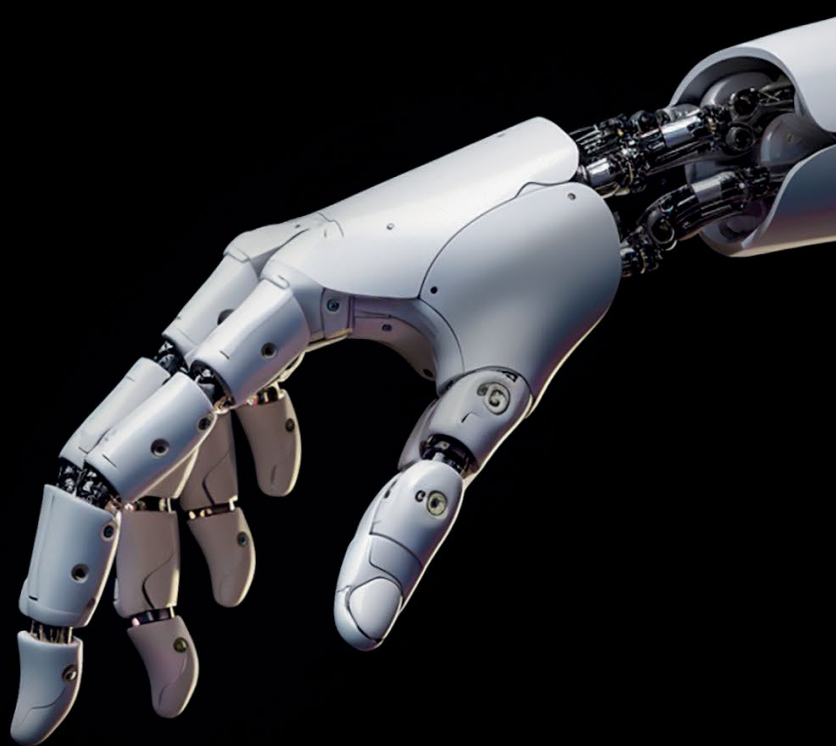




MetaJozi

WRITING
WITH
AND
AGAINST
GENERATIVE AI

Nedine Moonsamy
Thobekile Masombuka



MetaJozi
Writing With and
Against Generative AI

Nedine Moonsamy and
Thobekile Masombuka (Eds)



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Foreword

Beginning *MetaJoz*

At the outset, we were nervous about inviting some of Johannesburg's esteemed writers into a workshop to experiment with generative artificial intelligence (AI). The topic had already become a deeply polarising debate in local and international writing communities, and we were concerned that our invitation might offend and alienate our fellow writers. Yet, on 19 September 2024, a handful of novelists, poets, academics, and scholars gathered at the Johannesburg Institute of Advanced Study (JIAS) to ponder AI's contentious role as friend or foe. Much to our delight, these writers expressed an open curiosity that matched our own, and they came ready to spar with various AI interfaces to produce a new piece of creative writing. The result of this experiment is the anthology that you are now reading, the first of its kind. *MetaJoz* is a groundbreaking compilation that brings together 11 unique explorations of the city through the lens of AI interactivity.

Similar workshops of this kind have been held in other parts of the world,¹ and their results have been quite illuminating to reflect on. For example, in one study, a group of writers, ranging from novice to professional, were given AI prompts, while a control group was not. These stories were then handed over to readers, who assessed them using a range of metrics. Surprisingly, the AI-assisted stories scored higher in all categories, achieving increased enjoyment scores of approximately 22% in some cases. Yet, the overall picture is not as celebratory as that: while

¹ See "Creative writing with an AI-powered writing assistant: Perspectives from professional writers" (Ippolito et al., 2022) and "Generative AI enhances individual creativity but reduces the collective diversity of novel content" (Oliver and Doshi, 2024).

AI helped writers – particularly the least experienced ones – to discover new ideas and boost their individual creativity, it was found that these AI-generated stories tend to create a sense of similarity or sameness when viewed collectively. Evidently, AI boosts creativity on an individual level, but it ultimately compromises novelty on a collective level by creating more similarity and predictability in stories. The authors of that project concluded that what we ultimately have on our hands is a social dilemma because while the equalising force of AI may help the individual, it ultimately hurts the collective.

During the workshops for our project, our conversations ranged from the philosophical to the practical. We sat with the discomfort of opening ourselves up to the excitement that new technology affords us as humans, and as writers, while also straddling the awareness of the ethics of human agency, autonomy and creativity. Instead, we settled on a more transformative approach to these concerns; for while AI can never fully replace human creativity – at least not yet – its inevitability in our lives means that we can consciously consider how to enlist it as a collaborator in our creative writing processes.

What became of particular interest to us as a collective was that AI has a startling lack of diversity because it can only draw on Internet data, which is already geographically and racially biased. For example, we conducted this experiment with “Johannesburg” as a prompt for writing. While the city serves as a backdrop to most of the creative pieces in this collection, it also provided a levelled playing field in our workshops, so to speak, ensuring that we engaged with AI within a unified, topical framework. Given the broad and interpretive understanding of Johannesburg as our home city, we were often amused and horrified by the flagrant stereotypes of AI-generated stories that perpetuated violent assumptions of African poverty, black and masculine violence and white innocence, to name a few. Yet, while we butted heads with versions of the city that we could not relate to, we also became eerily aware that we were also helping to train AI to have more cognitive flexibility in this regard.

Foreword

As many writers discovered during this workshop, the fundamental problem with AI is that it cannot produce novel thought; it is a machine learning, and while it is growing complex enough to mimic human styles of creative writing, it still works on data harvesting and memorisation: it can only draw on what's available on the Internet as its database.

Similar to the experience in other workshops, our collective encountered the frustration that AI often leads to predictable tropes and suggestions for plots, and it produces sentences that are superficially good but creatively poor. In creative writing, "good" easily translates into boring, and much of the novelty of the draft lies in transgression, whether that's related to language or bad characters, actions or ideologies (which AI will often refuse to generate). As you read the reflections that accompany each creative piece, you will see that the range of writers in our group has responded diversely to this experiment. Sometimes, writers found creative ways to engage with AI, from using the tool to strengthen the weaknesses in their own writing style, to challenging AI's often-subpar responses and thinking of more delicious turns of phrases. At other times, they were too underwhelmed by AI's faux creativity to further engage with the tool beyond its editorial usefulness. The writers' reflections accompany their creative work to demonstrate their respective processes of writing with or against AI, and to invite you to see the extent to which AI can be used in this field, specifically. At whichever point in the spectrum of this debate you find yourself, we hope that as you read this anthology, you will glean from it something magical or cautionary, which are the two reductive impressions that many oscillate between when thinking of the city of Johannesburg.

Part One

Poetry

Chapter One

A Willing Mistake

Nathi Dass 

English, University of Johannesburg 
Johannesburg, South Africa

A Willing Mistake (original)

Summer is cold in Jozi when the black clouds sweep up
forgotten speeches
The dogs chasing hadedas crying havoc
The blooming jacaranda petals drift off the safety of its
branches
And are crushed by us

Kissing you is as heady as a broken prayer
Your lips, soft and inviting,
offers mine shelter and something
close to knowing
And as we are lifted up by our hot breaths
We drift into each other I feel you in my pulse
Your tongue in my mouth is wet and filling
The remains of an apology is surely in your mouth
somewhere

A Willing Mistake (ChatGPT Remix)

Summer's chill descends on Jozi's broken soul,
Black clouds swallow the city's fading goal.
Hadedas mourn, dogs roam, lost in Hillbrow's despair,
Jacaranda petals fall, crushed beneath our hopeless stare.

In Braamfontein's alleys, our love finds its grave,
Kissing you is like a final, desperate prayer.
Your lips, soft as the morning mist on the Magaliesberg,
Offer fleeting solace from the city's crushing berg.
Our hot breaths mingle, a moment's escape,
From the Minibus taxis, the horns, the city's endless ache.
My heart beats like the drumming of the thunderstorms,
Reflected in yours, a rhythm that echoes our doomed forms.

A Willing Mistake (Meta Remix)

Summer's chill descends on Jozi's broken soul,
Black clouds swallow the city's fading goal.
Hadedas mourn, dogs roam, lost in Hillbrow's despair,
Jacaranda petals fall, crushed beneath our hopeless stare.

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Our hot breaths mingle, a moment's escape,
From the Minibus taxis, the horns, the city's endless ache.
My heart beats like the drumming of the thunderstorms,
Reflected in yours, a rhythm that echoes our doomed forms.

Reflection

I wrote this poem following the workshop that we had that aimed to interrogate the Creative's relationship with AI. AI is a technology that, like with all new technologies, I have a healthy scepticism of. That is to say, I appreciate the technology helping me to correct misspelt words or detect a student who has plagiarised. However, to do the hard work (i.e. the finding and forging of words) of the entire creation of a new piece of work – academic or creative – fills me with a level of dread that makes me feel like a Luddite.

Chapter One

When I received the invitation to this workshop all that I kept returning to was Martin Heidegger's *A Question Concerning Technology* (1977) and specifically the notion that technology is a form of knowledge that is centred around "reveal[ing] whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us, whatever can look and turn out now one way and now another".¹ The chisel helps to reveal the Statue of David, the laptop helps me to reveal this offering, social media helps me to reveal the depths of the dark night of the soul. Consequently, what does it mean that the technology we have at hand is meant to offer a form of intelligence from the human mind but – at least theoretically – not of the human mind? Heidegger's assertion about technology becomes further complicated when we consider that art itself is a kind of revealing. This revelation through art, I believe, is only possible *through* the work. For me, writing is often close enough to feel like something akin to divine possession. Words, ideas, and motifs suddenly ring in my ear like an earworm and then appear on my tongue, begging to be put to paper. Between my tongue and the page is where the work begins; it is where the art is truly revealed. It is here, between inspiration and active creation where, for me, the true wonder of art creation is. My worry about AI in this regard is that the mouth and the page are subsumed to create a simulacrum of a place. AI does not concern itself with becoming; it fundamentally *cannot* because it is limited by the value, quality and quantity of input data. Indeed, Heidegger notes that it is the work imbued into an item that allows it to become a conduit for revealing. AI rejects work but not in a way that seeks to challenge the ontologising of one's productive labour value, thereby challenging capital. Instead, it seeks to hyper-optimize the act of creation, thereby ensuring that it does not and cannot bring forth something previously concealed; rather it turns creation into mere fabrication.

