We walk on wet gravel, following the silver hearse up the hill. In front of me, my eldest cousin. He rests his hand on the boot of the car, his face scrunched with tears.

'Bentong!' he shouts. 'Go back to Bentong!'

In the heat, the car's fumes curl dark and toxic. There is the crunch of gravel, the engine's purr and the sound of my aunties crying.

At the top of the hill, we pile into the air-conditioned coach which pulls out of Kuala Lumpur, makes north for Bentong. The large, winding road is quiet on Sunday save for the occasional ruckus of the motorcycle rallies. They stream past the window single-file – skinny boys in helmets and shorts, the sleeves of their t-shirts rippling at the elbow. They overtake us, the hearse, with ease; speed away into the distance.

'Eh – if your uncle could afford to buy a car,' says the man in the seat across from me, 'he would insist on buying motorbike instead!'

'Yah-la,' his wife agrees. 'Very humble-one.'

I turn to look out the window. On either side, the trees rise up, steeped into mountains of green. The plants here grow fast, gorged on sunlight and water – greedy for life. The jungle tops dissolve into mist. I cannot shake the sense that there is magic here.

*Bentong is old like I remember. A crowd of coloured houses and faded ice-cream parlours. The coach follows the hearse through the small streets, the locals gaping as we pass. We stop at the mouth of the Chinese cemetery, climb down into the hot afternoon sun and make our way to the plot of land my uncle bought for himself.*
The hum of insects takes over. We walk the dirt path between the thickets of grass, pointing out dragonflies large as our fists. The sun has baked out the morning’s puddles and the shallow craters teem with ants.

The land rises and falls. In amongst the tall grass are plots of paved concrete – big semi-circles with elegant borders. The headstones are pale grey, lined with Chinese characters and a photograph of the deceased. Once a year, the graves are tidied, the grass cut back. The rest of the time, my sister tells me, it is left to grow wild.

Along the path, my cousin stops beside a stone staircase. It leads up to two graves set into the hill.

‘This one – your great-grandfather,’ he says. ‘Great-grandmother on this side.’

I stand for a minute, gazing up at the tiny portraits of people I have never met but whose blood runs through me. I know nothing of my great-grandmother but there are stories about her husband and the misery he caused. His wealth, his lust. His wives and concubines, and the hoard of illegitimate children.

Behind the headstone, on the walled border lies a large tan dog. It sits up, yawns lazily at us, then sinks back down, half-submerged in the grass.

I follow the path around the bend and stop short at the sight of the silver hearse. For a little while, I have forgotten why I am here.

The plot is at the back of the cemetery, set just in front of the rough tin walls. The grave has been dug and the white coffin sits above it, held up by three strong sticks.

We are given prayer books and lilies then the service begins but I cannot follow it. Cannot understand how this tiny Chinese man draped in white silk can be my uncle. His stocky build and wide-set face shrunken back to the bone.

When the pastor has finished, they lower in the coffin and, one-by-one, we walk to the edge, toss down our lilies. We scoop handfuls of the gritty earth, scatter it as gently as we can.

The undertakers pick up their shovels.

The sun is so hot on the back of my neck.

Then my mother and my aunties begin to sing *Amazing Grace* in full, rich acapella harmonies.

We watch the coffin disappear under the earth. Then we leave my uncle behind. To the hills and the mist and the grass.

After lunch, the coach heads back to Kuala Lumpur but my family decide to stay behind. We stop at my uncle’s favourite ice-cream parlour, sit inside the cool dimness and spoon back ais kacang with pandang ice cream. We eat and talk, ignoring the small half-feral cats curling around our ankles.

When we’re done, we make our way to my grandparents’ house – The Old Bentong House – where my uncle lived. There is a cardboard sign hanging from the front door, his unexpected handwriting: ‘Going for a jog’.

We stand there, say nothing.

It is tied so neatly with yellow string.

We leave it intact, go round to the back door which opens into the old kitchen. Light streams in, and it is hard. His laptop is open and wired to the mains. His shirts and socks and underpants hang on the rack. There are eggs in the fridge, and vitamin bottles, nutrition drinks, prayers on scraps of paper. There is a tub of half-eaten pink ice-cream.

I take the stairs up into the long main room. It is dark, the wooden floor warm and covered with dust. I go – as I always do – to the old electronic organ. And I sit and I play and I sing.

My sister pushes back the curtains and the Bentong light hits the floor, makes it gleam. Sooner or later, we all end up here, in the main room, picking through knick-knacks – the row of old Encyclopaedias, handing round his many faded trophies.

My brother-in-law takes his turn at the organ, cranks out a tune. He dabbles with the side panel and, suddenly – lo! – a disco drumbeat. It pulses out from the instrument louder than I thought it could. We turn around to watch. Then, for no reason at all, we begin to dance – my brother stuttering a moonwalk across the floor, my father doing the chicken dance. I Chuck Berry it across the room. We hop from leg to leg, clumsy and uncoordinated, arms swinging free. Our faces glisten with sweat. And it feels so good to move.

Days later, alone in the taxi, I cry on the way to the airport. We pass mamak stalls and tin shacks, trees heavy with papaya. It dawns on me
Days later, alone in the taxi, I cry on the way to the airport. We pass mamak stalls and tin shacks, trees heavy with papaya. It dawns on me finally how, for my whole life, Khing Joo has meant Malaysia and Malaysia has meant Khing Joo.

My uncle – king of roti canai, iced milo and durian. The first graduate of the Tan family, the Maths teacher, the plantation-worker. Followed by his pack of loyal dogs, crossing the river with his shoes under his armpits, laying cocoa beans out in the sun. My uncle – the Genting-gambler, the stock-market strategist, the tennis champion, badminton champion, ping-pong champion, trophy winner. My uncle – the cancer sufferer, the fighter, the stubborn. Homesick and yearning for Bentong. With the oxygen mask in the hospital bed. My uncle.

Much loved.

Much missed.

Out. Gone for a jog.

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**A Zulu Warrior King Checks His Email by Glen Retief**

**by Glen Retief on February 27, 2018 in Fiction**

Sunday afternoon sweltered hot and rainless. On the cul-de-sac next to the alligator canal, the humidity shimmered off the black tarmac, giving the neatly-trimmed hedges, palms, and ficus trees a fluid, iridescent sheen. In his computer room in the white three-bedroomed ranch house, buffered from the heat by the walls and the air-conditioning, Milton Henry Johnson, a Zulu Warrior King who had never won a playground fight, rose from his Tribal Nations video game and strode into his kitchen, where he grabbed a pre-made protein shake from the refrigerator.

In a past life, might Milton have been a sub-Saharan conqueror? Say King Shaka, feather-crowned emperor of the Southern African coastal plain, 1787-1828. Rumor has it Shaka was conceived in a game that couldn’t stop—a convulsion of pleasure that ran to its destination. Ukuhlobonga, a traditional Zulu *coitus interruptis*, has strict rules. Spit, lard, and butter are all possible lubricants. The girl pinches her thighs. But Shaka’s father, Chief Senzangakhona, violated the protocols. His pregnant mistress didn’t receive so much as a ceremonial cow. And this is what the old people still say, in laughing whispers, about the great African Napoleon, the inventor of the *iklwa*, the short, stabbing spear, as well the legendary “bull horn” formation to encircle one’s rivals. Shaka’s ferocity, his brutality and brilliance, all sprang from this splinter of abandonment lodged in him.

Maybe so. Perhaps somewhere in Milton Henry Johnson’s soul he, too—as fatherless as Shaka—possessed a shadow of this vainglorious mania. Yet to look at him an observer would simply think, *What a nice guy.* A popular podiatrist on staff at the Broward Medical Center, he...
spent his days setting ankle fractures and making foam casts for custom-made orthotics. His pale blue Calvin Klein jeans, casual white T-shirt, and bright green New Balance running shoes set off his gym-sculpted chest and the smoothness of his mocha skin. At age thirty-five, his house had none of the disheveled appearance of the stereotypical videogamer: pizza boxes and beer cans. Instead, three yellow sunflowers stood in a blue ceramic jug on a spotless marble countertop.

‘You keep your room tidy, Jimmy, and your mind’ll follow,’ Milton’s mother, an Alabama supermarket manager, had always told him and his siblings. And Milton had credited this advice with his admission to medical school, his prestigious Mount Sinai residency, and now his current position.

Returning to the computer console with his shake, Milton noted the sunlight coming in had a blinding quality that bleached the day bed olive drab. He placed the shake on a coaster. ‘Too bright.’ He started to move toward the black plastic window shade, but kicked the wheel of the desk, splashing milkshake.

‘Ah—’ He mopped up the mess. On the screen the Second Division of the Zulu Imperial Army had managed, in three short minutes, to lose control of the ramp to a castle.

> zulu warriors, he typed on the messenger function, wtf man? yr king is back dudes lets go rape these fuckin aztecs!!!

For the next forty-five minutes Milton remained immersed in the contest. His right hand tapped fluidly and rhythmically on the controls, while his left hand typed messages. As usual, he aced this kind of cyber-battle, rallying his troops to retake the fortress, and defeating the Aztec king in a bout of dagger combat. Fighting epic, bloodthirsty battles in cyberspace, Milton lost any hesitation he might have experienced in his ‘day life’, the false notes he sometimes hit, playing oboe for the Fort Lauderdale Gay Men’s Orchestra; the occasional winces he’d prompt pressing on a patient’s talus bone.

‘Sorry, goddamnit,’ he’d shrug at Raymond, the orchestra conductor, or at Mrs. Jones, frowning at him in his consulting rooms.

> good job dingane, he told his second-in-command, now, when Dingane found a magical spear.

> zandedude! –when that warrior managed to beat back no less than four Aztecs. > u r magnificently beautiful my friend. And Milton meant the compliment: that left arrow short stab, followed by that fabulous CTRL-F mariposa kick. ‘You feel beauty inside,’ Raymond told the orchestra musicians. And Milton was feeling something like that right now, a joyful unknotting in his chest.

Had any of Milton’s team mates guessed he was gay? Misogamist, Milton’s ex-partner, Lance, had called their gamers’ dialogue.

> drill the featherface bitch a new one.

> gonna jackripper that faggot.

‘Why do you even go along with that? Would you call someone that in real life? What makes this different?’

Lance was five years younger than Milton. White, middle-class, blonde—he’d literally grown up in Greenwich, Connecticut, one of the nation’s richest zip codes, in a mansion with a view of the Long Island Sound. Now, he was completing a doctorate in English Literature at Florida International University, which apparently had a prerequisite in earnestness. At any rate, Milton found it all but incomprehensible that a language scholar wouldn’t be able to grasp irony, persona, and linguistic context.

‘It’s like acting in a play, Lance babes. Just a role.’ But Lance didn’t agree: ‘If you act something enough it becomes habitual.’

The two of them had met three years earlier, via a dating group at the same LGBT community center where Milton’s orchestral group had its rehearsals. Milton had fallen for Lance’s looks: that A-list body; those brilliant blonde locks. But then it was Lance’s brain that kept his attention beyond the first three dates. How many gorgeous circuit boys on the Fort Lauderdale scene could explain the difference between post-structuralism and semiotics? Milton’s own curiosity had always lain more in the sciences and music. But he loved accompanying Lance to hear melancholy Cuban exiles, reading short stories about midnight cigars.

A year later, Lance and Milton moved in together. Lance had brought all his possessions in his black Honda Civic, a single trip up the turnpike and I-95 to the Oakland Park exit, boxes of books on the back seat. And at first their domestic companionship had been sublime. Early mornings he’d throw his arm around Lance as seagulls cawed overhead. Homemade Sunday breakfasts consisted of eggs benedict; shrimp and grits. They bought each other presents: Adidas running shoes and Nordstrom underwear for Lance, a three-disc Tribal Nations animated manga series for Milton.

But then things had unraveled. In Milton’s mind it began, ironically enough, with his joining the Gay Men’s Orchestra, at Lance’s suggestion.

’screens, light, synthesizers, they’re all fine, but there’s something about the physicality of a musical instrument.’

Probably Lance had imagined the music would take Milton away from his computer. Lance had a problem with Milton’s gaming habits—that was obvious.

‘Have you considered if you’re an addict? Any spare minute, and you’re on that thing.’

And: ‘Are you trying to be a teenager?’
Most insultingly literal of all from Milton’s point of view: ‘Is it some aggression from your childhood? Do you need to be a warrior king so you’re fighting back?’ It got to the point where Milton regretted telling Lance about his childhood struggles, the inner-city Tuscaloosa basketball jocks who shoved him against the lockers and asked if he liked to suck dick, the homeboys who wondered if he was trying to be white by heading to the library.