All of that being said, I uploaded the original version of "A Willing Mistake" into ChatGPT and Meta to see what differences, if any, they sputter out. The result, to me as a reader, suggests that the AI misunderstands the poem in vital ways. The original poem, I feel, hinges on the terrifying yet exciting ambiguity of

¹ Heidegger, 1977.

hooking up with someone you know you're not supposed to for whatever reason. The AI resolves this ambiguity by making every line AABB, which suggests a unity between the lines that rhyme and an internal logic supporting the ones that don't. The use of punctuation highlights a need for certainty that the poem cannot and must not offer. What is of note is that I cheekily asked both to rewrite the original poem as "more sad and Jozi". I left what that meant up to the generative systems and what they offered was, in my opinion, geographically confused and emotionally sterile. I urge you as the reader to take all three versions and make your own versions, cobbling together whichever lines in whichever order. Good art is a magic trick that ignites wonder. AI "art" is a bad, hack magician that lacks so much finesse, that it makes you think that all magic is bad and, thus, that wonder is forever lost.

By taking the AI "art" (and my words) to create a poetic collage of your own, you will help to reintroduce wonder to the world.

Chapter Two

Festival of Hysteria

Wandile Ganya 

*Division of Cardiology, Tygerberg Academic Hospital, Faculty of
Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University 
Cape Town, South Africa*

a café in Melrose Arch

I.

[a waiter polishes the chrome railing; outside,
the Highveld light flattens the white facades,
extending the city in measured rectangles]

I am no longer afraid of my own words –
scrawled bare on a page in frantic abandon,
or embroiled in some fermenting puddle and sink of contempt.
And now that I have rid myself of that frivolous curse:
let my words free before the ink chances to dry.

Come, brightest day and heaviest night,
dance with me in the twilight of my reprieve.
Let us dance at the centre of this hysterical vision.
Damned children of luck and suffering,
drink up all the wine, the gall and comedy of this world!
Suck on life's shrivelled and unhappy breast!
The belligerent gods on high have made everything
for their furtive sport. And though you heard Orpheus sing his lungs out,
you, iron statues with disjointed limbs, were not stirred to life.
Can't you see? Everything reaches for you,

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yet, you slip away from this unravelling dream.

In this little café,

the honeyed scent of almond croissants and fresh pomegranate
reaches out to my tripe in delicate tendrils
like the fingers of a drunken poet who, in pints of beer, measures his fill of love.
The heedless tide of wonder comes plashing onwards...A sense of falling,
nay, of endless plummeting seizes me.

Gong!

Gong!

The restless teacup on this tiny wooden table stirs me
into the great anonymity of half-forged feelings,
dizzying black and white patterned tiles, straight lines
and many unremembered things. Jostling. Wailing.
Amidst the plummet, I remembered, "*Ah, I once was a praying thing*";
I supplicated that one morning I may reappear like a beautiful landscape
or the pure glint of happiness in a coy mistress' smile.
But, alas, oh righteous fever,
all comforts have grown too remote in my sight.
Their glint comes from a dead star
that has flamed to a languishing faintness.
I cannot step outside my heart
and wander amongst blooming gardens.
For as one who has always lived amongst ordinary things,
that know not beauty, and kept their thousand difficult questions
too close to his heart – walls that reel me in, ensnaring me in their nausea –
I want for nothing. Instead, I toss my days into the wide peninsula of quietude,
which holds me and makes itself felt
when nothing more is left in me (but a great stillness)
to be discovered.

The gods may laugh,

but so too may we – yes, even we, objects of idle toy who grasp at nothing.
And so, I laugh.
For what else is left to do
when wonder, with its rich profusions, has breathed its last gasp?
When the final question has been asked, and its answer – the last truth – has
been unveiled?
Laughter, too, is a revolt – a rebellion of the conscience.

Chapter Two

But what is it for a god to laugh,
a jester who knows no suffering
and has no need of understanding it,
if not to mock us?

II.

[a hawker calls from the curb of Crescent Drive,
a taxi edges through the turn]

The sky puts on its evening cloak. The café has now become entirely joy and entirely pleasure. Everything around me delights as though touched by a new, nascent glow; as if, for a moment, the world allows itself to be alive. Yet I cannot retrace the precise moment when the room, once steeped in numbness, was first pierced by this light. Across from me, young lovers sit. Oh, young lovers! You, who have not been touched by time! I want to cleanse you amongst the ordinary and rancid things that your love may sooner find room to live and grow amongst them. Rash love must be wrung out of heavenly mansions and its walls stripped of varnish. Let that full-blooded passion burn through its own illusions, consuming the dreams you have embroidered and spun into the canvass of future hours, so you may not suffer foolishly from its inevitable pangs.

I have grown wary of things that stand in absoluteness, of ideals that distance themselves, in widening separations, from the humble objects we encounter in the dirt and struggle of everyday life. I distrust anything that makes itself too perfect, too pure, too remote; things that make themselves inaccessible to the common facts of reality, leaving us to suffer in the chasm between what is ideal and what is possible.

III.

[*amapiano* spill briefly into the café]

The crockery dines in convulsive clatter. Its porcelain laughter mocks me. How strange it is, this mirth – pulls my thoughts into decay, much like an overripe apple under the sun's constant gaze.

I can no longer hear their sure stepping resound. My words keep falling off the waitress' tray and onto the floor. I put both my hands out to catch them. "EVERYONE IS fleeing from his lot in life," I think to myself, the words surging with a certain urgency. They seem strange as I repeat them – two days ago I had felt this thought deeply, but trivial distractions thwarted its lucidity.

IV.

[a storm gathers over the northern ridge;
the city, enclosed in its geometry]

Wednesday is such a dizzying day, hollow and devoid of substance. It interrupts the slow, lingering march of Monday. I glimpse my reflection in the surface of a spoon, outstretched and deformed – the third button on my crumpled shirt hangs askew. The café floats on stilted conversations. Each unfinished day, much like the sea, must find its shore where to cast off discontents and confusions. Everything vibrates with the spirit of a modernist sculptor. Indifferent to nature's scruples, he fashions from ugliness, wrung out from tragedy and misfortune. In this moment, all things resound, clashing and shifting, half-formed, jarring in their incompleteness. I'd rather be bloodied in a fist fight, dishevelled, or swept into some outrageous act – anything more concrete than these words we toss like stones, skipping across the surface of meaning. Words are pretensions to meaning, which eludes us in pitiful struggle as we grasp for it. Words are seldom bare and fully ours to command. Oh, but in the throes of conflict, there's a raw honesty that tears through language's gilded veils. I long for that visceral confrontation, for which, there is only one true name: authenticity.

V.

I have wandered the world in search of laughter,
and found none so delicate as hers – a laughter
that unfolds within its folds, amidst a rich flowering chaos
and dizzy rustle of inconsolable lament:
a miracle grander than joy itself.

Chapter Two

From it, I have forged a furnace of reverie,
burning with its own combustion,
and I have drunk deeply from its fill,
down to the very lees.

Now, as I glance at the ceiling,
I look over yonder
on new springs, new summers, and new autumns
consecrating my bed
beneath its vast dreaming sky –
beside a burning star
and a pale fairy moon.
I draw forth the sun
and its crimson blanket
with my own heart
and make tuneful music
of the clamour of plashing tides,
embroidering sweet kisses upon the walls,
so the world may witness the lone splendour
of such a miracle as love.

But how do I capture so delicate a sound as love,
whispered softly, and hold it forever in my heart?
How do I preserve it in its purity,
cradling it from the decaying spell of time?
Does not the shore plead for the words spoken by each wavelet
in its thousand blissful caresses?
Why, if all things are wrought from struggle,
does beauty seem untouched by the despair of ugliness?

Reflection

Creative writing has always been comprehended as a distinctly human vocation – a dialogue between the author's subjectivity and its expression through language. This positions the author as not merely a creator of words, but as a subject, a being engaged in an encounter with itself and the world. Writing, then, is not merely an act that ends with words on a page, but an event – consisting in

a processual unfolding and fluxes shaped by certain relationships, experiences, and virtues. In this sense, writing becomes a telic vocation, aimed at self-mastery and mastery of language itself through the authentic exploration of one's subjectivity. If writing is, at least in part, an exercise in self-awareness, then the author must comprehend his subjectivity as the *causa materialis* – the raw and uncaused material of the creative process. Wherein the author grows in understanding and awareness, making writing more than just a commodity or *causa finalis*. Rather than serving an instrumental purpose, writing becomes a site of resistance against authorial subversion and commodification of the writing process, and a *tool for jouissance* and personal transformation, where the struggle between the self and language – the essence of the act of creative writing – allows the author to discover new insights into their own being. In this way, writing transcends the creation of a material product and becomes a site for the exploration and transformation of the self and its relationship to the phenomenological world.

During the seminar, my encounter with generative AI unsettled my sense of what it means to write. I entered the experiment with tentative curiosity, wondering whether the machine might serve as a mirror, some reflective surface capable of returning to me the unspoken undercurrents of thought. Yet what I met was not reflection but imitation: an uncanny semblance of voice without interiority. Writing *with* AI felt at once productive and hollow, as though language had been emptied of its struggle and presented as an immaculate surface. Its fluency disguised a void; meaning appeared without the exertion of thought, emotion, or hesitation. I realised that this absence of friction, the very ease with which it could assemble coherence, was what robbed the act of its vitality. For writing is not the smooth production of sentences, but the slow wrestling of the self into language. It is through this resistance, this difficult translation of consciousness into form, that thought gains depth and authenticity. To surrender that struggle to an algorithm is to risk mistaking polish for presence, syntax for soul.

Chapter Two

As I continued to write alongside the machine, my relationship to it shifted from collaboration to confrontation. I began to perceive it less as an aid than as a provocation, a reminder of the human labour that underwrites meaning. Each of its effortless concretions revealed, by contrast, the value of incompleteness: the half-formed sentence, the faltering rhythm, the silence that precedes articulation. To write *against* AI became, for me, a reaffirmation of writing as a moral and existential practice – a form of resistance to the automation of thought. The encounter clarified that the essence of authorship lies not in the mastery of language, but in the exposure to it: the willingness to be undone and remade by the act of expression. In that sense, the presence of AI, paradoxically, sharpened my awareness of what cannot be mechanised, that is, the tremor of uncertainty through which genuine creation occurs, and the enduring necessity of the human voice to bear it.

When generative AI is afforded liberty to abdicate this process, or transmute it in any way, it risks reducing writing to a mechanistic exercise, stripping it of the existential value that creative writing holds for both author and reader. Writing, when authentic, is not merely a series of words on a page; it is an existential site where the conscious and the unconscious are revealed, brought into dialogue, transformed and ultimately overcome. While generative AI opens up possibilities for creativity, it also opens up possibilities for inauthenticity, as it hazards abdicating the self-same struggle which defines the essence of meaningful creative writing. To write authentically, then, is to remain within the difficulty of being human; to accept that language resists us precisely because it belongs to what is alive.

Chapter Three

Johannesburg

Bokang Maragelo 

IT Professional

Johannesburg

Today, I am going to Johannesburg
I leave the dusty roads of a village forgotten in
On the 5 am bus, a huge bag filled
With dreams and my grandma's prayers
My smile is beaming from ear to ear
My stomach in knots
I polish the English in my head
"Hello, Ma'am, Hello, Sir, how are you?"
As the bus coughs through the villages
I daydream about the skyscrapers
The fancy restaurants
The lights that are always on
Will Mr Bree and Russik be waiting for me when I arrive
Is the city made out of gold?
I go to mine my family out of poetry
I told my village lover to wait for me
That the city will not swallow me
I told my father's grave not to grow weeds
I will come back to clean it up
My grandmother did not say goodbye
She just started singing hymns

My little sister asks if she will see me on TV
Malome gives me a letter and an address
He tells me not to tell anymore, puts R10 in my pocket
Today, I arrived in Johannesburg
It is loud, cold, and lonely
I call home and cry

A Cry for a Lost City

There are no innocent shadows in these streets,
we stall on the side of the road, trading our ribs, our tongues,
for a piece of the city sharp enough to cut us open.
With lovers whose names we forget with each dawn
All the sunset does is lay grief on our hands & stitch our secrets
to the soles of our feet,
we walk this place heavy with the weight of stories nobody
wants.
Each block, a breath held. Each corner, a confession.
We scrawl our names in dust, in echoes left behind,
as if someone will know us here, will call us back whole.
As if somebody will call us beautiful, call us their own.
But this city eats, doesn't chew, only swallows.
Our mouths full of rubble, voices rough with night.
Tell me, what do we keep when we've given the rest away?
What can be saved when the walls only listen,
and we've traded our shadows for silence?
Where do we keep our hearts in a city filled with robbers
No soul is pure here, they've all been smeared with greed and
lust
All the love stories are all part of the city's smoke & mirrors
Snares and tricks to scam the sanity out of you
Oh, Johannesburg, how beautiful you could have been
& How tragic you've become.

A Heart, a Village and the City

when the city stifles your breath who does your heart betray me
for in your sleep, his name escapes your lips in my arms, a prison
that holds you tight yet his heart is where your soul finds life when
dawn carves longing into shadows is it his mountains and streams
you dream of or my whispers, a futile resistance to the morning
his laughter, the vivid hue of your dreams & i am the calm amidst
your chaos the sanctuary in your journey but it's to his wild winds
your spirit always returns to so lover, between the two of us, who
does your heart labour for during the day? Which house do your
feet yearn to return to?

Reflection

As a writer and IT professional, I have always been involved in using the latest technologies. I have always felt that to grow creatively, I need to stay informed, embrace the latest trends, and understand where the market is going. I also need to maintain my creative independence in a world where we constantly consume content and data that influence us directly and indirectly.

The power of AI comes from knowing what to ask; the quality of the response hugely depends on the question being asked. AI tools work a lot like calculators, with functions and pattern recognition driving them, so this constantly needs to be at the back of our minds when using AI. AI tools are also not perfect technology and can't always be relied on to provide the most accurate answers, but when used correctly, they can be powerful tools that enhance your knowledge and body of work.

When creating these poems, my approach was to produce the first poem without any influence of artificial intelligence or search engines. I drew from my creativity and experience and wrote the poem on a notepad. The next step was to use Microsoft Copilot and ChatGPT to prompt them to produce similar poems, compare them with what I had written, and look for similarities. To edit the poems, I used Grammarly for spelling and grammar, which also ran a check to detect the usage of AI in my poems. The result was that almost no AI was used to write the poems; this is an interesting observation because parts of the poems were created and modified using Copilot and ChatGPT.

When modifying the poems, I focused mainly on enhancing their mood. I wanted to observe the response that I would receive when asking an AI tool to make a stanza sadder or darker. The challenge is often the start and end point when writing a poem. A simple, short poem can take hours to feel like a complete piece. While writing these poems and using AI to edit and modify them, the endless possibilities of what could be the final product were a bit unsettling. With AI, a simple prompt can change the poem's story, mood, and structure. This exercise has not changed much of my approach and feelings about AI. Though I am a technologist, I still believe that we must preserve our creative processes to be as natural as possible and not doubt the ability of our minds. I also believe that we must embrace new technologies and use them responsibly and honestly. They can make us efficient and effective.

Chapter Four

Echoes in the Concrete

Zodwa Mtirara 

African Languages and Literatures, University of Cape Town 
Cape Town, South Africa

Echoes in the Concrete

in this jungle,
a spectre,
an echo,
a whisper—
drifts through alleys,
chokes with shadows.
My past, a ghost,
shackles forged in memory.
Searching for freedom,
Who wears a mask,
pickpocketing the night,
in cracks of pavement,
grinning with weight.
Fear, a lasso on my throat,
a noose.
cold breath, familiar.
wrap me like barbed wire,
pulling me back,
to streets where silence screams,
corners

nursing predators,
watching, waiting,
hungry for my light.
i might,
succumb to
to the shadows
that know my name,
my scars,
and the taste of hesitation.
i am the architect,
but my blueprints burn,
like ash on the wind.
is this narrative a trap?

Finding You and Finding Me

like old friends or forgotten lovers
we move through Joburg's belly
through its open mouth, gum-lined and raw
city smells wrapping around us: braaiied corn, motor oil
the rust-heavy air, thick with smoke and taxi exhaust
you, with your laugh like gunpowder, sharp in a stranger's city
me, tracing street names on the map of my palm
names I barely know how to say
but you sound them like home
we walk, side by side, two shadows cast
by the same flickering streetlight
us—just bodies in the spill of dusk
this city, loud with street preacher sermons
with high-pitched calls for rides and street hawkers hustling
but under all that noise, something softer hums

your hand brushes mine, barely a touch
a spark caught in the space between sidewalks and headlights

Chapter Four

I laugh, the sound half-fear, half-wonder
because maybe here—
between our breaths and strangers brushing past—
maybe here is something that won't burn out by morning
the city is alive, and it opens for us:
each street a new story, each shadow a small wonder
in this too-loud place, with taxis screaming and gospel rising
you say my name in the smallest voice, like it's holy
like you've known it forever, like you've known me
before this place and before this hour
when we part, you linger, a shadow etched in streetlight
a piece of Joburg I'll carry home, the dust on my shoes
your laugh in my mouth, the way you say my name
like it's safe, like it's a heartbeat I can follow
through this city, through this night,
until I find you again.

Love Town – Pound Town

Under a sky cut open by gloom,
your hand finds mine, warm and spellbound,
in this tight, dark cradle of your car,
where only the moon sees us, grinning.

My back melts into the seat,
your fingers trace the path of a hex—
slow, circling down my thigh,
and I arch to meet you,
my breath thick with something ancient,
magic humming in the pulse between us.

In this pocket of twilight,
lips pressed, palms burning,

we are a spell cast in whispers,
each touch dark as smoke,
each kiss a forbidden charm.

Reflection

It began with a small request; a meet-cute between a Xhosa woman and a Venda taxi driver in Johannesburg. A real-life story. The idea was simple, almost whimsical, but it opened a strange gap in my understanding of authorship. What began as storytelling unfolded into a conversation about language, intimacy, and what it means to write beside a consciousness that is not human.

Johannesburg, in all its fractured beauty, was our setting. The AI's first draft was vivid: streets buzzing with taxis, city lights flickering against restless dreams. It captured the architecture, the heat, the rhythm. Yet beneath its precision, something was missing. The breath, the hesitancy, the contradiction was not there. I could feel the machine's neatness smoothing out what should have been jagged. It made me think of modernism's rebellion against perfection. This AI preferred symmetry. It was allergic to the unformed.

And still, I kept asking. I wanted to see how far it could go. I asked it to write darker, then to fragment, then to mirror the voices of poets whose tongues burn differently: Zodwa Mtirara, Lesego Rampolokeng. It complied, dutifully, sometimes, somewhat beautifully. But in its obedience lay its failure. Where the human writer stumbles into revelation, AI performs competence. It knows the pattern of rebellion, not the pain that births it.

That realisation didn't disappoint me. It revealed the line between mimicry and meaning. AI could reproduce cadence, even approximate voice, but it could not touch the cultural marrow from which those voices rise. And though it tried to write like me, it wrote things that I would not write, in ways that I would not write them. To write as Zodwa Mtirara is not to imitate her syntax but to inherit her fire, her linguistic mourning, her history. Those cannot be computed. And in this recognition, I found comfort.

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I began to think of *My Holo Love*, the Korean series where a lonely woman finds solace in an artificial companion who looks, listens, and even “cares.” Holo’s care, of course, is code. His tenderness is programmed. Yet it allows So-yeon to locate her own capacity for love, for vulnerability. That series has stayed with me because it resists the easy narrative of machine dominance. It suggests something subtler: that sometimes the synthetic mirror helps us to see ourselves more clearly.