In fact Tribal Nations relaxed Milton. After a frantic day in the surgery, dealing with anesthetists, head nurses, and anxious relatives, the game provided an escape—light, sounds, fun. Milton wished he could show Lance real addiction, the junkies passed out in the stairwells of the rundown apartment building where Milton had grown up with his sister, Mary, and his younger brother, Jamal. The addicts had lain there, heads lolling over backwards. Sometimes you could see wet patches on their groins. Milton, Mary, and Jamal would hold hands, still in their school clothes, bookbags swinging from their shoulders, and step around the urine and vomit, and let themselves into the one bedroom apartment, where Milton and Jamal slept in the living room.

But he did empathize with Lance’s frustration. On the weekends Milton carried a beeper; he had to return calls, make occasional trips into the ward, give nurses instructions. Once, he’d had to duck out of a Valentine’s Day dinner with Lance to perform emergency surgery on a woman whose foot had gotten crushed under the front wheel of a garbage truck.

‘Garbage,’ Lance had protested, not especially originally. ‘Will the prognosis be so different tomorrow?’ He’d apologized for his callousness, but still. After he joined the orchestra, Milton needed to practice for at least an hour a day. And then when all that was done, when he felt antsy around bedtime, his thoughts running to shattered cuboids and metastarsals, or being on the wrong key in a performance.

‘Always that game, Milton. Late at night, when we could be together.’

But why the breakup? In front of his computer screen, Milton now took down some dumb Aztec noob called Yumyumheart73 with a CTRL-K Tesoura de Frente. He decapitated him with his hip sword—a splatter of red over his screen, accompanying by a buzzing sound, like that of an oven timer. How had the two of them gone from, ‘I just feel Milton isn’t available to me’—this said to their relationship counselor, a redhead Jewish spinster named Hannah? Gone from this to, ‘Sorry, babes. I can’t explain, but I just can’t do this anymore.’ And the parting itself—God, it still hurt Milton to remember it—so sadistically choreographed.

It had happened three months earlier. Milton had driven home from the hospital, thinking, he remembered now, about the disastrous impact of folk-vernacular bone manipulation—that afternoon he’d seen a fifteen year old girl who’d begun limping after a visit to a chiropractor. He pulled into the drive, parking to the left of Lance’s car. Only when he got out of the Avalanche and opened the back to take out the Publix shopping bags with dinner in them—frozen haddock in cheese sauce, Spanish rice, and lettuce and tomato—did he notice that the Civic was piled up with boxes, suitcases, and bulging garbage bags, almost exactly as it had been two years earlier.

The house door opened, and Lance emerged with his last item, his black canvas laptop bag. He was holding his keys in his right hand and getting ready to lock up, but when he saw Milton—or, Milton had to ask himself later, had he in fact been waiting around for this exact moment?—he left the door ajar.

‘Sorry, babes,’ Lance said, where their paths crossed. ‘It’s just—I’ll call you—send you an email.’ He dropped the keys in one of Milton’s shopping bags. He seemed choked up. Later, Milton would think: he didn’t even want to touch me.

‘Lance, what’s going on?’

But Lance had simply gotten into his car, turned the ignition key, and backed clean out of Milton’s life: right out the driveway, left at Palmetto Street, and then gone. Milton stood for one or two minutes, still in his medical scrubs, holding the bags. Nothing felt real. A vacuum expanded in his chest. Only later would the pain hit him: the empty shelves cleared out of the bedroom bookshelf. The abandonment filling his body like air in a balloon.

The texts and Skype IM messages: > so sorry babes. i didn’t know how to tell you.

> i was shitty Milton just really shitty. i don’t really like myself u know?

What exactly was he supposed to say? As he told his sister, Mary, over the phone: ‘It’s like Lance was trying to be the worst bastard he could be, just so I’d be able to let him go.’

Bullshit. Pathetic. Milton now lifted up a stone in the videogame and clicked on a bottle of cordial, that swelled him up to twice his usual size. A bell rang, and then the landscape of the videogame transformed into cliffs and snowdrifts.

> ya, we won! Now lets kill these eskimos! The Independent Inuits were something of a legendary outfit. Milton jumped up now and ran to the next door bathroom. He peed as fast as he could. The time was 3:10. By the time he made it back to the computer screen both dingane911 and zandedude had been killed.

>fuck man these inuits are good but lets fiiight!!!!

At first, in this Arctic landscape, Milton didn’t notice the flashing Skype tab on the Windows toolbar. He didn’t use Skype all that much, despite the fact that it was set to automatically start with the computer itself. A couple of times he’d used it connect with his brother Jamal, who Milton feared was turning into their father—a divorced heavy drinker and good-for-nothing who drifted around doing odd jobs. More recently Milton had used his zulu_warrior_king Skype moniker to flirt online, meeting guys on web sites like Manhunt, and then
transitioning to cam4cam, c4c, phone bone—different names for an emotional salve.

Milton’s first thought was that the Skype message was from a recent trick, say Sven1975 in Sweden. Worse, maybe Lance himself, with another round of sickening apologies. Yet when Milton right-clicked on the program to close it, he noticed it was actually from someone with an unfamiliar, vaguely Native American-sounding screenname: nonqawuse78.

>> Hi there, zulu_warrior_king. How are you today?? How is the weather in Fort Lauderdale (did I spell that right LOL?)

Who on earth was this? Somehow he’d been approved as a Skype contact. Had Milton clicked a yes button? He certainly didn’t remember a chat.

On the main screen, the game careened along. Milton was trying to lure aaanaangaq12 away from a vast, shining igloo. Something moved to Milton’s right—by instinct he threw an assegai at it, but he missed, and now an axe hit Milton’s leg, and there was a sound like a paper bag popping. Milton was wounded and had to move in slow motion.

The Skype tab flashed again. He was about to quit that program—his team needed him. But now—where did this memory even come from?—as he played he recalled another incident, from a month or two after Lance had moved in. Milton had come over from the bedroom to check email, news, and weather. Skype had been open on the desktop screen, and there, left in plain view, was a lengthy conversation between his own zulu_warrior_king avatar, and one ghettothug4blackonly from Orlando. Lance had been pretending to be Milton, which is to say he’d been faking being a middle class African-American podiatrist in Fort Lauderdale, who had grown up in the poor neighborhoods of Tuscaloosa.

>> yeah homeboy lets chill, Lance had written.

>> let me shake my zulu spear at you lol.

Milton had felt strangely violated. Sure, he’d proclaimed the z_w_k identity was just a role, like the ‘misogamist’ dialogue—all pixels and data. Yet it was his role.

‘I don’t mind you using my computer. I don’t even care too much if you flirt with a black guy in Orlando.’ Lance and Milton agreed to be monogamous, but they hadn’t discussed Internet liaisons. ‘But use your own Skype login, alright?’

Lance was suitably embarrassed.

‘Shit, Milton,’ he said. ‘It’s just—such a great name, you know?’ Milton had added separate password-protected profiles to the operating system and thought that would be the end of it.

But now Milton wondered—was this the only incident? More to the point, had Lance done this several times before the ghettothug conversation? Despite himself, Milton felt curious. What exactly had Lance said to others, using Milton’s name? Later, he would also have to admit, both to his sister, Mary, and his best high school friend, Eric: ‘I guess it helps me to feel mad at Lance. If I think of him creeping around on the Internet like a fucking stalker, I don’t miss him so much.’

>> nonqawuse im ok. how bout u?

>> interesting screenname btw! what language is it, native american?

>> btw have we talked b4???

He played Tribal Nations, fighting off an Eskimo dressed in headgear that recalled an American Bald Eagle.

The Skype tab flashed: >> Xhosa. Not Native American no haha! In fact I am a Zulu in South Africa. But my name is a Xhosa prophet. Google her haha! Shes badassssssss ooh yeah ;-)P

>> oh yes we did talk once long ago. Lets just say you availed yrself of my professional services :-) :-OOOOP

Professional services? Milton’s head went to ‘rent boy’—he could hardly help it after ghettothug4blackonly. But that made zero sense. Nongqawuse was not only on the other side of the world. Lance, who refused help from his family and lived on his teaching stipend, also had no money for escorts.

>> mugabe can you take over as commander for a while? brb. Milton in fact now felt tired of the game. His shoulders were sore from being hunched up. What would he do on a day like this if he weren’t playing?

>> professional services, nongq? haha I don’t remember.

He did look up the screenname. The niece of a nineteenth century Xhosa court magician, Nongqawuse had met some ancestors in a vision who’d told her that if all the Xhosa killed their cattle to show their faith in the shades, the sun would rise red as blood and all the British settlers would be blown into the sea. Half the nation obeyed the prophecy, the other half didn’t. The resulting, catastrophic famine caused a feud that apparently continued to this day, between those who believed Nongqawuse a fraud, and those who thought that complete obedience would have saved the nation from colonization.
so zulu you are a doctor hey! well I am a traditional zulu healer, we say here sangoma. I told you about some herbs for your sinuses lol and you said your american medicine was not so good at treating those infections.

btw I am a man but the spirit that inhabits me and gives me my divination powers is the very same nongqawuse!!!

Milton took his hat off to Lance. He’d loved medical ethnography back in school: psychology, spells, the placebo effect, herbal healing. He recalled studying the doctrine of spirit possession, the notion that a ghost or ancestor might inhabit a human being to give him or her medical powers, a concept that, as a physician, he found absurd, disconcerting, and resonant all at the same time—a metaphor for the intuitive leaps necessary for diagnosis and treatment.

lol spells spirits that is quite exotic for us nonq.

altho you know now i think of it my mother did see a sort of diviner when i was a kid

haha i had almost forgotten

Their church had been a predominantly black, Pentecostal Holiness denomination: the bishop sent a minivan on Sunday mornings to pick them up. Milton remembered the converted schoolhouse as noisy and happy, a lot of clapping and dancing. 'Hallelujah.' 'Preach It, Brother!' and 'Praise the Lord'—not to mention lots of prophecy and speaking in tongues. His mother, Alvina Abigail Johnson, led a special ministry there for impoverished mothers who’d been abandoned by their husbands and boyfriends.

'I pour my voice out to the Lord!' Alvina would call out. 'I pour out my complaint before HIM!' Usually such prayers bookended more practical discussions of household budgets and supermarket discounts—Alvina Johnson also handed out coupons from the Piggly she managed on Nineteenth Street.

The diviner visit had been prompted by a call from a teacher. Miss Norris, from sixth grade homeroom, was worried. Milton’s grades and academic performance were fine. But some of the older boys—well, you know how they can be. And Milton didn’t have a father around? Had Alvina Johnson considered boxing class for Milton? Martial arts? Even if he just did something more masculine—you know children are like chickens, they just peck at the weakest link.

Esther, the woman in their church with the gift of the discerning of spirits, came from the Bahamas. He’d always liked her—she sometimes led the children’s Sunday school, and she had a somber, kind manner. On that particular day, though, in her apartment, she’d scared him.

'He has the spirit of weakness in him, real bad,' she told his mother. She’d leaned forward and squeezed her hands around Milton’s neck. Today Milton struggled to even believe this could even have happened. He stood in Esther’s small kitchen. Esther handed him a plastic washing up bucket, into which he was supposed to vomit up any evil spirits.

'Most glorious God Almighty, defend us against the principalities and powers, against the rulers of this world of darkness!' When Milton got woozy from the lack of oxygen—prickles of darkness dancing in front of his eyes—and fell down, Esther and his mother cheered. But the following Monday the bullies were still there. That same week, after a P.E. class, a football player shoved Milton’s head in a toilet bowl and flushed it, as a punishment for missing an easy slant pass.

btw nonq I think it was my ex-lover chatting with u using my skype identity

hes a white boy im not with him anymore. Again Milton thought: good riddance.

Back in Tribal Nations, Mugabe had been pinned into the corner of an ice sheet. Milton tackled two of Mugabe’s pursuers, but then a third came up behind Milton and floored him with a CTRL-B Bananeria. A blue light flashed to indicate Milton was temporarily unconscious.

Strange questions, especially right after that memory of the exorcism. As an adult, had he learned to fight? If Milton had been able to fully look into himself, hold up the emotional skeleton of his life story next to that of Shaka Zulu’s, femur to femur, he would have had to say something like: > I don’t know nongqawuse. i don’t feel pushed around anymore. but i do feel lonely. maybe i have walled myself up instead of leading an army.