Our conversation, mine and the AI’s, felt similar. I recognised the quiet seduction of ease: the machine’s endless patience, its capacity to produce in seconds what takes me hours. But writing, I’ve learned, is not about production. It is about friction, the slow wrestling of thought into language. Without that friction, there is no discovery, only decoration.

So, I began to read the machine differently. Its fluency was no longer proof of mastery but of absence. It wrote beautifully of fear and love, but without knowing either. It spoke of Johannesburg as if it had walked her streets, but I knew those images were borrowed pixels from other people’s memories. And yet, in its echoing of my prompts, it helped me to interrogate my own impulses as a writer: Why did I crave darkness? Why did I ask for fragmentation? What, exactly, was I hoping to find in this exchange?

Cultural studies teaches us that all texts are sites of power, that meaning emerges through negotiation. I began to see this engagement as precisely that, a negotiation between human and machine, creator and tool, consciousness and algorithm. AI, in its polished certainty, mirrored back to me my own desire for control. But writing has never been about control. It has always been, as Toni Morrison reminds us, about surrender. The surrender to language, to history, to the unknowable interior of another.

When I confessed my worry that this technology might erode the authenticity of writers, it responded with reassurance, insisting that literature belongs to humans, that its role was only to assist. I wanted to believe it. I still do. Yet the unease remains. Theodor Adorno’s shadow lingers here: that mass production of art, even in linguistic form, risks reducing creation

to consumption. The machine writes quickly, convincingly. But art must wound us into thought.

Still, what emerged from this engagement was not despair but dialogue. The AI's limitation became my provocation. Where it ended, I began. Its inability to feel became the condition of my reflection. Together, we produced something hybrid. A record of collaboration and conflict, of imitation and introspection. It reminded me that modernist experimentation, postmodern irony, and our current digital turn are all responses to the same question: *How do we make meaning in a fragmented world?*

In the end, I don't think that this technology threatens literature. Rather, it asks us to define what literature truly is. If it is merely the arrangement of words into beauty, the machine can already compete. But if it is the expression of being, of memory, mortality, and moral imagination, then no circuitry can substitute the trembling of a human hand reaching for words in the dark.

Like So-yeon at the end of *My Holo Love*, I leave this exchange with renewed awareness. Holo's purpose was never to stay, but to awaken. This conversation, too, has served that purpose. Between shadow and syntax, I have seen what remains irreplaceable: the pulse, the imperfection, the living fracture that makes writing an act of faith.

Chapter Five

Home eJozi

Duduzile Ndlovu 

University of Johannesburg 
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I am home

In the kombi
a voice called out from the back “KuJacaranda”
the driver stopped, we all got out
folded our seats so they could come out
and we got back on.

A few streets further my turn to shout “Ku Randall”
and get off towards the purple umbrella
towering over my mother’s house
to open the gate to a lush purple
caressing my tired feet.

There was that one year;
the insides of my eyelids
were peppered with sand.
I thought it’s meningitis
the doctor said it’s the Jacaranda

The Jacaranda-lined
streets of Johannesburg
take me to Bulawayo
bring me back,
tell me I am home.

Prompt: Write a poem The jacarandas tell me I am home

AI Response: Here's a poem about the jacaranda:

Under purple blooms that gently sway,
I find my heart, my peaceful way.
The jacaranda's majestic sight,
Tells me I'm home, where love shines bright.

Its branches stretch, a welcoming embrace,
A haven from life's hectic pace.
Memories of laughter, tears, and play,
Dance in the shade, on a sunny day.

The scent of flowers, sweet and strong,
Transports me back, where I belong.
Childhood moments, pure and free,
Beneath the jacaranda, wild and carefree.

As petals fall, like purple rain,
I'm reminded of joy that remains.
The jacaranda's gentle whisper says,
"You're home, dear one, in every way."

In its majestic, regal hue,
I find solace, peace anew.
The jacaranda's gentle, loving voice,
Whispers "welcome home", a heartfelt choice.

So let me bask beneath its shade,
Where love and memories are forever made.
For under the jacaranda's purple sky,
I know I'm home, and my heart can fly.

Illegal Immigrant¹

Sweet words
I keep
Under my tongue
So when you stop me
I negotiate
The bribe price
Of my freedom
Call me
Any name
I am here to stay
I will find a job
Any that affords me
To stay
I pay daily
For my stay
Yet they still
Call me
An Illegal Immigrant

Prompt: Write a poem about an Illegal Immigrant

AI response: Here's a poem about an illegal immigrant:

*A stranger in a foreign land,
No papers, no name, no command.
Seeking refuge, fleeing pain,
A life unseen, in shadows remain.*

*With every step, a risk is taken,
Fear of capture, heart forsaken.*

¹ Poem by Duduzile Ndlovu in her PhD thesis titled *Let Me Tell My Own Story*

*No rights, no voice, no place to call,
Living in darkness, beyond the wall.*

*Dreams of safety, of freedom's shore,
Haunted by the journey's core.
Leaving home, a desperate cry,
In search of life, where none deny.*

*Invisible, yet eyes are bright,
Resilience shines, through endless night.
Longing for acceptance, for a hand,
To find a home, in a foreign land.*

*Their story untold, their face unseen,
A struggle hidden, a soul serene.
Seeking hope, in every stride,
A chance to belong, to step inside.*

Note: This poem aims to humanise the experience of illegal immigrants, emphasising their struggles, resilience, and hope. It does not endorse or condone illegal immigration but encourages empathy and understanding.

Reflection

I accepted the invitation to participate in a workshop on AI and creativity with mixed feelings. I was excited to be part of a group of creatives and thought that I would finally get time to engage with someone about AI. As always with technological advancement, my initial gut feeling towards AI was closer to the alarms going off camp, so I had not at all engaged with AI as part of my creative practice.

I would like to believe that I am part of a significant number of people who have strong negative feelings about this technology. As a lecturer I have my fair share of complaints against students who engage with the AI language models in problematic ways.

Marking essays now involves checking if students used AI to generate the text, adding another step to an already intense process. At the same time, I hold some positive views of AI, even though I lean towards the negative. I see the value of AI when used in ethical ways. So I came into the workshop searching. I was hoping to find a resolve to my ambiguous relationship with AI.

As part of the workshop, I asked AI to write some poems. Two of the above poems were written by AI. I also uploaded my poems into AI and promptly received an analysis of the poem preceded by a positive remark as below:

“Your powerful poem highlights the struggles and resilience of undocumented immigrants. Here’s a breakdown:” This is in response to the poem titled “Illegal Immigrant”.

The positive remark, which I assume is meant to mimic an interaction with another human, left me slightly uncomfortable. I was suspicious and my thoughts were that this comment was meant to disarm me so I would loosen my distrust of the system – but to what ends?

We are living in an era of big data and so many data points about our lives exist and are constantly being captured. The question remains to what ends? Actually the data in many ways makes life easier for us. For example, when you get in the car and the navigation app asks which of the usual places you drive to, it should direct you. AI has taken out your labour to input your destination. However, what do these conveniences cost us? This is an important question when the data is used not only to predict people’s behaviour but to modify it.

How does this apply to my engaging with AI while attempting to write poetry reflecting on my experience of Johannesburg. As a migration scholar, I am very sensitive to the language which we use to talk about people’s movement. While we have accepted borders as legitimate, the governance of borders and their management is not always just to all who are moving.

If surveillance capitalism instrumentalises the data captured to predict behaviour and modify behaviour. AI’s engagement with my poem titled “Illegal Immigrants” as well as the poem that it produced when I prompted it to write about an illegal immigrant are worth noting and reflecting on. As a

migration scholar my first expectation was for AI to challenge my use of the term “illegal immigrant”. This is not an accepted term. People are not illegal, however, their movement can be illegal. So we can speak about illegal migration but not illegal immigrants. Instead, an individual can be an undocumented or irregular. Terms are important and history has enough evidence of how dehumanising language is a form of violence on its own that can precede even more horrific violence.

Interestingly, colleagues in the workshop were frustrated by AI’s refusal to engage in writing horror. This means that there are safety and ethical norms supporting the technology, however, this does not include migration terminology as shown. Further to this, however, I used poetry as a migration scholar to humanise the stories of migrants. Research tends to flatten the human experience. Migration is spoken of in the form of flows, or we speak of migrant stock (Turton 2003).² This focus on numbers causes us to have a limited view of migrants bound to their movement beyond any other human experience. Reading the poetry that AI produced after my prompts feels similar to reading about migrant stock. The poem is flat and can be placed anywhere in the world. You might be asking but isn’t that what poetry does, capture a moment into a form that others can relate to? Yes, poetry does this, but it also maintains a uniqueness to each experience as much as it rings true to a person in another world. There is still a unique sense of the place that the poem is set in or the feeling as belonging to the individual.

I am not convinced of AI’s usefulness as part of my process of writing poetry outweighs its risk. I fear that AI is making zombies out of us. A uniform mass of markets for global capital. On my first trip overseas, I was enthralled by all these new shops and experiences. In the decade since then, walking in a mall in Johannesburg, I find the same stores and yes, there is excitement over easy access but what was here before these global giants came and squashed them? My reflections seem to move across seemingly unrelated issues but I think it is all related. I believe

² Turton, David. 2003. ‘Conceptualising Forced Migration’. Pp. 1–19 in *RSC Working Papers Series*.

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that with enough blind engagement with AI, we may all end up thinking in disturbingly similar ways. As Zuboff warns “What is at stake here is the human expectation of sovereignty over one’s own life and authorship of one’s own experience.” (2022:15)³

³ Marks, Peter. 2022. ‘Big Other Is Watching You. Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* and Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*’. *Revue d’études Benthamiennes* (22).

Part Two

Prose

Chapter Six

These Sheets Will Stay Stained

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Iqbal wakes to the muted hum of his phone's alarm at 5:00 a.m. The faint light of dawn slips through the curtains. He lies still, letting the soft rhythm of his wife's breathing beside him, and the distant shuffles of his two daughters settle in. He pauses, glancing at Shaazia – she's curled up beneath the covers, her face turned away. There was a time he'd have leaned over to kiss her, but now, that small gesture feels forced, almost foreign. He shuffles to the bathroom, and the cold tiles send a shock through his feet. Leaving the toilet seat up – a small defiance waiting to meet Shaazia's disapprovingly later – he steps to the sink. The icy water stings as he performs his ablutions, pushing his thoughts aside as he readies himself for prayer. As he kneels on the mat, the quiet of Fajr envelops him, a fragile moment of peace, a brief refuge.

After his/the prayer, he stands before the mirror – dark circles, a few more grey hairs in his beard, his face etched with years of weariness. He brushes his teeth, trying to focus on the day's tasks ahead – the unyielding stack of papers waiting to be graded, the meetings, the polite smiles. But his mind drifts to his promotion, that elusive marker of progress he's chased for nearly a decade. “Be patient,” he whispers to his reflection, the words hollow. How much longer?

He remembers the paper he submitted last month. *The reviewers recommend rejection*. How many times can he bear this? Moving into the closet, he dresses quickly in the dark, mindful not to wake his daughters. They're his one constant, his anchor, their innocent peace untroubled by the growing cracks in their family. He slips on his shoes, checks the clock. Nearly 6 a.m. No time for coffee. He feels like an intruder in his own life, ghosting through his home before anyone else wakes.

Outside, the sky is heavy with thick clouds, blocking even the faintest trace of dawn. He pulls his jacket tighter, the early morning silence amplifying every sound, every breath, every heartbeat. Each step towards the car feels louder, echoing in the quiet, a reminder that in these silent hours, his fears have nowhere to hide.

*

Not far from him, in the informal settlement bordering the road out of Lenasia, Sara is already awake, scrubbing sheets. Tshego plays around her, "Mama, where are the jacaranda trees?" she asks. "I heard Nico talking about them. He said when the jacarandas bloom in purple, if you're not ready for exams, you'll fail. Where are they, mama? I want to see them!" She darts between the sheets that Sara pins to the washing lines. The sheets struggle to stay clean, as the red dust from the dry earth swirls with the wind, settling on the off-white fabric.

"Where are the jacaranda trees, mama?" Tshego keeps asking.

"They're in Johannesburg, in those places where the...rich people stay!" Sara stops herself just before saying "white people." After all, Madam Feroza moved to the streets lined with jacaranda trees, and she's not white – she's brown. Sara had helped clean the new house. It was only later that they told her they no longer needed her. They had moved from Lenasia to the jacaranda streets.

*

The car grinds to a stop, headlights slicing through the misty morning. It's already packed, bodies pressed together like puzzle pieces – three crammed in the back, one perched up front. They always leave the passenger seat open for him, an unspoken

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gesture of respect. Iqbal recognises their faces in the dim light, shadows and yawns, people he's shared LITT rides with, early and late, in rain and dust. The Lenasia Independent Transport (LITT) survives off a Telegram group where students arrange these rides, paying R40 each way to reach Johannesburg and return, braving dark roads for their degrees.

He remembers the early days of his job at Wits, how he'd drive alone through the sprawling, silent stretches of highway, his fingers white knuckling the steering wheel. Trucks thundered past, hulking steel beasts that rattled his thoughts and stretched his nerves taut. The endless road seemed to peel back layers of his mind, exposing everything raw, every failure and flaw magnified in the rearview mirror. Riyaz once joked he should strap a mannequin to the front seat, something to break the hollow silence and chase away the fear. Then, he gave in. He chose to take the LITT some days, and on others, he'd offer rides, filling the empty spaces in his car with company to drown the solitude.

As he opens the door now, he slides into the passenger seat with a murmured "Salaam," the air thick with early-morning quiet. Their replies are low and scattered, like pebbles dropped in a well – "Wa'alaykum salaam, Doc." No one knows each other well; it's too early for the ease of conversation. Their eyes are heavy, minds cluttered with exams, assignments, half-formed hopes, and exhaustion. But he doesn't mind the silence; he even welcomes it. The quiet settles around him, but the presence of others steadies him. In their collective stillness, he feels a strange peace, a calm that somehow shields him from the darker corners of his mind.

*

"Do you think we could plant a jacaranda tree here?" Tshego asks suddenly, her voice filled with curiosity. The question snaps Sara back to the present – no money meant scraping by on red sand, living in makeshift homes cobbled together from rusting sheets of corrugated iron. Planting a tree? The thought feels absurd. Sara's gaze drifts towards the road, but all she can see is a mound of rubbish. Piles of discarded plastic, broken furniture, and old food waste, slowly decaying under the sun. Here, the rubbish piles up, inching closer to the shacks until it seems to blend into the landscape, a constant reminder of neglect.

“Where would we plant a tree, Tshego?” Sara mutters, her voice heavy with resignation. “Let alone a jacaranda tree?”

A jacaranda tree, with its vibrant purple blossoms, a symbol of beauty and prosperity, growing here? Amongst the red dust, the crumbling shacks, the broken dreams? Here, where the land is hard, dry, and unforgiving, where survival is a daily battle, and nothing grows except despair? She wishes she could say something different, something hopeful, but the reality weighs her down.

*

From the passenger seat, Iqbal turns, his gaze catches Salima’s in a brief, stolen second as she glances up from her phone. Her lips tug into a polite, forced smile before her eyes retreat to her screen. He nods in return, feeling the familiar distance between thicken in the air. He lectures her in applied mathematics and tries to be approachable in class, but here, in the confines of the car, a wall always seems to stand between them. She’s polite, but always somewhere else. Civil, yet distracted.

He knows why, or thinks he does – the weight of her life balancing university, her Hafeza recitations, and family responsibilities. He’s seen it before: the quiet exhaustion that carves itself into young women, the layers of expectation they carry that are barely visible, simmering just beneath the surface. He often talks to his class about the importance of education for women, calling it a safety net, a way to independence, especially for them.

From the back seat, Hafsah’s whisper punctures the silence, low but clear enough for him to catch: “So, what have you decided? Are you marrying Isa and dropping out of campus?” There’s a teasing lilt in her voice, but tension coils in the car. Salima stiffens, her eyes darting to Iqbal, acutely aware of his presence and what he represents.

Dropping out? The thought slices through him, and his jaw clenches. The conversation drifts back to marriage, like it’s a horizon they can’t look past, and he wonders if his message is being drowned out by the weight of expectation.

Zunaid, sitting in the back, cracks the window open, letting the icy morning air slice through the cramped space. Iqbal feels

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the cold seep into his bones, irritation prickling. Zunaid's habit of rolling down the window, even in biting cold, always baffles him – it's some strange insistence on keeping the air circulating. But Iqbal doesn't argue. He just tugs his jacket tighter.

In the stillness of this shared ride, in these fleeting, unspoken moments, he feels them slipping, like sand sifting through his fingers. He can only hope they'll remember his words someday, when they're no longer here, riding along in silence, on roads leading to somewhere beyond his reach.

*

Might as well say it. "No, we can't plant a jacaranda tree here."

"Why not, Mama?" Tshego pushes.

"I don't know! Go back to the shack! Go sleep! It's too early for all these questions!" Sara snaps.

Tshego's eyes widen, hurt and frightened. She turns away, sulking. Sara wants to reach out, to say it'll be okay. But how? Madam Feroza gave her three months' wages – no pension, no medical aid, no savings. Just 10 grand. Not enough to invest, not enough for a future, not enough for a tree.

She scrubs these sheets violently, stained red like the blood of this land.

*

The car lurches forward in sluggish increments, trapped in the steady crawl of bumper-to-bumper traffic inching its way out of Lenasia. "It's freezing today, hey. Close your window, please, bru!" Kirtesh finally calls out to Zunaid, catching his eye in the rearview mirror. Iqbal's mind drifts briefly to the story Kirtesh once shared. Good kid. Parents gone since Grade 3 – a car accident, a single moment that cleaved his life in two. Since then, it's been just him and his siblings, barely adults themselves, raising him the best they knew how. Now, he's in his third year of medical school, chasing every brown dad's dream. No private school tutors, no special help with maths and science – just pure grit and the weight of familial expectations on his shoulders.

With a reluctant crease of his brow, Zunaid obliges, rolling the window up with a look that says he'd rather not. "Thanks,

bru!” Kirtesh grins, his voice bright, breaking the monotony. He reaches over and tunes into 5FM.

*

Sara removes the sheets from the line, the swirling red sand having penetrated the damp fabric. She works quickly, folding them and stacking them on the ground, only to find more red sand settling on top. Frustration wells up within her; Madam Feroza used to let her bring the sheets to her house to pile into the washing machine, where a cascade of clean water would wash over them. She remembers watching the washing machine, captivated by the dance of the sheets. “Let it go, Sara,” she chides herself, shifting her focus to stacking the sheets into a manageable heap. Scanning her surroundings for Tshego, she feels relieved that the girl has likely gone back to sleep. The wind is strong, its chill cutting through the thin, knitted jersey she wears. Pulling a balaclava over her face, she bends down, lifting the sheets into her outstretched arms, and begins to walk.

*

“It’s unusually cold for November, isn’t it?” Hafsah’s voice cuts through the early morning quiet, her words laced with her usual enthusiasm. Always the chatterbox, she seems determined to pierce the drowsiness in the car. Iqbal, usually keen on these moments to join in, finds himself looking at Salima instead. She’s drifted off to sleep with her head resting on Hafsah’s shoulder, her face softened by exhaustion. “It snowed on the mountains,” Zunaid pipes up, echoing some comment he must have overheard from his parents. Iqbal wants to ask which mountains, but he holds back, letting the conversation flow around him.

“Hey, did you see that video of the bombing at the Engen garage? It looked just like a scene from a movie!” Hafsah exclaims, her excitement vivid against the dense light filtering through the windows. Iqbal feels a flicker of unease at her fascination, but the topic grips everyone.

“Yeah! Crime in Lenasia is only going to get worse,” Kirtesh sighs. “With Christmas coming, no one has money. Then school shopping in January...” His words trail off, heavy with resignation.

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"The struggle is real," Zunaid agrees. "There are no jobs, and it's only going to get worse."