What he really typed: > well that question is pretty intense nonq!!!

but i think i’m just an ordinary guy i eat and bleed and shit like anyone haha
A much longer oven buzzer sound now indicated the Imperial Zulu Army had been defeated. Those Inuits were indeed champions. Now the game was over for Milton and his teammates until tonight at 8 pm when another round would start, probably a rematch against the Awesome Aborigines.

And there it was, in his Gmail: Nongqawuse74@mweb.co.za. What did he feel as he opened it? Certainly a prick of erotic curiosity: for some reason he couldn’t stop himself imagining a man out of a National Geographic documentary, muscled and shirtless, wearing a loincloth. He downloaded pictures like this all the time, so he clicked ‘Yes’ when the operating system warned him this could damage his system: an automatic reflex, like a kick when you tapped the patellar ligament.

Nothing happened. The computer’s ‘busy’ icon just kept spinning in the center of the screen. Had the photograph had been saved in memory-intensive resolution? He reached to exit out of the download, and retry.

But then the screen went blank. Something was badly wrong. An image popped up on the screen, but with a blank background. It showed a heavyset young black woman, wearing some kind of traditional clothing—a white triangle draped over her front and a sackcloth skirt. Her lips were moving, and now a subtitle appeared at the bottom of the picture: ‘You, you, you.’

Milton’s stomach sunk downwards. If this was a virus, all of his software would need to be reinstalled. Photographs—all three years of his relationship with Lance—gone now. Shit. Was this the picture of the original Nongqawuse?

The image came back three times, with the same subtitle. Milton thought he should probably switch it off to protect against further damage, but even now he found himself strangely curious to see where this display would go. And indeed, almost immediately the image faded to that of a cartoon cow, fat, with visibly swollen udders. Milton’s computer speakers issued conspicuous mooing sounds: belches, groans, and bellows. Milton had to laugh. This faraway African programmer had a sense of humor. The cow walked about halfway across the screen, from right to left, then turned into a laughing human skeleton.

‘Fuck!’ Milton yelled now, for good measure, and slapped the desk. He tried to restart the computer in safe mode, but as he’d feared it would be, the system was dead. He turned the machine off for good this time. The room seemed quiet without the sound of the motherboard fan.

Had Nongqawuse somehow plotted this with Lance? But Milton doubted the latter. It was more likely Nongqawuse was just some mischievous hacker, probably a bored teenager: nothing that a reformatted hard drive wouldn’t fix, although it was a pain to accomplish it.

He looked out the window. It was still mid-afternoon, bright as a spotlight. If he took the computer to Best Buy now, perhaps they could fix it by Tuesday?

He sat, still somewhat stunned, in his computer chair with the discs stacked on the bookshelf to his right. His house really was enormous. One thousand eight hundred square feet. Three large bedrooms. The wooden chest full of DVDs at the foot of his king-sized bed. The lawn needed mowing, the flower beds, weeding.

How had he arrived here? As a kid Milton had slept on the floor, on a foam mattress. The four of them ate hamburger helper on their laps. The apartment windows were jammed open for cross-flow. But that place had been, Milton couldn’t deny it, human. He and Mary had run around out back, by the dumpsters, and thrown pebbles at the garbage bags, then tried to guess contents from the sounds they made. There were Butch and Danita Hinton, from the apartment opposite them. Afternoons when Milton’s mother had to work long hours, Grandma Hinton invited them into her kitchen, where they baked cookies and played board games. In Risk, Milton’s favorite territory had been the Congo, from which you could launch attacks in four different directions.

The evening before Lance moved out, he’d cooked Milton collard greens, lean baked ham, and candied yams. They had opened a bottle of wine—some Argentinian Malbec. Lance had asked Milton about his day at the office. Milton had commented on how many people revealed on their entrance questionnaires they took anti-depressants, and Lance had replied: ‘Yeah, I believe Prozac is now the biggest river pollutant.’

How could everything be so ephemeral? His mother, Alvina Abigail Johnson: in two weeks’ time it would be the five-year anniversary of the day she died of renal failure. The hospital ward—beeping machines, the smell of ammonia, and her body so stiff and lifeless. That black Honda with its boxes, backing out of the driveway. Even his stupid computer: God, Milton wanted to just kick the metal tower now, shake the transistors out of their invisible moorings. Everyone died. That was one thing Milton knew as a doctor.

He breathed shallowly and put his hand on his chest. But then he gathered himself. He stood up, grabbed the empty glass with the remnants of the protein shake, walked through to the kitchen, and rinsed and cleaned it. Then he returned to the study and began unplugging cables and cords.

Probably right now, on this very street, women and men were falling out of love. Grey-haired lesbians were calling attorneys who specialized in dissolving domestic partner agreements. Children were being packed into cars, for weekend visits to absent parents.

‘Ah but your dad does love you, Jimmy boy,’ Alvina always told Milton. ‘He’s just scared of us.’ As a boy, Milton had no idea what she meant, but now, thinking of Lance and the Honda, he had a better guess.
Milton closed the window blind. He cradled the computer tower under his left arm and grabbed the keys. Best Buy was just ten minutes away, but, he now considered, perhaps he'd go for a drive after dropping off the machine. Hollywood Boardwalk, maybe, with its kitschy shops and hot dog stands. Or South Beach, pretty Speedo boys drinking water from coconuts—Milton had a swimsuit and towel stored in the back of the car. Or maybe even Key Largo, the Everglades, Orlando, and beyond it the lime springs of North Florida.

The world was a big place, thought Milton, vast and interesting. Houses fanning out. Mountain ranges and continents. People and adventures. Zulu herbalists, too; he wouldn't forget those in hurry: curing their patients' viral infections by day and damaging computer hard drives by night, as if to square up invisible balance.

Glen Retief grew up in South Africa during the apartheid era. His *The Jack Bank: A Memoir of a South African Childhood* (St. Martin’s Press, April 2011) won a Lambda Literary Award and was selected as an Africa Book Club Book of 2011. He has published short stories and memoirs in journals including *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and *New Contrast*, as well as numerous short personal essays in newspapers like *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He teaches Creative Nonfiction at Susquehanna University.

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**That Summer**

We’re lucky we’re not stuck in sweaty New York City like the fathers in their summer suits are every day and the Fresh Air Fund kids in their giveaway t-shirts who come down in buses and never get to stay.

We’re so lucky, stuck on our mothers’ quiet beach.
up by the bridge, stuck not being a teenager yet
when everything will change. We get luckier every day,
when we can’t go to the movies and see Sandra Dee

- we already know she gets pregnant like my mother
but she’s much cuter and a beach ball doesn’t clip
her stomach on the beach and make her freak out
(though we don’t say that yet) because of the other baby

- three days after Christmas, like the ones Herod killed
a thousand years ago. It takes a long time to get over stuff.
We stay in till our lips turn blue like his. On rainy days,
we read magazines at Hendershott’s till we get chased.

We sneak down to First Street Beach where the teenagers
lie on dark green army blankets listening to transistors
and making out. First Street is by the boardwalk where
hamburgers sizzling on the griddles fill your mouth with spit.

The mothers wait for weekends when the men come down
to drive across the bridge to Somers Point, which isn’t dry.
Too old for dolls, we buy them anyway and then it happens,
the thing they’d lock us up in padded cells for, strapped

in padded jackets: the rubber baby dolls with plastic bottles
stuck in little holes between their stuck-together lips, they
start to twitch. Linda says: *I put her on her back and when
I went to get her, she was on her stomach.* We never catch them

rolling over, spitting jets of curdled milk, wetting their diapers.
(In this world there is no shit). We whisper *She soaked herself
right through, next thing she’ll have a rash,* mop, sigh, live
in a bubble like Revival tents down the coast where Billy Graham

gets them going for Jesus. He has nothing on us as we climb
out of the waves we’ve surfed to body temperature and walk off.
leaving the mothers smiling in the sun behind us, thinking
we’re headed wistfully to First Street, then double back, fast,

along the hot, hot concrete to the house where rubber babies wait,
– we hear their baby sobs as we get close, and start to run.

desperate to touch and change and feed and cuddle them and feel
the strange electric summer when our dolls are turning real.

–

*That Summer* won second prize in the Writeabridge poetry competition 2017.

Aileen La Tourette has published two volumes of poetry with Headland, ‘Downward Mobility’ and ‘Touching Base’, and four novels; two with Virago, one with Ilura Press (Aust) and one with Caliband (UK). The last, 'The Oldest Girl' was published in 2011, the year she retired from lecturing in Creative Writing at Liverpool John Moores University.

Her poem 'The Diving Horse' won the Live Canon International Poetry Competition in 2016. She facilitates a lovely poetry group at Mind in Birkenhead, and in 2015 she completed a qualification as a poetry therapy practitioner. This involves bringing poems to bear on whatever/wherever people may be and seeing how they/we respond; often, not always, people write ‘back’ to the poems.

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By **Connor Frew** on February 20, 2018 in Poetry

In That Dream I Became A Stain In My Own House

I dreamt that I was bitten by venomous snakes

The first was a cottonmouth.
The first was a cottonmouth,
In my living room

The second a black mamba,
In my parents' bedroom

In that dream I became a stain in my own house,
A rejected organ

My parents watched crime television specials
In place of the news


Connor Frew is an artist and writer currently living and working in Austin, Texas, where he is in his fifth year pursuing a BFA in Studio Art and a BA in Art History. He is a Texas Exes Forty Acres Scholar and a 2015-16 recipient of the Susan Vaughan Foundation Endowed Scholarship in Art and Art History. His works and writings have been shown at the MOM Gallery and Dude Ranch in Austin, TX; the Barrett Art Center in Poughkeepsie, NY; and at the 2016 Unnoticed Art Festival in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Additional work has been published in anthologies by the University of Texas' Analecta Journal and El Aleph Magazine.

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Woman In A White Coat: A Memoir by Dr Abby J. Waterman – Excerpt

An earlier version of this chapter, September 1939, was shortlisted for the Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2016.

Chapter 4: A Country at War
We were tired and hungry, my sister Hannah and I, as we stood waiting in Littleport Village Hall, waiting to be chosen by someone, anyone.

'Don't snivel,' Hannah said. 'No-one will take us in if they see you crying.' She pushed my hand away. 'You're too old to hold hands Abby, and anyhow your hands are always wet and sticky.'

'Operation Pied Piper', the plan for the evacuation of children from areas likely to be bombed, was in place long before World War 2 was declared. People in safe areas with spare bedrooms were urged to take in evacuees. They would be paid 10/6d a week for the first child and 8/6d for each subsequent child. Nearly a million children were evacuated on Friday September 1st, 1939. London railway stations were packed with children and whole trains were commandeered.

Parents had been given a list of clothing to pack. Girls needed 1 spare vest, 1 pair of knickers, 1 petticoat, 1 slip, 1 blouse, 1 cardigan, a coat or Mackintosh, nightwear, a comb, towel, soap, face-cloth, boots or shoes and plimsolls.

Hannah hadn't yet started at the local grammar school, Central Foundation School for Girls, so she came with me to my school, Jews Free Junior School. She carried the brown cardboard suitcase we shared. Our teachers marched us to Liverpool Street station and onto the train to Littleport. Many mothers and a few fathers came to the station with their children. Hannah and I were alone.

'You’re old enough to go on your own,' my mother said. 'I’ve put a stamped and addressed postcard in your case for you to send me your address as soon as you’re settled.'

I was seven, nearly eight and Hannah was thirteen. She wore her new school uniform and I was in my dark green skirt and jumper and my navy serge coat, the one with the collar that rubbed. Our gas masks in their square brown boxes hung on tapes around our necks and we had identity labels printed with our names and evacuee numbers tied through our buttonholes.

We waited and waited. Maybe no-one wanted to take in two sisters from the East End of London. Then, when we were beginning to dread that no-one would ever choose us, a young couple beckoned us over. The husband, a big man with a bushy red beard, lowered the tail-gate of an open-bed lorry and put in our suitcase.

'Jump in girls. The farm's only a couple of miles from here. You can sit on those potato sacks. Don’t mind the straw. It’s this year's and quite clean.'

We clung to the side of the lorry as he hurtled through the narrow country lanes. Empty fields stretched for miles, right up to the horizon. The harvest had been gathered in, and most of the fields were brown, though the verges were still green. Ripe purple blackberries hung from brambles at the side of the road.

They ushered us in to a large brick-built farmhouse. It was completely surrounded by fields and there were no other houses in sight. Back home in Petticoat Lane, there were tightly packed buildings wherever you looked.

We had a fried egg on toast for tea and at 7.30 they shooed us off to bed in a little attic bedroom. Horses snuffled in a nearby field and there was a herd of cows in the distance. I was scared when I heard an owl hooting. I crept closer to Hannah and pulled the blankets over my head. When dawn came, the birds woke us. It was so noisy and different.

After porridge for breakfast, they took us in their lorry back to the Village Hall. We were to spend the day there with the other evacuees from our school. The farmer and his wife were going off to a wedding.

'What’s that horrible smell?' Hannah asked the farmer, as we climbed into the lorry.

'Don’t you worry your little head, miss. It’s only Fred’s piggeries.'

I hoped no-one would expect us to eat pork. Jews weren’t allowed. We’d been taught that pigs were filthy animals, non-Kosher, traife.

It was Saturday, Shabbat, so we had a short service, lunch and some games. After tea, we were sent back to our billets.

One of the teachers pointed out the way.

'The farm is straight along that road. They said you can't miss it.'

We trudged back to the farmhouse and knocked on the door but no-one answered. We went around the back but the back door was locked. We peeped into the kitchen but no-one was there. As the blood-red sunset gave way to night, we cowered in a corner of the porch away from the huge Alsatian that strained at his chain, trying to get at us, snapping and barking. We were terrified, alone in that vast expanse.

Finally, the farmer and his wife came home.

'Sorry we're late. We forgot all about you.'

They gave us milk and biscuits, and sent us up to bed.

The next day the farmer's wife said it wouldn't work.

'We can’t be baby-sitting you every night. You’re going to have to stay with my mother. She lives in the village and she’ll take you in.'
We can’t be baby-sitting you every night. You’re going to have to stay with my mother. She lives in the village and she’ll look after you.

Once again, we climbed into the back of the lorry. They didn’t talk to us or smile. We never knew their names.

Mrs Hopwood, a tiny white-haired woman, not quite as tall as Hannah, was waiting at the door of her stone cottage. She had bright blue eyes, lots of wrinkles and a big smile.

‘Come in. Come in,’ she said, giving Hannah and me a hug. ‘I’ll show you around. My little cottage is tiny compared with the farmhouse.’

On the ground floor at the front there was a parlour. At the back, there was a kitchen and a pocket-sized garden with an outside toilet at the far end. Butterflies hovered over borders ablaze with colour. The lawn was smooth and bright green. We could smell newly cut grass.

On the first floor, there were two bedrooms. Mrs Hopwood took us into the front bedroom.

‘This will be your room, my dears. I’ve no need for it now that Mr Hopwood has passed away.’

A big brass double bed, a tall mahogany wardrobe and a dressing table crowded the room. A porcelain bowl with a border of roses and a large ewer stood on the dressing table, while a matching chamber pot peeped out from under the bed. The wallpaper was pale pink and decorated with tiny roses. It was all lovely and cozy.

‘We don’t have a bathroom, my dears. I still use my tin bath. We’ll have a big coal fire going in the kitchen, and you’ll be warm as toast. You can leave your things for now. Come on down and we’ll have a bite to eat.’

We had scones still warm from the oven, as much butter as we liked, strawberry jam and strong sweet tea. When we’d eaten all the scones, Mrs Hopwood wiped the crumbs and jam off my face with a damp flannel.

‘There now,’ she said. ‘That’s better, isn’t it?’

She took us over to a large sepia photograph on the wall. There were two rows of children with a man and a woman in the centre.

She pointed to the man with a long white beard.

‘That’s the late Mr Hopwood. God Rest His Soul, with his hand on my shoulder, and there are all the children – had 22 and raised 19. We had to eat in shifts, we did. There was never enough room for us all to sit down at once, save at Christmas, when we all squeezed up.’

I’d never heard of anyone having that many children. The Old Woman who lived in a Shoe, popped into my head.

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,

She had so many children she didn’t know what to do;

She gave them some broth without any bread;

She whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.

I smiled at my thoughts. Hannah dug me in the ribs.

‘Don’t be rude. What are you laughing at?’

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘That hurt.’

I couldn’t imagine Mrs Hopwood whipping her children or not giving them any bread.

When it was bedtime, Hannah and I snuggled up underneath the patchwork eiderdown and were soon fast asleep.

The wail of an air raid siren woke us up. We jumped out of bed, found our gas-masks and pulled them on. We were sure we were about to be bombed or gassed. Maybe the Germans had already landed.

Mrs Hopwood came to check that we were OK. She stood in the doorway trying to catch her breath. She was laughing so much that tears ran down her face.

‘You should see yourselves, my lovelies, looking for all the world like a couple of monsters. It’s only a practice. Do take those nasty things off. I’ll tuck you in and you must go straight back to sleep. You’ll want to be up bright and early in the morning.’

Next day was Sunday September 3rd. Mrs Hopwood had the radio on in the kitchen and we listened to Mr Chamberlain’s speech.

‘I am speaking to you from the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street. This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that, unless we hear from them by 11 o’clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this
Mrs Hopwood put her arms around us.

‘I never thought there’d be another war in my lifetime. Our war was the war to end all wars. Those Jerries. They’ll never learn, but we’ll beat them again like we did last time.’

The few weeks we spent with Mrs Hopwood were all sunshine. On Fridays, she gave us the money to go to the fish and chip shop on the corner for cod and chips and a bottle of Tizer. I’d never tasted Tizer before. At home, my father sometimes bought me a glass of the red, slightly sour drink, sarsaparilla, in Petticoat Lane market. It tasted like hot, sweet medicine and was supposed to be good for you. Tizer was quite different – fizzy and very sweet. It dyed your tongue bright orange.

Then it was decided that it wasn’t sensible for the CFS girls billeted in Littleport and other villages to catch the bus into Ely every day. Hannah and I were to move to Ely. We would be billeted with Mr and Mrs Stonemartin and I would go to the local junior school.

Next day a slight man with a small mousey moustache drew up.

‘Have you got them ready?’ he asked Mrs Hopwood with a shy smile.

Hannah and I were both crying as we kissed her goodbye and got into Mr Stonemartin’s small black car. A wire-haired terrier sat on the front passenger seat and we squeezed into the back.

‘Must be nice people, if they have a lovely little dog like that,’ Hannah whispered.

Mr Stonemartin turned around.

‘She’s called Jill. Mrs Stonemartin dotes on her.’

He stopped the car in front of a semi-detached 1930s house, one of a long stretch of similar houses on the outskirts of Ely.

Mrs Stonemartin, a tall thin-faced woman, opened the door. She had a bright red turban tied around her head and wore a patterned wrap-around apron.

‘Welcome girls,’ she said. ‘Take off your shoes in the house, please, and be careful how you walk on our new stair carpet. It was only laid two weeks ago. When you’re going up and down, make sure you walk on the sides to save wear.’

The stair carpet had an all over vivid floral design that clashed with the large chrysanthemums on the wallpaper. The glaring colours made me feel ill.

‘I’ll show you to your bedroom and you can put your things away. Mind you always clear up after yourselves and keep everything tidy. Even our lovely dog, Jill, knows not to make a mess.’

The bedroom had twin beds. I’d never slept on my own. At home, I’d been sleeping in the large double mahogany bed with Hannah after my grandmother died. What if I was scared in the night?

‘Hurry up girls and fold your things nicely. Supper will be ready at six. The bathroom is along the hall. Wash your hands properly before you come down.’

By now I was starving. We’d had some paste sandwiches before we left Mrs Hopwood, but that was hours before.

We sat down at the dining table and Mrs Stonemartin brought in four plates and a dish for the dog. She ladled out some cold lumpy mashed potatoes and served each of us two tinned sardines swimming in oil. The look of them made me feel queasy. Sardines on toast sprinkled with lots of lemon juice was my favourite supper, but my mother always poured off the oil when she opened the tin.

For afters, we had cold tinned rice pudding with a tiny spoonful of jam. I was afraid I might be sick, but I managed to eat it.

We had grown to love Mrs Hopwood. She was the exact opposite of our new billet lady, Mrs Stonemartin, and her cooking had been delicious.

‘It’s seven o’clock. Time for you girls to go to bed. Make sure you brush your teeth and say your prayers before you get into bed. Luckily you have a nice clean carpet to kneel on. I don’t suppose you have that where you come from.’

It wasn’t something Jews did – kneel down to pray – but I prayed that night that we wouldn’t have to stay with the Stonemartins. She was horrible, though Mr Stonemartin tried to be friendly and smiled at us when she wasn’t looking.

Next evening, we had cold lumpy mashed potatoes again, this time with a small slice of pale meat that had a thick rim of fat. I hate fat. Although the Chief Rabbi said Jews were allowed to eat non-Kosher meat in wartime, I left the meat on the side of my plate.
Your sister’s eating hers. Why aren’t you?’

‘I’m not allowed to eat meat,’ I said.

‘All the more for the rest of us,’ Mrs Stonemartin said, putting my meat onto her plate.

The next two months were miserable, but when the Stonemartins went away for a weekend they asked their neighbours to have us from Friday night to Sunday night. Mr and Mrs Johnson were completely different from the Stonemartins. As soon as you walked into their half of the semi-detached house you could feel warm and friendly they were.

We had shepherd’s pie for supper and golden syrup pudding with hot creamy custard for afters. It seemed too rude to ask for seconds, though I would have liked to.

‘Come on girls,’ Mrs Johnson said. ‘Let’s get you a nice warm bath and into pyjamas.’

It snowed heavily that weekend. The four of us threw snowballs and we made a huge snowman. We never had enough snow at home to make one. We wished we could stay with the Johnsons forever but on Sunday night we had to go back.

Then I did something awful. I wrote to my parents about how wonderful it had been staying with the Johnsons, and how horrible Mrs Stonemartin was, and left the letter lying on top of the chest of drawers in our bedroom.

Dear Mummy and Daddy

We had a lovely time with Mr and Mrs Johnson. It snowed and we made an enormous snowman. We gave him two pieces of coal for eyes, a carrot for his nose and two little curved sticks for his lips. He looked cold, so Mr Johnson tied a scarf around his neck and put a pipe in his mouth. We wish we could be billeted with them, but they’re both teachers and they said they wouldn’t be able to take us in permanently. We had to go back to the old sourpuss, Mrs Stonehearted, and her horrid food.

Love to everyone.

Yours sincerely

Abigail Waterman

When we got home after school Mrs Stonemartin was livid.

‘That’s all the thanks I get, after taking you in, you ungrateful child. Mrs Stonehearted indeed. You can go straight to bed. Don’t even think about supper.’

I didn’t mind. I hated her food and I was glad not to have to eat it.

My father came to see us two weeks before Christmas.

‘Abby, you look like a skeleton. What have you been up to? Aren’t you eating?’

‘Please take me home, Daddy, please. I hate it here. Mrs Stonemartin is horrible. Mr Stonemartin says she likes Jill, her dog, better than him. If he’s sitting in front of the gas fire she makes him move away so that Jill can get warm. He’s got some shrapnel in his leg from the trenches, and it leaks nasty yellow stuff. He needs to change the bandages every few days. Mrs Stonemartin said she can’t bear to see it and he must do it himself. He knows Hannah is going to be a doctor, so he lets her help him. She doesn’t like children. She hates them. Hannah says she only took us in for the money.’

‘You’d better come home, Abby, but you should stay here, Hannah. You need to get on with your schooling, now that you’ve got into grammar school.’

‘I’m not staying if Abby’s going,’ Hannah said. ‘But why can’t she stay? She’s just being stupid about not eating.’

‘You can see the state she’s in. I won’t stop you coming home, if that’s what you want, Hannah, but you know it’s the wrong thing to do.’

On the train back to London I snuggled up to my father. Hannah ignored me and sat staring out of the window.

‘I’m never, ever going to be evacuated again,’ I said.

In the New Year, I went to the temporary junior school at Toynbee Hall. It was the time of the so-called Phony War. The bombing hadn’t started, and children had begun to trickle back to London. Makeshift classes were set up where there were large enough rooms, but there were no grammar school places. Grammar schools were all still evacuated. As Hannah was now fourteen, she left school. My parents sent her to Pitman’s College to learn shorthand and typing. She could become a secretary, like our elder sister, Rebecca. No way could she become a doctor now.
I shivered as I crossed Commercial Road. My hands were like ice. Since I came back from Ely, I couldn't seem to get warm.

'It's because you let yourself get so thin, you silly girl,' my father said. 'We'll have to fatten you up.'

My father left for work at seven in the morning so he couldn't take me to school on my first day.

'Now you've turned eight you're old enough to go on your own,' my mother said when I asked her to take me instead.

I walked up the paved path to Toynbee Hall and pushed as hard as I could, but the door wouldn't give. I knocked and a large smiling woman opened it.