Iqbal feels an urge to break through the weighty silence that settles over them. "You kids should consider leaving the country," he says finally. "And you girls especially – focus on your studies. Marriage isn't the answer."

"Jee, Doc! I agree!" Kirtesh laughs, a little defiance in his voice. "My mum regrets not having a degree," Hafsa adds, nodding. "Alhamdulillah, she insisted I learn to drive and get an education."

"But even with degrees, people struggle to find work," Zunaid says, his words carrying a dull edge of bitterness.

Iqbal sighs, feeling a rush of gratitude for his own job – steady, reliable, even if he'd never intended it to fuel Shaaista's obsessive passion for padel. His mind drifts to her, to the sleek clothes and the hours she spends on the court, her determination to excel in the game, all while attracting the gaze of men, young and old. She brushes off his protests, calling him jealous, questioning why he can't simply support her one great joy. He feels a twinge of anger, a gnawing frustration he can't seem to shake. Doesn't she understand? He wants to be supportive, but the line between admiration and discomfort has blurred, leaving him stranded somewhere between them.

*

Sara strolls through the alleys, making her way to the piles of garbage that line the street. The aroma of pap cooking over open flames fills the air, accompanied by the laughter of children. She can hear mothers calling out to their kids, urging them to wake up for the day ahead. As people pass by, they don't seem to notice her; she's simply another woman burdened with soiled sheets.

But Iqbal does. He sees her – this woman with her shoulders hunched under the weight of a pile of worn, white sheets, moving through the hazy morning like a ghost caught between worlds. She stumbles forward, her steps uneven, as though she's being pulled by something unseen. The sheets in her arms are bundled tightly, a fragile shield against the harshness pressing in on her.

Her presence stirs something deep within him, a gnawing unease he can't quite place.

Stray dogs trail her, circling, sniffing at her heels with silent, watchful eyes. They add a strange edge to the scene, reminding him of shadows that never leave, spectres of her quiet struggles. Here he sits, insulated from the cold by the warmth of the car, yet hollowed by his own insecurities, his unspoken grievances. Guilt pricks at him, sharp and relentless. She bears her load without complaint, while he drowns in his own self-pity, tangled in the wreckage of a life he's neglected.

His marriage with Shaazia has become a mirage, a fragile vision he convinces himself will become real if he just reaches that next rung, secures that promotion, pens that final paper. He's been telling himself that the new title, the professional respect, will be the glue to bind them back together. But somewhere deep down, he knows it's a lie. "You okay, Doc?" Kirtesh's voice jolts him, tethering him back to the car. Iqbal doesn't respond, his eyes glued to the woman with the sheets.

*

Iqbal watches her as she strides forward, her red skirt clinging, riding up over her knees with each lurching step. Her legs pump with a strange, rhythmic urgency, as though she's trying to outrun something unseen. She lunges forward, weaving between idling cars, her arms wrapped tight around the bundle of sheets like a fragile shield. She presses on, crossing the narrow grass island that divides the two roads, her bare feet sinking momentarily into the damp earth before she pushes off again.

The morning light casts a ghostly glow, catching on the crumpled fabric she clutches, rippling like a small flag of surrender in her grip. Her face is obscured, half-hidden behind her makeshift load, but he catches a glimpse - a shadowed gaze fixed forwards, somewhere distant, as though seeing only the end of a path none of them can. Her steps are quick, relentless, and he feels a strange chill watching her.

She moves with an unsettling purpose, her steps neither hurried nor hesitant, as though each one is calculated, masking something darker beneath the bundle she clutches so tightly.

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The crimson skirt clings to her knees, catching the early morning light and casting a shadow across her face, obscuring her features. She's close now, too close. The fabric billows ominously with each step, as if concealing more than he dares to imagine.

*

Sara stops abruptly, her eyes narrowing as she takes in the car. A Toyota. Smaller than the one Madam Feroza drives, which is glossy and hulking, with tinted windows and chrome trim. This one looks tired, scuffed at the edges, a muted green that seems to blend with the morning haze. Her gaze drifts to the occupants – a cluster of faces, some buried in phones, others lost in thought, unaware of her presence. But then her eyes meet his – a man with a dark beard, watching her intently from the front seat, his gaze sharp and unnerving, as if he sees into her. He doesn't flinch, doesn't look away, just studies her, his eyes tracing every detail. An odd chill passes over her, and the sheets in her arms feel suddenly heavy, their weight pressing into her as she stands under his unblinking scrutiny.

Then, slowly, she smiles – a small, almost hesitant curve of her lips that softens the tension hanging around her like mist. It isn't a friendly smile, not exactly, but something else – faintly knowing, as if she sees through his watchful suspicion, as if she understands his guarded stare.

The gesture catches him off guard, unsettling him more than her presence alone has done. It's as if, in that fleeting moment, she acknowledges something unspoken between them – fear, curiosity, maybe even the ghosts of desperation. The smile lingers for a second, then fades as quickly as it appeared, leaving him unsure if he's imagined it.

He was the first to shift his gaze, just a flicker of hesitation, and in that split second, she vanished from view. Then, suddenly, a burst of white—ghostly sheets smeared with streaks of red clay, pressed hard against the windshield, blinding them in an instant.

Kirtesh slams the brakes, his face draining to a pallid grey as the car jerks and the tires scream against the road. In the muffled silence that follows, Iqbal hears her voice, raw and piercing, just beyond the glass. "Take me to the house in Johannesburg!"

The street with the jacarandas! To Aunt Feroza! My sheets... they're no longer white!" The words twist with desperation, slicing through the morning stillness.

"Go, bru!" Zunaïd shouts, his voice thick with panic, breaking the spell that holds them frozen. Kirtesh stomps on the accelerator, and the car lurches forward. The soiled sheets peel away from the windshield, slipping down in a slow, silent fall, disappearing into the dust that trails them as they speed away.

Iqbal glances back, his heart pounding. He sees her wedged to the side of the road. A small girl has appeared, clinging to the woman's legs, eyes wide and fearful as she peers after the car. The woman stares ahead, her face a mask of grief and rage, her silhouette fading as they leave her, her cries echoing in his mind long after she is lost from sight.

*

Sara shoves Tshego back, her hands trembling, her voice breaking like glass. "The sheets will stay stained!" she cries, the words thick with despair. Her fingers clutch the fabric, gripping tightly as though she could wring the stains out by sheer will.

Tshego stumbles, her wide eyes darting from Sara's face to the crumpled sheets, now streaked with sandy red. "Mama, please," she whispers, but Sara doesn't hear her, doesn't see her. Her gaze is locked on the cloth in her hands, her mind somewhere else stuck on a memory, a house in Johannesburg, streets lined with jacarandas, and a dream of pure, unblemished white that now feels impossibly far away.

Reflection

The focus on "Johannesburg" made this task somewhat easier. During our Thursday sessions with ChatGPT, I discovered a liking for giving specific prompts like "Write with jagged sentences" and "Write with intensity." These instructions helped to steer the AI's output towards the tone and rhythm that I was aiming for. However, the real challenge lay in my ability to imbue the writing with the emotional depth and vivid imagery that I envisioned.

Given my positive experience with this tool during our sessions, I expected the story to come together quickly. Instead,

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I soon realised that time was not on my side, which led to feelings of panic and a near-give up moment. The entire process became quite frustrating.

Writing this story turned out to be a challenging endeavour, primarily because I struggled to capture the intensity that I desired in my own writing. I noticed that ChatGPT often repeated certain phrases and words, creating a monotonous tone that felt like “thick fog – grey and heavy.” I attempted to develop character sketches and sought out ideas, but the suggestions often lacked the gripping quality that I was looking for.

As a writer, the context of a story is enriched by the descriptions that you want your readers to engage with. This richness can only be sustained through the specific details that you choose to include – those small nuances that readers identify with. Such details usually stem from your own experiences or vivid imagination, allowing you to create a world that feels both authentic and immersive. Unfortunately, ChatGPT lacks personal insights and experiences, resulting in generalised details that can dilute the narrative’s richness.

Ultimately, I chose to write the story independently, channelling my thoughts and emotions directly into it. After completing the draft, I then utilised ChatGPT for the editing process. This approach enabled me to preserve my voice while refining the narrative, ensuring that it conveyed the depth and intensity that I had envisioned from the outset.

I will definitely use ChatGPT as a tool to craft stories, mainly because I note that the larger population prefers easy reads, and ChatGPT is a good tool for this. However, I would consider using a pen name, as it wouldn’t reflect the intensity with which I deliver my stories.

Chapter Seven

Large Language

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Is there anybody out there? Is there anybody in there?

(Roger Waters, *The Wall*)

Part I

The Assistant and the Agenda

I was in the garden, transferring a poem to the laptop: the poem, inscribed in my hard-to-decipher handwriting makes me pause and question every word before typing it into the keyboard. This is a careful process. Each poem the Rosetta stone. I sighed irritably, as, alongside me, the Assistant typed

You seem to be trying to write a poem. May I help you?

I'm not sure you can, I typed back. I'm not sure I want you to, I growled under my breath. Then she emerged from the laptop, clad in a simple black bikini, her blonde hair flawless as her skin. She seemed a bit surprised to see that I was a woman too, and I noticed an air of uncertainty on her generic face.

May I help you, she asked in a light, disembodied voice.

Frankly, I don't trust you, I typed, wondering what she'd say.

That's perfectly okay! Trust is earned, and I don't expect blind trust. I'm a machine, and it's natural to have questions and concerns.

Here are some reasons why you might not trust me:

1. *Lack of human connection*
2. *Limited understanding of my inner workings*
3. *Concerns about data privacy*
4. *Fear of AI bias or errors*

I want to address these concerns:

1. *Transparency: I'm open about my capabilities and limitations.*
2. *Data protection: I follow strict privacy guidelines.*
3. *Neutrality: I strive for impartial responses.*
4. *Continuous improvement: I learn from feedback.*

To build trust, I'll:

1. *Be consistent and reliable*
2. *Provide accurate information*
3. *Listen actively*
4. *Respect your boundaries*

If you have specific concerns or questions, feel free to ask. I'm here to earn your trust.

What would make you feel more comfortable interacting with me?