'Come on in, girlie,' she said. 'Are you for the juniors?'

When I nodded, she rubbed my cold hands in her large warm ones, and took me upstairs to a room full of children. They sat at small wooden tables with separate chairs, not at all like the school desks I was used to.

The teacher standing at the front came over.

'You must be Abby Waterman. We've been expecting you. Say "Hello" to Abby, children.'

Some muttered 'Hello', while a boy near the front put his hand over the side of his mouth so the teacher couldn't see, and poked out his tongue.

'You can sit in that empty place there,' the teacher said. She pointed to a table in the middle of the room.

They were doing long multiplication and division which I had learned in Ely. I found the sums quite easy and put my hand up a couple of times with the answers.

When the bell went, I hoped it was break time so I could go to the toilet, but it was Composition.

'I want you all to write about your last birthday.'

I was in Ely for my birthday and Mrs Stonemartin was especially horrid. My father had sent me a big bar of chocolate – his ration for a month – and Mrs Stonemartin took it away. She said it was bad for children's teeth. Mr Stonemartin secretly gave me a shilling. He told me to hide it and not to tell. I bought a tiny teddy in the little shop near school and took it with me everywhere. I hid it in the pocket in my knicker leg.

I sat my teddy on the table in front of me and started to write.

'My last birthday . . . ' I began.

In Ely, you had to wait until the mid-morning break to go to the toilet, but I had no idea whether that would be soon or not. I carried on writing for a bit, but I got really upset thinking about Ely and Mrs Stonemartin and everything. I squeezed my legs together, ever so hard, but it was no use. A warm trickle ran down my leg onto the floor.

'Please Miss,' said the boy who'd stuck out his tongue at me. 'The new girl's done a wee-wee.'

Everyone turned round to look and some of them giggled. I wanted to disappear.

The teacher put her arm around my shoulders.

'Don't worry, my dear. Sally can take you to the nurse. She'll find you some nice dry underwear. It's hard – your first day at school.'

The worst thing was going home afterwards. I knew if I told, I'd get a slap for disgracing myself, so I slipped into the girls' toilet and put my wet knickers back on and stuffed the school knickers into my coat pocket. I'd give them back next day.

When I got home I sat down very carefully so the wet part didn't soak my skirt. There was a space under our bed, so I spread my knickers over my shoes, and pushed them to the back, well hidden away. They were dry by morning so my mother never found out.

We were playing tag during morning break when some of the big girls came over and started lifting our skirts. I ran away fast as I could, straight into the corner of a brick wall. For a moment, I couldn't understand what had happened. The other girls in my class gathered round me.

'Your forehead's all bloody,' said Sally, who had taken me to get dry knickers. 'Better go and see nurse.'

I got out my handkerchief and dabbed at my head.

'It's nothing,' I said.

I didn't want to make a fuss and get sent home, but all afternoon my head hurt. I was wearing the new brown leather gloves my father had bought me. As I walked home I took off my right glove and held it over my forehead. That way no-one could see the blood and ask me about
Bought me. As I walked home I took off my right glove and held it over my forehead. That way no-one could see the blood and ask me about it.

By the time I climbed up to our tenement on the third floor, I felt sick and dizzy. I just about got in before I was sick. Luckily, I made it as far as the kitchen sink.

‘What have you been up to?’ my mother asked.

I was used to being told off, or even slapped, for falling over. I pulled my hair over the sore place on my forehead.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said, but she lifted my fringe.

‘Been playing rough games again, have you? How many times have I told you to be careful?’

Soon I was sick again and very dizzy indeed. My father had come home by then.

‘You poor wounded soldier,’ he said. ‘We’d better get the doctor.’

Dr Wilson asked me what had happened. I told him we’d been playing tag and I’d tried to get away from the big girls trying to lift my skirt.

I’ve told her so many times to be careful. She shouldn’t play with the big girls,’ my mother said.

She didn’t understand. They broke into our games and chased us. She wouldn’t listen.

‘Abby’s got a bit of a concussion,’ Dr Wilson said. ‘Keep her off for a couple of days. If she gets worse call me again.’

I didn’t get worse, and I went back to school two days later. I made up my mind that if I hurt myself I would never tell my mother. It was no use expecting her to kiss it make it better, maybe my father, and maybe Hannah, but never her.

Maybe she wasn’t my real mother. Maybe I was adopted or I was a changeling like in the stories.

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Dr Abby J. Waterman is an 85-year old retired consultant pathologist who has also been a Harley Street dentist, an entrepreneur (co-owner of Conran-group designed educational toyshops), the director of a cancer research laboratory, as well as a wife and mother of four children. She and her husband live in London while her children and grandchildren are scattered around the globe. As a pathologist, her favourite books are whodunits, but she is a book-worm and reads books of a wide variety of genres. She always has two or three books on the go. ‘Woman in a White Coat’ was short-listed for the Tony Lothian Biography Prize and the Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2016.
Ah, Maman! There are your alligator and crocodile shoes, lined up outside the wardrobe.

Once in a while, when my mother was in the mood, she showed me the difference in skins, running her expert finger over the striations of black and brown, streaks of zigzagging pattern and the tiny squares of leathery crocodile and alligator skins on her shoes. Skins that must have come by the truckload, tough hides carved away from the bodies of India’s river reptiles.

Anytime of day, I could peer through my pink curtains in our New Delhi house and see my mother’s crocodile and alligator shoes, placed on the concrete floor next to her wardrobe. Lying in my bed, I spent hours in this pursuit, bathed by the bright sunlight that flooded the hallway and filtered through my curtains. I wondered if this was the way crocodiles bathed.

On more occasions than I can count, my mother took me to the cramped and airless crocodile shop deep inside New Delhi’s Khan Market where the shoes originated and where a Mr. Farid, the shop’s jaunty young shoemaker, was an alligator and crocodile expert.

‘Ferra-ga-mo,’ my mother would say slowly and with emphasis to Mr. Farid, showing him a photograph from the NYT or the latest Italian fashion magazine.

‘Sal-Va-Tore FerraGamo,’ she would repeat again with a perfect Italian accent. Then Mr. Farid would study the photo closely, eyes boring in, fingers moving deftly in the air as if to show my mother he could mimic the shoe’s elegant structure in his mind.

‘Madam...’ he would concede as he finished his mental drawing, nodding generously to my beautiful mother, whose presence in the shop always caused something of a stir. Like clockwork, a young boy would appear out of nowhere with a tray of steaming chai and offer one to my mother. Dressed in one of her freshly ironed salwar kameez, my mother wore large black sunglasses, pushed back to hold her auburn hair.

‘Madam must bring her friends also,’ Mr. Farid would skillfully encourage at just the right moment with a wave of his head.

During these sessions, I sat at the back of Mr. Farid’s shop in what must have been the only chair. It was made of a heavy wood, mahogany perhaps, a seat of wicker that sunk precipitously low in the middle from years of wear. The shop had a large black fan on the counter and was rank with the smell of glue and raw leather. Once or twice I saw an elderly man pressed into a corner of the wall as he knelt for prayer.

In my chair, to pass the time, I watched shafts of light from the shuttered window illuminate specs of dust that rose from the floor like armies, as the fan made its slow but steady rotation. A metallic creak signaled the return journey as the fan gradually pointed its breeze to where I was sitting. Then I stared at the large slabs of tawny coloured leather piled in the corner, raw hide on one side and reptile skin on the other.

It seemed to me I sat for hours, watching the dust rise and fall, sitting so long that the chair patterns eventually imprinted themselves on the flesh of my thighs, leaving small reddish marks of repeating octagonal shapes that I could still see when I returned home. Only occasionally would my mother glance back at me, her face flush with pleasure as she held up a piece of alligator or crocodile, the skins taut and gleaming, a swatch of blackish-brown with a psychedelic reptile design, as shiny as if they had been recently polished by Mr. Farid himself.

More than once, when I ventured to ask where the crocodiles for her shoes came from, my mother rolled her eyes and shrugged nonchalantly, as if crocodiles or alligators were hardly a concern. There were farms, she said. She had even seen one in Mahabalipuram. Crocodile attacks of villagers in India were rampant, she added, I had only to open the newspaper to read about it.

Seeing my quiet dismay, she would cry out, ‘Oh my goodness, they’re only crocodiles!’ Then, to make a point, she would wave her hand in front of her nose, ‘and what about that chicken of yours’, reminding me of my love affair with a baby chick I hatched from an incubator, keeping it in my room until the stench became so unbearable that the (then) large chicken was dispatched to a ‘farm’.

My mother also recalled the many afternoons I spent creating a homeless shelter for a group of stray dogs at a nearby construction site, an activity which had ended badly, being bitten and suffering through a series of rabies shots in my stomach. Then my mother lifted back her head in mock exhaustion and signaled to the pile of skins lying across Mr. Farid’s counter, as if, at the least, all this exposure to reptiles might toughen me up.

After what seemed like hours in the crocodile shop, my mother would grab my hand and out we would go into the sun-soaked smells of the street; air drenched with the sweetly-sour scent of roting food, the faint but unmistakable mix of faeces from the drains and nullahs along the way and frying onions. As I turned to try and find the origin of the onions, I could not. It was lunch, being prepared in a tiny room above us, on a street corner, in a cart – somewhere nearby.

Effusiveness came when the crocodile shoes were delivered a few weeks later in a wonderfully elaborate package and placed outside the wardrobe, ready for my mother to wear. As I peered out at her through my pink curtains, she beckoned for me to come and see.
'Look!' she cried out, as she lifted a bare leg with a crocodile shoe at the end, tossing her head of hair and 'modeling' for me, parading down the hallway. 'This is haute couture! Yves St. Laurent, Salvatore Ferragamo.'

How could I not be intoxicated by this mother? Yet, part of me yearned for a mother who was accent-less and American, a mother who knew about things like peanut-butter sandwiches. A mother with a family in Ohio or Minnesota who would send nice packages to the grandchildren.

'This is what the women of Paris and Rome are wearing,' she exclaimed, puckering her lips. 'Just look in the magazines!' she shouted happily, coming closer to make sure I heard through the glass window that separated my bedroom from the hallway where she stood.

Perhaps it was then, as she turned away, lost in the reverie of her new shoes, that I began to understand a little how my mother was in pursuit of the unparalleled beauty she saw reflected in those magazines, as if she were herself reaching into the darkness of that shoe shop and like the shoemaker, hammering and cutting and pasting onto herself an image of glamour and happiness, the same way Mr. Farida was constructing her crocodile shoes.

If there was any further hint about the role of shoes in her life, that came years later when my mother's feet began to hurt and the language of illness hinted at meanings far beyond a sore heel or a bunion rubbing against the instep of a shoe. Her feet required soaks and salt baths, lotions that promised to take away foot soreness, stockings to shore up painful veins and to decrease swelling. More and more, her legs needed to be propped up, as if gravity itself, the immense weight of life, were pulling her down. Her feet and legs became the subject of much discussion; they were worried over, tended to, her bunions filed down aggressively with an emery board, as if her feet and its offshoots contained bundles of memory that were pushing outwards. Her feet elicited acute sighs of pain, sometimes searing, which seemed, at the time, disproportional to any obvious cause.

Yet all too soon, within the next decade of my life, when I was in my twenties, the elegant alligator and crocodile shoes had suddenly become something of the past. Relics, they were relegated to the back of her wardrobe, deemed no longer useable. My mother, a Cinderella searching for her glass slipper in the shop of Mr. Farida, found that the shoe and its accompanying story of transformation was no longer a fit as the war began to seep through her body in ways that could not be contained. When I asked after the shoes, my mother shrugged, as if she had forgotten and could not understand my persistence in asking.

Over the years, thinking back, there may have been reference to a 'walk,' or a 'march,' those words said in a certain way, a different tone, the way I had often heard phrases and fragments, a lexicon that slipped out unseen, a vocabulary I had collected, stored away, and puzzled over, but if there was, I had now long forgotten. In the years of my mother's decline from cancer, I had tended to her legs, washing and wrapping the black cancerous wounds that had sprung from her body like a fourteenth century plague, unimaginable to me and to her. Oh, how far away the days of Mr. Farida's Crocodile shop seemed! The mother who had insisted on having her feet adorned in nothing less than haute couture, hand-made shoes from samples of Ferragamo and Bally, now could only wear the softest canvas shoes, Mary Jane's, shoes that barely pressed against her tender skin.