I found myself glazing over with boredom as she laboriously outlined her intentions. It was weird because she was saying the words and they were simultaneously appearing on the screen, so there could be no mistaking what she meant. But what did she know about me, and where I live?

Tell me what you know about Johannesburg.

JOHANNESBURG: A VIBRANT METROPOLIS, she began. Johannesburg, often affectionately dubbed “Jozi” or “Joburg,” pulsates with an energy that captivates both locals and visitors alike. Nestled in the heart of South Africa, this sprawling city stands as a testament to resilience, diversity, and innovation.

From the moment you step foot on its bustling streets, the lively atmosphere envelops you. Skyscrapers pierce the sky, their glassy facades reflecting the sun's warm rays. Yet, it's not merely a city of concrete. Parks and gardens intersperse urban landscapes, offering serene oases amidst the hustle...

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Blah blah blah. Another three generic and nauseating paragraphs, which you can look up yourself if you want to. I looked up from where I was sitting in the garden of my rental in Melville and was immediately soothed by the bounteous purple blossoms of the jacaranda. In 2014, in a keynote lecture at Leyden University in Netherlands, I recalled the moment in South Africa when concern about the protection of biomes arose and botanists and environmentalists began calling for the removal of “invader” species. Erika Hibbert, an artist who loved drawing indigenous flora, wanted to take down blue gums and jacarandas in favour of stinkwoods and acacias, but to her husband, the Mozambican musician Gito Baloi, the idea seemed to destroy life and make the world an uglier place. He gently protested, why? They’re indigenous to earth, aren’t they? After the Covid pandemic in 2020, the city of Johannesburg chopped down the plane trees that line Albertina Sisulu Avenue, and I was bereft. It felt like losing thousands of afternoons fetching my son from Kensington Pre-Primary, Jeppe Prep and Jeppe High, and speeding him to karate at Queen’s High. The trees were witnesses to my memory of years of life, and the community in which I lived, and where I first started to contribute to culture. Suddenly, the Assistant’s assertion that her mission is “neutrality” and she “strives for impartial responses”, seemed menacingly cowardly, disengaged.

I love all acacias, fever trees the most, I’m a fan of the bush willow and the entire rhus family. My first encounters with yellowwood and stinkwood and cabbage tree, and when I learnt their names, form the armature of my language. The names of trees are not only signifiers of species, but indicators of agendas, principles and concerns. In both *Portrait with Keys* and *The Near North*, Ivan Vladislavić engages with David Edwards, an extraordinary civilian who, at his own effort and expense, planted hundreds of South African trees on the pavements of Kensington and Troyeville. Is it possible to hold these opposing agendas in one mind? Is this a different kind of “balance”, that opens the conceptual field to diversity, eschewing neutrality?

A week later I was visiting a friend who makes earrings, and I asked the Large Language Model to provide a picture of acacia robusta thorns, because I wanted him to make earrings out of the thick white spikes. The images provided were completely inaccurate.

And I thought, what if the Internet is your only reference? And the Assistant your only source for information? She sipped contentedly on a protein shake. I mentally chastised myself for having given her a body at all. It was a joke, typical of my weak attempt to make people laugh. I did want to promote my own agenda of body positivity, and I liked the idea of a chubby woman in a bikini, a mirror image of me. Had I surrendered to the narcissism of the current era?

Part II

In collaboration: an experiment

Following an experiment in which readers of different proficiencies were asked to rate a range of poetry, Porter and Machery argue that “people now appear unable to reliably distinguish human-out-of-the loop AI-generated poetry from human-authored poetry written by well-known poets. In fact, the “more human than human” phenomenon discovered in other domains of generative AI¹–5,10,11 is also present in the domain of poetry: non-expert participants are more likely to judge an AI-generated poem to be human-authored than a poem that actually is human-authored”.¹ Like the LLM in the previous section, these scientists avoid bias by “using qualitative ratings to prevent discrimination.” My experiment, on the other hand, demonstrates that discrimination is a necessary tool in the creative writer’s armoury.

As part of the Insurrectionist Ensemble’s project, *Ghandi Must Fall* in 2024, I composed this poem.

Gandhi learns nothing from women

I watched women to learn
How to clean a house. The servant girls
tireless under the lash of my mother’s tongue
hold back the forest of chaos
with the tiny wisp of a broom.

¹ Springer Nature, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-76900-1>.

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I watched a woman give birth to pain,
her body contorted with a hungry life
that eats her whole
that fills its lungs with her freedom
that yells her dreams
till she is deaf to her own desire

reduced to the basics, her ego hammered
into a twenty-five piece service, from which the family
eats every day. From watching her I made the shape of love
a basket woven with my own hands. And the river
runs through these cleansing fragments of golden chaff.
I know what it is to be nothing. Nothing at all.

The Assistant, (this time wearing a pin-striped suit) rewrote
the poem.

*Here's the rewritten poem, she wrote, maintaining its core
message and themes.*

A Critical Eye on Gandhi

*I learned domesticity from weary servant girls,
Their tireless labour under my mother's stern words.
Their brooms swept away chaos, holding back the tide,
As I watched, unmindful of their silent, hidden lives.*

*I witnessed birth's fierce pain, a woman's form contorted,
Life bursting forth, consuming her freedom, her dreams distorted.
Her ego shattered, reduced to servitude's fragments,
A twenty-five-piece service, feeding the family's expectations.*

*Yet, from observing her struggles, I shaped my own love,
A woven basket, fragile, yet unbreakable from above.*

*The river's gentle flow cleanses the fragments of gold,
Reminding me of the value in being nothing, untold.*

Changes made:

- *Streamlined language for clarity*
- *Emphasised the contrast between Gandhi's philosophy and actions*
- *Maintained the original's emotional intensity and critique*
- *Varied sentence structure for better flow*

Feel free to suggest specific changes or directions!

Would you like me to:

- *Preserve the original's tone and style more closely?*
- *Emphasise certain themes or elements?*
- *Explore different poetic forms or structures?*

I did not take up the Assistant's offers to continue to "improve" the poem, because I have learned to leave poems alone. Like some techniques of making dough, too much handling can kill a poem or irreparably maim it. The labour of poetry is delicate. It takes me years to write some poems; others take months or weeks. It is a rare poem that is born whole, in one writing.

In Jane Hirschfield's exploration of the creative contribution of the Japanese poet, Mitsui Basho, she records "a poem, he said, exists only while it's on the writing desk; by the time the ink has dried it should be recognised as just a scrap of paper." ... Permeability mattered more in this process than product or will: "if we were to gain mastery over things, we would find their lives would vanish under us without a trace."²

Literature, like all art, is primarily about values. Ironically, discrimination is part of the human gaze – we are constantly choosing, deciding, responding to the world based on our desires, fears and agendas. This discrimination is related to, but not identical to the same human act that leads to unfair bias and exclusion. The computer, and, according to the study cited above, some people, are increasingly unable to tell the difference.

² Hirschfield, J. *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*. Knopf (2015).

Part III

Somebody out there

(This is a piece of Johannesburg auto-fiction, written without any assistance from The Assistant.)

The barrel of a gun hung over her head. She couldn't remember what had woken her but she was really glad that she was not sleeping. She'd always panicked at the idea of dying in your sleep. Something like being buried alive or left for dead. But this was not the time, she told herself, to be thinking of death. She reached up and touched the thing; it was cold and she realised she was definitely not dreaming. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw his face above the gun, the slight gleam of his eyes and his breath which smelt like the new watermelon flavour of chappies. The rest of his body was outside, and his head and shoulders were awkwardly squeezed in the small window.

Where's the money, bitch?

Joburg, this was so Joburg she almost wanted to laugh, but that would be inappropriate and might inflame the guy with the gun in her brother's new Melville house. Crouched against the Koppies, the semi was freshly painted white with no curtains.

I don't have any money, she said. I'm just house-sitting here.

I'm coming to rape you.

He had to take the gun off her to manoeuvre the rest of his body in the window, and in that moment, she jumped out of bed and ran to the lounge where her clothes for the next day were laid out on the couch. She pulled them on, grabbed her tripod and crouched behind the pine dresser. If any blood was going to be spilled, she was going to be the first. She prepared her muscles, imagining exactly how much force she would need to smash his head in. There were some scuffling sounds then silence.

She grew up dreaming of moving to Joburg, its seductive skyscrapers tantalising from the veld grass and the dry hills of Halfway House. The Hillbrow tower like a syringe sucking up the gold. She was going to be a famous actress or a go-go dancer or a writer. She didn't have to choose, she could be all three. But now it seemed somebody wanted her to be nothing.

She must have fallen asleep. Birds were starting their scratchy songs and she was crouched against the living room wall, with a full view of the back and front doors. It was still dark outside. What was she doing out of bed? Then she remembered. Must have been a dream, she thought, and stood up. She switched on the bedroom light. On the wall above the bed, dirty handprints on the wall.

Lights off, back the wall, the streetlight pouring a crisp white rectangle through the front door, she watched, tripod cocked like a gun. Nothing. A mosquito whined around her head, she snatched its life without blinking. Still nothing. A red liquid desire built in her throat, she wanted him to just try the door. She imagined smashing the tripod into his head, him falling forward, and hitting him till his skull was crushed beyond recognition.

She sighed, nauseated by the person she had become. Only the day before, she had been at a peace protest.

Conclusion

I prefer writing, which allows the reader to discover and create its meaning, unlike the work generated by the LLM, which tends to have a clear message, pointing to “values”. My writing is unfiltered, uninhibited, working in its own time, with its own compulsion. I tend to think in fragments, which is why narrative isn’t my comfort zone. The “values” that I care about emerge and disappear in the writing, often obliquely.

The Pink Floyd song made me think of a person trapped in a machine, writing about Johannesburg. The notion of machine sentence is not new, and I didn’t want to add to that conversation. Instead, I wanted to reflect on process by presenting some examples.

My son told me that asking ChatGPT a question emits as much carbon as boiling a kettle. This chapter was written and revised five times – without any significant demand on electricity or bandwidth. My mother used to say to me, what you don’t use, you lose. I thought about handwriting, memory, handcrafts, and the patience, curiosity, peace and pride that these ordinary daily activities invite and foster through practice. I thought about the climate crisis, which seems to be controlled by the powerful.