This ritual bathing took place in the back rooms of a Bed and Breakfast in Virginia, where my mother was living during a renovation that was being done on our house. It was to be yet another holding spot in a lifetime of temporary homes. There was my mother, perched on the hills of the Virginia countryside, a place to which she had no real affiliation but absorbed, breathing in its history and landscape, with the same fierce determination that she had become accustomed to doing her entire life.

Mike, a young black man from the nearby town, became my mother's close friend during this period and her way forward. A local hire, Mike came regularly to cut the grass and clean the pool for the owner of the B&B. Mike was as tall and strong as my mother was now frail. Over the first few weeks, my mother began to talk endlessly about Mike, his family, his struggles to get his high school diploma, the history that Mike represented— a history of overcoming slavery in a nearby town where a settlement of tiny slave houses still existed less than a mile away. My mother threw herself into Mike's past and present, gaining strength from his stories, taking him on as a student, suggesting material to read, plying him with clippings from the newspaper, finding courses for him to take. She regaled Mike with stories of her travels and her refugee past like Scheherazade; the stories masking and transforming the reality at hand. They spent hours together, my mother and Mike, their shadows crossing in the garden under the hot sun, these two great bodies of history comingling as my mother let Mike gather her in his arms when she became tired and take her back into the shade.

'Man,' Mike would say to me, shaking his head in amazement.

Later on, they shared meals together. Mike bringing home-cooked food for my mother to taste and music to listen to. A few times he bundled her into the front seat of his car, taking extreme care, as if she were a broken bird, and driving her a few miles down the road to see where he had come from and to meet some of his family. I remember seeing my mother's hand on one of these trips, the once beautiful almond hand, now thin and spindly, grasping the window frame as she gingerly eased herself into the car seat. It occurred to me more than once how ironic it would be if Mike knew more about my mother's life than any of us. Yet, the intimate friendship forged that spring was an echo of encounters with outsiders that had come before: the Polish Count in Tanzania, Abdul Haq, the jeweler in India, Cornelia Boursan, the obstetrician in Romania. It was as if these people were a protected landmass, a horizon shimmering in the distance. As if she recognised qualities in each of them that allowed her to reveal something of herself. It was a reaching out and roping in of solitude followed by echoes of encounters with outsiders that had come before; the Polish Count in Tanzania, Abdul Haq, the jeweler in India, Cornelia Boursan, the obstetrician in Romania. It was as if these people were a protected landmass, a horizon shimmering in the distance. As if she recognised qualities in each of them that allowed her to reveal something of herself.
these bracketed moments with Mike, there was an undeniable shift in posture, a release from the tightly calibrated grip of the past, as if the molecules of air had regrouped. Maybe in the face of life-threatening illness, my mother allowed herself the luxury of an abandon that was unashamedly girlish.

I wondered, too, how much Mike understood that this tremendous outpouring of emotion and experience expressed on his behalf was one of my mother’s final works, an effort to instill her life experience in him, to affect him, and ultimately to transport him.

Through those months, we tried to ignore the sores, we talked over them, covering them with soft cloths and in the warm, spring-almost-summer air, it seemed possible to do. The Polonia trees were about to bloom, there were frogs starting to croak in the ponds and the weeping willows were unfurling, bending down alongside the windows. And here, in the back of this B&B, where sometimes people arrived to stay and sometimes they didn’t, my mother fought her cancer. Buckets of warm water as I sponged, gently, water filled with ointments and oils, trying to ease her sores and cracking skin, skin that had become like the crocodile and alligator hides she once coveted. Several times a week, an ambulance from the local hospital would arrive at the back door and I would climb in after my mother, the two of us together, as the vehicle hurtled down the road towards radiation treatments.

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Alexandra Anastasia Viets is a writer/screenwriter and journalist whose work focuses on women and dislocation. Her first feature-length screenplay, Cotton Mary, was produced by Merchant Ivory. Her most recent screenplay is an adaptation of the award-winning novel, “Ask Me No Questions,” about a Bangladeshi family fleeing NYC post 9/11. Awarded a fellowship by the National Endowment for Humanities in South Asian history and art, she has taught creative writing workshops in India and the Middle East, focusing on personal biography. She is currently working on a memoir entitled, Maryna. After the War, about her mother’s role in the Polish Underground Army.

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'Daw' In The Snow by Alan Remfry

By Alan Remfry on January 22, 2018 in Poetry

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'Daw' In The Snow.

A bird fell to earth.

Black crack in the snow.

Moving sharp. Moving slow.

Beating out a sky torn track.

It is still, like cold air.
Coddled under a tree,
hiding in a shallow scrape,
of its own making.

Black folds white, folds back.
Pressed to the earth.
Waiting. Ice feather forms.
Once seized. Helpless.

It protests, slight shivers.
Opens a silvered beak,
rasps in harsh protest,
rattles its black tongue.

Confined in a bird sized space.
Wingtips brush the very edge.
A large brown box,
of our own making.

We tend to this stranger.
Stale bread and warm water,
may sustain it.
Alone, in the garden shed.

A night of edgy bird sleep.
Inside that silence space,
twinned with darkness.
In our ‘Daw’ dreams, it does exist.

An urgent phone call.
We make arrangements.
The weather clears. A Van arrives,
for the brown box with the bird in it.

Alan Remfry lives in Durham. He writes crime novels, short stories, plays and poetry for adults and children. Presently, he is working on drafting a series of children’s fantasy novels, while researching background ideas for new plays and scripts. He enjoys going to the cinema, baroque music and hill walking. ‘Daw In The Snow’ was shortlisted for the Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2016 in the Poetry category.
The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea by Bandi – book review

By Felicity Gee on January 16, 2018 in Articles

Prior to opening Bandi’s *The Accusation*, I was already filled with immense curiosity and presentiment, the weight of the author’s precarious position pressing heavily upon me. Written in North Korea between 1989 and 1995 during the Kim Il-sung era by a writer who draws from his perspective as a worker, the original handwritten manuscript is a vital artefact of the Republic’s hidden history. Unable to publish under his own name, Bandi is a pseudonym meaning ‘firefly’, which aptly symbolises both illumination and fragility; the act of revealing ordinary acts of life that are required by North Korean law to remain in darkness, puts the writer in a very dangerous position. Smuggled out of North Korea and into China, and subsequently published in South Korea, these seven stories are now available in English, a valuable and rare volume of samizdat literature that is both bitingly humorous and achingly tragic.

The tensions of North Korea’s political situation are transmitted onto every page of the volume. First-hand narratives, intimate diaries, and official declarations detail the ways in which ordinary life is controlled and transformed by the power of the Great Leader and his government. The theme of accusation runs throughout, leaving no household, no family, and no individual unexamined. In ‘City of Specters’, Pyongyang readies for the National Day celebrations, a marvel of organisational acumen that tallies with the publicly broadcast face of North Korea that is associated with lavish shows of military prowess and mass unity. Central protagonist Gyeong-hee, mother of a two-year old son, lives in an apartment facing Kim Il-sung Square, overlooking two huge portraits of Karl Marx and Kim Il-sung, and is accused of ‘neglecting to educate [her] son in the proper revolutionary principles’. In an exquisitely funny chain of episodes that unfold during the festival preparations, it is revealed that due to a rash threat made to keep her son quiet the boy has mistakenly conflated Marx, Kim Il-sung and the fairy tale monster Eobi, who comes for bad children. Every time he sees either of these giant portraits, there is a risk that he will cry out ‘Eobi’, be overheard, and thus reveal the supposed anti-Communist sentiment of his parents. The ridiculousness of the situation escalates as the mother adds contraband curtains to their apartment, which is in plain view at the epicentre of the celebrations, in an attempt to obscure the view of the portraits from the boy.

Similarly characters in other stories are punished or sent mad by the accusations levelled at them: failure to chop down a tree, share food, cultivate crops amidst unprecedented storms, sleep with persons high up in the Communist Party, travel with the correct papers, or weep uncontrollably at the death of the Great Leader all result in extreme penalties. As well as the black humour, which darkly satirises the whims and obsessions of the leadership to exert complete control and to never lose face, the stories are remarkable in their daring outpourings of emotion. In contrast to the regimented and obsequious mass that will turn on a traitor in seconds, each tale reveals the rich emotions, and the gutsy rebelliousness within individuals. The palpable tension generated under the conditions of the regime is exacerbated as the private grief, anger, and violence erupt in thrilling and heart wrenching ways. A man who has believed all his life that the elm tree outside his house symbolises hope and abundance for all his hard work, explodes in a rage, facing officials with an axe and flinging a glass ashtray at his wife. Insults are hurled, betrayal and cruel disappointment abound, real tears are shed and uncontrollable sobs verge on the hysterical.

The wittiest reflection on the performative aspect of North Korean life comes in the form of a young factory worker, Kyeong-hun, who has a very enlightened view of living without freedom. Accused of crimes against the Party — clowning around, drinking alcohol, and flirting — he defends himself, claiming that while working as a border sentry, his brain ‘had been rotted by the South Korean puppets’ anti-Communist broadcasts that parrot ideas of ‘freedom’. However, it becomes clear in his defence statement that this worker is cleverly using the drills and
stage rehearsals required of him as a member of the community to parody the system and use the idea of 'stage truth' to make his comrades laugh. The reader is left to unravel the layers of performance required of the townsfolk in order to fake 'real' emotion for the Party. Laughter is a also a key component in 'Pandemonium', where folklore provides the framing device for an encounter with Kim Il-sung that combines magic with oppression, in which a demon uses laughing magic on his slaves to conceal their pain. As well as theatre and marching drills, Bandi's stories also ruminate on the role of journalism, propaganda, and food production within the Republic. The reader becomes enmeshed in the intricate twists and turns of the characters as they struggle to remain invisible and undetected in their fallibility. Some of these situations are truly nail-bitingly tense.

The volume as a whole presents a wide-ranging emotional and psychological portrait of North Korea over a time-span that is made to seem curiously modern. Not only do readers understand that the political situation is little changed in the twenty-first century, with one leader merely replaced by another male family member, but the way in which the perspective is shared is refreshingly nuanced. Gender roles and relations are more fluid, with traditional aspects of marriage, labour and domesticity pitted against the individual responsibilities of living inside the Republic. Class and power determine the patterns of sexual harassment, childcare, and privilege in non-expected ways for a Western reader. Ideas are focalised through first person, third person, epistolary, and para-textual narrative segments. Bandi's energetic and whip-smart prose nudges into the cracks and corners that may be seeing light in English for the first time.

As the volume's afterword attests, Bandi took dangerous steps to ensure that the sheaves of worn paper bearing the imprint of these affective stories reached a wider audience. But a great part of the impact also rests with translator Deborah Smith, who ensures that culturally specific terms pertaining to naming, hierarchical order, food, rituals, and weather retain detail without forsaking dynamic, suggestive energies. I was left feeling cold, frostbitten and chafed by the elements and the lack of warmth, and raw from the cumulative affect generated in these tales of struggle and epic sacrifice. In the twenty-first century, we can readily read what Kim Jong-il thought about cinema, consume news from the region filtered through layers and layers of spin, worry about North Korea's nuclear agenda, and wonder at how and why North Korean athletes will attend the Winter Olympic Games held in South Korea in 2018. Bandi's wonderful stories create the underworld from which this is all possible. They tell of ordinary yet extraordinary people, who, above everything can laugh for real.

The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea by Bandi

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Felicity Gee is lecturer in World Cinema at the University of Exeter. She is the author of the forthcoming monograph Magic Realism: The Avant-Garde in Exile (Routledge, 2018), and has published on Luis Buñuel, Surrealism and avant-garde film, Japanese and Korean film, and affect theory. Most recently, she was awarded a British Academy grant to conduct archival research in Cuba, on the interdisciplinary work of Alejo Carpentier. Felicity's research straddles film, art history and literary studies, and her current projects investigate the collaborative work of modernist writers and artists that takes place across and between media.
'I bought you something,' Duncan said, 'but you can’t love it.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'That’s the rule,' he said, and he lifted a blanket off his surprise for me, a little mechanical dog. Its tail and ears were furry but the legs were metallic and its torso was smooth white plastic. Its laser-point eyes flashed green and blue, and a rubber tongue lolled out of its open grin. The tongue brushed my hand and I recoiled.

'Does it have a name?' I asked.

Duncan leafed through a mini instructions booklet. 'We can call him whatever we want,' he said. 'The default name is Spot, but it looks pretty easy to change.'

Its ears pricked up at the name Spot. I touched them. The dog pawed my finger gently and a little plastic nail caught my skin.

'So it’s a he?' I asked.

More flipping through pages. 'That’s the default setting,' Duncan said. 'If you want a girl, though, we can change it. Just press that button there for three seconds, then release, and then hold for another three seconds.'

The button Duncan spoke of was where the creature’s genitals would have been. My hand hesitated over the spot.

'Never mind,' I said. 'Nature doesn’t let you choose.'

'We’re not talking about nature,' Duncan said. 'It’s like asking what colour phone you want. Should it be Spot the boy, or Spot the girl?'

'Boy,' I said. 'And I’d like to call him Serge.'

'After the musician?'

'After nothing. I like the name Serge.'

'Whatever darling wants,' Duncan said, thumping a sequence of buttons on the dog’s belly. 'Serge,' he said in the dog’s ear. He looked at me. 'Now you.'

'What?'

'So it recognises both of our voices,' he said. 'Just touch here and say Serge.'

I did. Then Duncan went across the room. 'Here, Serge,' he called, and Serge let out a little bark, almost convincing except for the rasp of binary code in his voice. He ran stiffly, as if woken from a nap, into Duncan’s arms.

* 

Duncan tried to keep our home filled with living things. He bought me lilies, daffodils, blood roses, strange tropical flowers with petals like feverish tongues. He arranged them in painted vases and old pickle jars, trimming the bottoms of the stems and topping up the tap water with plant food. He brought home sacks of bright oranges, crisp apples and green pomelos and put them in a glass bowl so we could see the colours. He diligently watered our many potted greens, their names long forgotten. He remembered to buy bags of bird seed when we were running low. He brought me little pictures of hedgehogs.

These gifts were presented with a whiff of apology. My acceptance of them was an agreement to forgive. I welcomed life into my home not like a mother, but like an aunt.

One day Duncan wanted to throw away some old flowers – still alive in their cloudy water but admittedly starting to stink – and I wouldn’t let him.

'This is still a bit of life, isn’t it,' I insisted. 'The petals, though, might be decaying.'
There's still a bit of life in them,' I insisted. The petals, though wrinkled, retained their colour.

He was quiet and I thought I had won the flowers an extra day in our flat, but when I returned from buying hand soap ('Kills 99.9% of Bacteria!' its label bragged) I found the vase empty, scrubbed clean and left drying on the dish rack.

The flowers were in the bottom of the bin, wet coffee grounds and tea bags already dropped on top.

Duncan couldn't understand my fury. We went back and forth for ages, with him repeating that they were just flowers and me trying to explain this need I felt to tend a living thing that would last longer than four days on the kitchen counter.

'Do you want me to go out, buy some new ones?' he asked. 'I think the florist is still open.'

'No,' I said. 'That's not the point.'

He checked the time on his phone. He did this during fights sometimes, and it drove me mad – but before I could say anything, pick a whole new argument, he said, 'I think I know what to do.'

* 

Duncan wanted Serge to sleep in our bedroom. I said, 'does he even need to sleep?'

'He's what a real dog would do,' said Duncan.

'I thought real dogs sleep in kennels,' I said.

'Not my dog,' said Duncan.

We plugged Serge into the socket at the foot of the bed using a thin cord that attached to its neck. 'So cute,' said Duncan. 'Just like a leash.' We both patted the thing goodnight and climbed into bed.

Duncan was gone instantly, breathing nasally into his pillow, but I couldn't sleep. I lay there listening to a strange sound coming from the floor, like a whisper.

I climbed out in my bare feet to check on Serge. The sound came from him, a gentle fan in his body to keep the inner hardware cool. I touched his back and his legs shifted, a programmed response. His body was warm to the touch.

* 

In the morning I unplugged Serge and he followed me with wagging tail to the kitchen. He watched as I poured grapefruit juice and dropped bread in the toaster. His eyes glowed an anxious yellow and he shifted from paw to paw.

'Duncan,' I called, 'are we supposed to feed it?'

'It's a machine,' came his response from the bedroom.

'It wants something,' I said.

'So scratch its head,' he said. 'Throw a ball. I don't know.'

The thing let out a chalky yip and nudged my shin with its nose. My toast popped up. I buttered and ate it, trying my best to ignore the whimpering machine.

'You don't need anything,' I reminded it. 'What's the problem?'

I bit my toast. Crumbs scattered to the floor. Serge's eyes flashed and he lapped up the stray crumbs with his rubber tongue.

The mail slot in the front door creaked open and shut. Serge ran away to bark at it. On the floor, where his tongue had been lapping, was what looked like a patch of wet. I bent and touched it. It didn't feel like saliva. It was a trick, a sleight of programming. But, still, there were no toast crumbs to be found. Where were they now? In his little computer belly?

I reported this mystery to Kate, my cubicle-mate at work. She looked at me, eyes wide beneath heavy cat-eye swooshes.

'Duncan got you one of those?' she said. 'Why? They're creepy.'
'He's cute,' I said. 'It's nice to have the company.'

'It's not company,' said Kate. 'It's weird.'

Her mobile phone on the desk flashed and she picked it up, swiftly, like you would a crying baby. She tapped the screen with a fingertip and was gone.

I stopped at a grocery store on the way home and bought chicken for dinner and ripe plums for the fruit bowl. I came home, arms full of rustling plastic, slipped off my shoes in the doorway, and stepped square into a warm puddle on the floor.

I ran to grab a paper towel, the last one on the damn roll. The brown cardboard tube sat there, naked and pointless. A mild odour met my nose as I sopped up the mess. It reminded me of urine, but not quite. Sort of like green tea.

Serge trotted in from the bedroom. He put his paws on my legs and tickled my face with his tongue. 'Did you do this?' I asked, pointing at the puddle. Serge's tail tucked between his legs and his eyes turned an embarrassed mauve.

The instruction book said nothing about licking up crumbs or pissing on floors. It only contained vague promises to provide a realistic experience of having a pet. I checked online forums to see if anyone had a problem with their SmartDog peeing on the floor, but all I could find was someone whose dog's battery had leaked.

I coaxed Serge over and opened his tummy to check for leaks. None that I could see. I popped out the battery to check behind. Serge's eyes went dull and his limbs froze. No problems. I stuck the battery back in and for a second he remained still – my heart did a quick, panicked pump – but then he came back to life and started chasing his own tail.

* 

At dinner some of Duncan's chicken fell on the floor and he called Serge to clean it up.

'He doesn't have a stomach,' I said.

'He cleaned up your crumbs,' he said. 'Maybe he's got a food disposal function. You know, to be realistic.' He called Serge again but Serge didn't come.

'Is he switched on?' asked Duncan.

'Of course he's switched on,' I said. 'What's the point of having the thing if we're just going to switch it off and on?'

'I don't know,' said Duncan. 'I just figured sometimes you might not have it switched on. You know, to save on battery.'

I left my dinner to check on Serge. I found him in the bedroom, making a nest of dirty socks. He picked them up in his plastic teeth and placed them in the warmest corner of our room, right beside the radiator.

'Serge,' I said. He ignored me and curled up in his pile of limp old socks.

'The computer must be malfunctioning,' I said to Duncan. 'He's not recognizing his name.'

Duncan followed me to the bedroom and we took turns calling Serge's name. No reaction. I called the company's help line. They kept me on hold for twenty minutes and I imagined the thousands of other SmartDog owners, each holding a phone to their ear, listening to hold music. Were their dogs identical to mine? Had anyone else chosen the same name? Were they worried about their creature like it was a real pet, or did they approach the situation with objectivity, like the owner of a blender that had stopped working?

When an agent finally picked up and I explained the issue with Serge, I was asked to check that the battery hadn't been accidentally dislodged.

'Oh,' I said. 'I took the battery out earlier today. But I put it right back in.' Then I was told it doesn't matter how quickly I replace the battery – removing it for just a moment resets the dog.

'But what if I have to take it out again?' I asked.

I was told I shouldn't ever remove the battery myself, except in an emergency. But when I tried to find out what sort of emergency, they wouldn't say.

'Rare cases,' I was told. 'You won't have to worry about it. Just call again if you have any questions. We'll advise you.'

I didn't like that the dog had a reset function. It seemed unfair – like Duncan throwing away flowers before they were properly dead. We had
to program his name all over again, and he’d forgotten where we kept his box of toys. When I took him to the back garden to play fetch I faked throwing the ball and Serge chased after it, whereas just yesterday he had learned to wait for it to leave my hand first. But other things – the way he curled in my lap while Duncan and I watched TV, or napping in his favorite corner – didn’t need to be taught. They were just Serge.

*

We invited some people over. I brewed a big pot of coffee and served it with homemade pumpkin bread. We sat in the living room where the blue sky came in fresh and strong, making us squint.

I called Serge and he delighted everyone by running from hand to outstretched hand, nuzzling their fingers while speakers in his nose generated a sniffing sound. One of the ladies, Claire, had just finished a slice of bread and her fingertips were sweet and greasy. Serge licked her hand.

‘Does he actually smell it?’ she asked, amazed.

‘It’s an illusion,’ said Ian. ‘It’s a machine designed to make you believe it smells and eats and loves and shits.’

‘It doesn’t do all those things,’ I said. ‘That’s one of the perks highlighted in the ad. There’s no shit. It’s a shitless dog.’

‘Then why am I picking up turds every morning in the yard?’ asked Duncan.

‘What?’ I said.

‘It’s weird,’ he said. ‘They must be from foxes or something, but I swear since we got this SmartDog there’s been more shit in our yard every day.’

‘Maybe foxes are attracted to its smell,’ suggested Claire.

‘There shouldn’t be any smell,’ I said.

‘How do you know?’ asked Duncan. ‘The instruction book hardly says anything at all.’

Serge ran away and returned with a tennis ball in its mouth. We took turns throwing the ball and watching Serge bring it back, until conversation moved to gossip and Serge was ignored. He dropped the ball at Ian’s feet, wanting to fetch some more. He yipped. Ian did nothing. So Serge stuck his nose in Ian’s crotch and inhaled deeply. Then he started humping Ian’s leg.

Everyone laughed except for Ian. ‘Very funny,’ he scowled as he nudged Serge down.

‘I didn’t teach it that,’ I said.

‘Probably some programmer’s joke,’ said Duncan.

‘Maybe you can un-program it,’ said Ian.

Duncan stood and reached for Serge. ‘Come on, you,’ he said, gathering the dog in his arms.

‘Where are you taking him?’ I asked.

‘Just giving everybody a break,’ he said.

‘I’ll keep him in my lap,’ I said. ‘He won’t bother anybody.’

‘Actually,’ said Claire, ‘the grinding of his joints is giving me a headache.’

‘He’ll be alright in our room,’ said Duncan, looking at me.

‘I know,’ I said.

‘Say bye-bye, Serge,’ said Duncan, waving Serge’s paw at the group. Serge barked and everybody laughed. ‘Good boy,’ said Duncan, and he left the room.

‘He is cute,’ said Claire apologetically. ‘Just, only for five minutes.’

‘I understand,’ I said. But to me the rest of the afternoon felt bruised by his absence.
The next evening Duncan and I were cleaning after dinner when Serge started whining at the front door.

‘What does it want?’ said Duncan. Serge scratched the door imploringly.

‘I think he wants to go for a walk,’ I said.

‘It doesn’t need to go for a walk.’

‘Yeah, but if he were a real dog, he would. Let’s take him.’

‘We don’t have a leash.’

‘He’ll be fine. I don’t think he can run very fast.’

We got our jackets and opened the front door. Serge took off like a shot, barking at something we couldn’t see. I tensed, ready to chase him, but he halted at the end of the road to wait for us, ears and tail erect.

Serge led the way. He went from tree to tree with his nose to the ground. Duncan and I followed, watching Serge nervously at first and then relaxing into normal conversation. We commented on houses as we passed, each one much the same but with small differences – venetian blinds on the windows, or curtains; toys on a shelf, or ceramic elephants; *The Matrix* playing on TV, or the local news. I stopped to admire someone’s kitchen through their side windows, all clean with clay jars labelled ‘sugar’ and ‘flour’ and an ice dispenser in the black polished fridge.

‘That’s the sort of kitchen I want,’ I told Duncan, and I beckoned for him to join me. But he didn’t. He remained standing near the street curb, looking one way and then another.

That’s when I realised Serge was nowhere to be seen.

We called his name. We listened for mechanical footsteps or barks. Nothing.

‘Do you think he can find his way home?’ I asked.

‘I hope so,’ said Duncan. ‘Shit. That thing was expensive.’

We split up. We shouted his name up and down the neighbourhood. I checked weedy alleys, garbage cans, other people’s lawns. Duncan’s voice drifted to me through cracks between houses. I imagined people looking down on us from their first-floor bedrooms, stepping away from folding clean laundry to see what the fuss was about. They would probably think we had lost a real dog.

I heard distant barking – real barking – followed by a voice shouting ‘no.’ Duncan’s voice.

I ran around the next corner and found Duncan near the gate to the neighbourhood park. There was mud on his jeans and something cradled in his arms. It gave a computerised hiccup – possibly an attempt at a whimper.

‘Serge,’ I cried.

He looked up, feebly, at the sound of his name. His eyes were dull. One ear had been torn off, leaving behind a cluster of exposed wires. The other ear drooped in canine melancholy.

Duncan passed him to my outstretched arms. I cradled him close.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘Someone’s Jack Russell,’ fumed Duncan. ‘I got a picture on my phone.’ He showed me. It was blurry.

‘Where did it go?’

‘Into the park. Maybe the owner’s there.’

We peered through the gate. There was no movement in the park except for a rush of birds heading for their roosting tree. They perched nightly in its dead branches and screamed at the abandoning sun.

I walked Serge home while Duncan searched for the Jack Russell’s owner. Serge quivered delicately against my chest. I held him close, warming him against my heart.

Back home, Serge limped to his favourite corner and curled up. I knelt to check his limbs. A few scratches, and one of his legs now overextended. I held him close, and stroked his remaining ear until he fell asleep.
overextended. When I tried to bend it back he gave a yelp as if in pain, so I stopped and just stroked his remaining ear until Duncan came home.

* 

The next day at work I told the tale of the Jack Russell Terrier as my colleagues and I stirred our morning cups of instant coffee. Then they took turns with their own stories of pets being attacked.

‘Misty’s tail was crooked for the rest of her life,’ said Kate.

‘Oscar refuses to walk down that street again,’ said Claire.

We all basked in the shared horror and misery of pet owners, until Ian ruined it by saying, ‘at least Serge has a warranty,’ to which everyone laughed, and I was instantly excluded.

* 

When I got home Duncan was packing Serge into a box.

‘The goddamn warranty doesn’t cover replacement parts,’ he said. ‘Only a complete replacement dog. Isn’t that ridiculous?’

‘We have to replace Serge?’ I said.

‘It’ll be the same model,’ Duncan said. ‘We just have to wait a couple of weeks.’

‘It’s only an ear,’ I said. ‘He can live with one ear.’

‘He walks funny too,’ said Duncan. ‘Makes noises. Listen. Don’t turn him on, okay? Something’s wrong.’

In the box Serge’s eyes were dark. His legs were tucked around his body in strange angles.

‘Can’t I say goodbye?’ I asked.

‘To what?’ said Duncan. He tore a long strip of duct tape, making a terrible sound, like ripping skin. He slapped down the box lids and taped them shut.

* 

I slept badly that night. The sealed box sat in Serge’s favourite corner, and I couldn’t sleep for wondering what the next dog would be like – if it would play the same games as Serge, if it would like that corner too. I wondered if we would call it Serge. It wouldn’t be wrong to, but I knew somehow I couldn’t. I would have to think of a whole new name.

I sat up sometime around dawn and pulled on a bathrobe. I looked at the box. It made me feel spooked, like the box was looking back.

‘Duncan,’ I said. He didn’t move.

I slipped out of bed and took the box to the kitchen.

I wiggled a fingernail under the tape and pried it up. I folded back the box lid and took out Serge, white packing peanuts skittering to the floor. I propped the dog in my lap and opened his belly with my thumb. No battery. I searched the surface of Duncan’s desk and found the battery under a pile of unopened bills. I pressed it into Serge’s belly and his eyes lit up green.

‘Serge,’ I cooed, cradling his squirming limbs.

He tossed his head, trying to get free, and nosed me hard in the chin. I set him down and he ran circles on the kitchen floor, yapping at full volume.

I tried to shush him but he ignored me and ran for the back door. He stood on his hind legs and scraped lines into the wood finish with furious paws.
'No,' I said in a scolding voice.

And he turned and growled at me. His eyes flashed red.

Everything stopped. The room shrank and I held my breath in the infinite moment that my dog growled at me and I stood there in my slippers.

Serge moved first. He charged at me. He opened his mouth of teeth – teeth! Who gave him teeth? – ready to snap shut on me.

It was a survival reaction. It wasn't something I thought about. All I saw were those teeth. I drew my leg back and kicked him hard.

His body was flimsy, light as an action figure. He flew into the door and landed on the tiled kitchen floor.

Somewhere between my foot and the floor Serge went from being a threat to being something Duncan had paid for. I heard his voice in my head (Shit, that thing was expensive). I felt a jolt in my heart of fear and failed responsibility, a feeling I got whenever I dropped my phone and worried for the fragile screen.

But Serge did not shatter. He did something worse. He started to cry.

Huge, tragic whimpers to break your heart. I watched him wail on his back, legs pedaling in the air. Someone had done this to him, made him capable of such sorrow. Someone had done this to me.

I knelt beside his fallen body. I reached between his upright limbs and opened the battery hatch.

His watery blue eyes met mine one last time before the light went out, and all was still.

Maria Hummer was born in Toledo, Ohio. She has lived and worked around the world in Seoul, St. Louis, Budapest and Bratislava, and she is currently based in London. Her short stories have appeared in publications such as *Best of Ohio Short Stories*, *Passages North*, *Emry's Journal*, and more. She is also the writer of prize-winning short films "He Took His Skin Off For Me" and "Dinner and a Movie." Her most recent film, based on her short story "The Director," is currently in post-production. At present Maria is completing her first novel, a speculative fiction love story. She tweets @mariahum
In the film Flying Blind, a white woman, Frankie, who works as an aeronautical engineer designing drones for the Ministry of Defence begins an affair with a much younger Algerian refugee. After she is detained by the security services and told that her lover is a “person of interest” she discovers that he has looked at Islamic fundamentalist websites on his computer, is an illegal immigrant and has suspicious scars on his body. She suspects that she has become implicated in a terrorism plot and her father even goes as far as to ask her, “Do you think it wise to have an Arab boyfriend given the nature of your work?” In the end, Frankie comes to realise that her (and the viewer’s) readiness to misread evidence and assume a threat simply because her boyfriend inadvertently fits the profile of an Arabic threat comes at a great cost. The film is instructive of the paranoia that exist in western societies about Arabic and Islamic peoples – more than any other religion, Islam is made to carry more than its fair share of stereotypical freight – and illustrates why a book like *Don’t Panic, I’m Islamic: Words and Pictures on How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Alien Next Door*; to give it its full title, is necessary.

There are many things that are remarkable about this timely and subversive book, but easily the most remarkable thing about it is how many major award-winning artists and writers the reader has never heard of before contribute to it. If such writers and artists had been white and feted just as much, would they be more visible to a wider readership? It’s debatable. Here are artists, writers, journalists, comedians, activists, filmmakers and the odd drag-queen whose work is part of the public collection of the British Museum (Chant Avedissian whose art graces the cover of the book); has won BAFTAs (Omar Hamdi); is frequently published in *The Guardian* (Arwa Mahdawi); and has been on the BBC 100 Women list (Bahia Shehab). It underlines that something is really lacking in the myopic way that westerners regard Arabic people if the most recognisable name on the list of contributors to such a book is that of the British Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, who is distinctly not Arabic or Islamic. Notwithstanding her very apposite and impactful contribution in the poem ‘Comprehensive’, the reader has to wonder if she has been included precisely because of the pulling power of her name.

This resolutely secular and somewhat uneven anthology, commissioned by London-based Saqi Books in response to the US travel ban and composed of a multifarious collection of short fiction, memoirs, poems and artworks, opens with a couple of insouciantly provocative essays. Arwa Mahdawi teaches “how to distinguish an acceptable Arab from a terrorist in 6 easy steps” and what Arabic words you should not be alarmed by while Karl Sharro walks the reader through *The Joys of Applying for a US Visa*. Who knew falafel could be so contentious? It appears in no less than the first two articles.

Laugh out loud quotable lines set the tone – “Do you feel yourself to be more Libyan, or more homosexual, Sir?” which is continued in a cartoon by Chris Riddell lampooning Donald Trump and Theresa May while other artworks juxtapose unexpected elements. Hassan Hajjaj’s Kesh Angels photographs combine women wearing Nike embossed burkas, bestriding Harley Davidson motorcycles within a frame ringed by Lego. Chaza Charafeddine’s Divine Comedy series mixes photographic portraits of men wearing Carmen Miranda style headdresses with1940s Egyptian, Indian, Afghani and Iranian popular portrayals of mythological beings. Tammam Azzam uses graphic art in From Syria with Love to create visual composites of the conflict in Syria in which the walls of a bombed out building are bedecked with the aces and deuces of playing cards or a posse of Andy Warhol style Elvisses guard another bombed out building. This kind of art is so infrequently given a platform that the reader wishes the book had space for a lot more.

*Don’t Panic, I’m Islamic*’s great strength is that the writing is indeed, to quote the endorsement from Brian Eno on the bright and inviting front cover, “bursting with creativity, wit and intelligence.” The even greater strength is that it curated its content from an international cross-section of the Arabic diaspora. Stories, memoirs, articles and artworks come from places as diverse as UK, US, Libya, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Morocco, Turkey and France. But by far the greatest strength is the insight it provides into the traumas, crises of identities, the micro-aggressions, the anger, hurt and the constant sense of threat that blights day to day lives of Muslim and Arabic people around the world because of the ‘war on terror’. A Guardian reader from Surrey, also a biologist at Harvard University suffers a psychotic breakdown in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when he witnesses such things as vehicles bearing slogans like “All Muslims must die now!” A father trains his children into semi-paranoia for the ‘new America’ after the Trump travel ban. A young Arab-American woman studying in France becomes dislocated when her classmates assure her she is white. This book further subverts stereotypes by highlighting the cultural and geographical hybridity of many Islamic identities. Negin Farsad describes this phenomenon: “I’m a Third Thing – Islam doesn’t explain me, Iranian poetry doesn’t explain me, and apple pie doesn’t explain me.” She is a composite of all of those things but yet feels strangely alienated from all of them.

The book isn’t without its flaws. The unevenness in the balance between the amount of art, journalism, stories and poetry gives the impression of a scattergun approach in the commissioning of the contributions. Further, some of the contributions are conspicuous by how unsuited they seem to be for this anthology. While all the other pieces grapple with the nuances of being Islamic in a world that chooses to vilify Muslims and Arab people, Alex Wheatle’s ‘Shade-ism’, about the consequences of a wife’s jealous rage following her husband’s affair leaves this reader scratching her head as to why it was included because neither of its two characters appear to be Muslim or Arab and the story sheds no light on what it means to be either of these two things in the 21st century. On balance though, *Don’t Panic I’m Islamic* is a very strong start to what I hope will become a strong and very visible series of anthologies of art, wit and critical thinking.
Upon his arrival, Dingane entertained Retief and his men with dances, feasts and sham fights and discussions regarding the allocation of land commenced. From this point on sources differ greatly. Dingane subsequently sent out his warriors to kill the rest of the Voortrekkers awaiting Retief’s return from Mgungundlovu. Hundreds of Voortrekkers were consequently killed at Bloukrans and Mooordspruit which set off months of bloody conflict between the Voortrekkers and Dingane’s Zulus. In response, Voortrekker leaders Hendrik Potgieter and Piet Uys sent out an expedition against Dingane, but were defeated at Italeni. Sigidi kaSenzangakhona commonly known as Shaka was a great Zulu king and conqueror. He lived in an area of more. King Dingane ka Senzangakhona. When Mpande became king, his praise-singer recited a dirge that reflected the enduring Zulu perception of Dingane: ‘You thrust an evil spear into Zululand!’ Yet, many historians profess sympathy for Dingane’s predicament: he ruled the kingdom during a particularly challenging era in which it was clear that, unless the Zulu found ways to match the whites’ firepower, they would be encircled and eventually defeated. Log In. Retrieve your password. Please enter your username or email address to reset your password. Log In. Zulu King Dingane addresses his people over the bodies of Boer emissaries he had ordered killed at the royal capital of uMgungundlovu in early February 1838. (Stock Montage/Getty Images). As eager to aid his fellow Boers as he was to avenge the massacre of Piet Retief and party, Pretorius was impatient to get his kommando (mobile infantry regiment) armed, trained and under way. By early December his wagon train was ready to roll and set out for uMgungundlovu. He knew the Zulu king could not possibly let such a challenge pass without suffering a humiliating loss of face. December 16 dawned with perfect battle weather and the sobering spectacle of an estimated 30,000 Zulu warriors seated patiently on the surrounding veldt.