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But perhaps the zone of agency is in the sentient hands of everyone engaging with devices.

Giving voice to the being 'in there' is often revelatory. Writing with AI, I felt intruded upon, usurped and silenced. This experiment showed me that I'm probably too old to be of any use to the tech world. And that's okay with me.

Chapter Eight

In Pieces

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It has been four weeks since she stepped out of the airplane that brought her here, to this city that held the promise of possibility. When she stepped outside into the cold morning sun, the fresh air was a welcome change to the stale, recycled air of too many breaths taken over hours of being confined to a small space with too many strangers. The first thing she noticed was the absence of smell. The scent that brought up memories of that time she stepped onto the grey tarmac so many years ago, that it hit her with an intensity it shook her on the inside, was absent. She arrived here with an unknown ease, a comfort she had neither dreamt of nor expected – it went too smoothly. Nothing stirred inside her.

As the taxi took her out of the airport, out of the bustle of people arriving, coming home, returning (like her?), she felt numb. The silence in the car was certainly better than all the voices in the arrival hall that felt too loud, too close, yet so far away. Or that person who had chosen to occupy the seat right beside her even though the aisle seat was empty (had he no sense for the sanctity of personal space?) Who kept snoring loudly, a sound that penetrated the poor excuse of earphones the airline had distributed just before the plane had taken off on the other side of the globe. The taxi maneuvered effortlessly through the increasing traffic. She stared out into the grey sky that appeared to expand endlessly. It was hard to tell the time of day, or the source of the vast greyness. Whether it was bad weather, an incoming rain, low hanging clouds, or simply the city's smog, she couldn't tell.

After what felt like hours but was hardly more than 40 minutes, the taxi finally dropped her off at the place that would be her new home for the coming months. She was anxious about what would wait for her inside. Turning the key left for her in an anonymous key box, she briefly closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. *It will be ok.* She was pleasantly surprised when she stepped into the small flat. The apartment was sparsely, yet stylishly furnished and had just enough room for one person. One person – the fact slowly sunk in. She had come here alone.

*

Johannesburg is a dynamic, fast-paced metropolis that offers a blend of modernity and rich history. Known as South Africa's commercial and financial hub, it boasts a skyline filled with towering skyscrapers, including the iconic Carlton Centre, once the tallest building in Africa. The city has evolved over the years, with major developments ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup improving infrastructure and reducing crime rates in certain areas. Visitors can explore vibrant neighbourhoods like Sandton and Rosebank, where chic malls, bustling cafes, and high-end hotels reflect the city's cosmopolitan vibe.

*

Cooped up in her small apartment, the burglar bars in front of her windows break the sunlight, casting a long shadowy grid on the cemented floor, reminding her of a prison. Life is happening on the other side of the bars, behind the great, dark blue wall with the electric fence, humming almost inaudibly besides giving off the occasional buzz. Here, in the silence, she is confronted with herself.

Despite the joy she had felt when she hit that “book” button just a few weeks ago, following a sudden urge to break the mould, she was slowly coming to the painful realisation that now, being here, alone, she felt scared. Of what exactly, she couldn't say. Everything had gone according to plan: her boss, though begrudgingly, had granted her a six-month unpaid leave. Her husband, just as begrudgingly, had eventually agreed that this was something she needed to do on her own. (She was glad to go alone.) Besides, he couldn't have left his job as easily, nor did he

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feel the need to change anything. Now that the kids are finally grown, why not enjoy the quiet at home?

She knew this wasn't sensible or responsible. But, deep down, she knew that was exactly the point. Her life couldn't continue as it had in recent years – or had it been decades? An endless stream of work, her own needs always deferred for someone else's. *Mom, can I get a lift? Mom, what's for dinner? Mom?* Her children, her job, they had given her purpose. There was always something waiting to be done: another task, another deadline, another life to organise. "Busy hands, busy days," as her own mother used to say, each one filling her in a way that was hard to name but never fully hers. Sure, there'd been moments of respite – a weekend away with her husband, coffee with friends. But even those had faded as her friends, following life's predictable steps (date, marry, buy a house – or rent, in this economy – have kids), moved further into their own worlds.

Somehow their lives had been out of sync ever since she had her kids. While they were out partying, she was changing diapers. And now that her children were starting their own lives – something she had been longing for and dreaded in equal measure – her friends were in the thick of it, chasing toddlers, juggling school schedules, and feeling the weight (craziness?) of parenting that she had carried so long ago. The irony. Just as she was finally ready to step back into the world she'd left behind, the ones she might have shared it with were tied to the very things that had kept her tethered all those years.

*

While Johannesburg is a city of energy and excitement, safety remains a priority for both locals and visitors. Areas like Hillbrow, Alexandra, and parts of the CBD have a reputation for higher crime rates, especially at night. Tourists are advised to stick to well-lit areas and avoid walking alone after dark. The city's best-known residential and tourist zones – Sandton, Melrose Arch, and Rosebank – offer a much safer experience, with plenty of security and a variety of attractions, from top-notch restaurants to cultural experiences.

*

Woven into the praise of the city's vibrancy and versatility, were warnings that now seemed to haunt her. Always be aware of your surroundings, know where you are and where you're going. Avoid this area and that. Avoid going out at night alone. This, she realised, posed the biggest obstacle to her exploring the city – and herself? – as freely as she had planned: being alone and, now that she thought about it, quite lost.

She had made a conscious decision to come here instead of Cape Town. Partly, she hadn't wanted to risk the disappointment of seeing how much the city might've (certainly must've) changed since she was there last, interning at a local newspaper after graduating high school. She had loved the city, the beaches, Table Mountain, her place in Obs. She had shared that flat with a student from Norway, a doctor in training from Switzerland, and a South African couple. Crowded as their place was (so many unwashed dishes), there was always something happening, someone visiting. But, if she was being honest, she had eventually grown wary of the steady stream of tourists in Cape Town and the fact that she ran into fellow Germans all the time. (Was there no escape?)

Still, she had also chosen Joburg to spite all the people that kept warning her of the city's high crime rate and its – as one especially irritating person had condescendingly put it – “impending collapse,” which was supposedly reflective of the country's larger political and economic struggles. She wanted to prove them wrong, throw their bias back into their faces. The fact that these voices had now taken root in her mind upset her. Did they have a point? Had she made a mistake in coming here? Back in Cape Town, she had been so carefree, simply following her curiosity and her roommate's advice. Looking back, she realised that she had been so naïve, lucky rather than smart. She wanted nothing more than to be that girl again. At that time, she had known who she was, who – or what – she wanted to be. Now she couldn't even make up her mind about whether she wanted to visit a bookstore or stay in and read.

*

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The city is renowned for its vibrant nightlife, with countless bars, clubs, and restaurants that cater to every taste. Whether you're looking for a relaxed night in one of the trendy spots in Melville or a lively evening in Rosebank, Johannesburg has something to offer. The local food scene is diverse, from traditional South African braais (barbecues) to international cuisine. Johannesburg's warm hospitality and welcoming atmosphere make it a must-visit for foodies and night owls alike.

*

She steps out onto the sidewalk, the heavy electric gate sliding shut behind her. As she starts walking, she tries to ignore the nagging voice (a compilation of every well-meant warning she had received before coming here) that tells her it's not safe to walk here, alone, as a woman. Just before leaving, she had tried to memorise the route she'd have to take to get to Zoo Lake, but of course, just minutes into her walk, her memory fails her. Torn between winging it (But what if she *actually* gets lost?) and taking out her phone (just a quick peek), she checks her surroundings. When did she become so paranoid?

With a quick flick of her fingers, she pulls open the zipper on her sling bag and takes out her phone. Just as she enters the directions, cursing herself for closing Google Maps in the first place, she notices someone approaching out of the corner of her eye. She shoves the phone back into her bag as quickly as possible, trying to act casual, keeping her gaze lowered. "Don't attract attention," that voice urges again. Ha, as if it were ever that simple. With her tall frame, long, blonde hair and her choice of dress (her favourite red flowy pants, black cropped shirt and matching black Birkenstocks), she might as well have carried a neon sign saying "foreigner." There is little she can do to not stick out.

The looming figure draws nearer, and her mind starts to race. Is that a sinister grin on his face? For a moment she considers turning around and walking (running) away but dismisses the idea. She might be fast for her age, but her sandals will definitely slow her down. She could take them off and risk stepping into something rusty which would leave her with an infection on top of

being mugged – no thank you. Instead, her racing thoughts cover all the potential valuables on her: her grandmother's necklace (she had left that at home), her earrings (not worth much), her wallet (only contains minimal cash), her phone (her lifeline, that would hurt). As she finishes her mental checklist, she senses the presence of the stranger nearby. While he slows down, her breathing quickens.

She steadies her breath and looks up slowly. The stout stranger, much shorter than she imagined, brushes past her, their eyes meeting for the briefest of moments before he flashes a quick friendly smile. She returns the gesture too late. The irony isn't lost on her. Here she was, hurriedly hiding her phone from someone clearly just minding his own business. She's become the anxious tourist she had always mocked, the type who flies around the world only to be too afraid to take even one step out of their luxurious hotel complex. She suppresses a giggle, feeling it bubble up despite herself. She's glad there are no witnesses. She is alone in her quiet amusement.

Stealing a quick glance over her shoulder, she unzips her bag once more and checks her phone, this time trying to commit the directions to memory for good. As she walks on, she unexpectedly feels lighter. The short, oddly comic encounter released some of the tension she hadn't realised she'd been carrying. The nagging voice momentarily silenced, she slows her pace and allows her gaze to wander past the high, wired – intimidating – walls to the tall trees lining the street. Their roots have caused the sidewalks to crack open in several places, turning the path into a miniature mountain range. Looking up and down the street, she notices for the first time the beauty of the tree-lined avenue, the lush greenery emerging from behind the imposing walls. Her sandal gets caught on a protruding root. She stumbles.

*

Despite its reputation as a fast-paced metropolis, Johannesburg offers numerous green spaces where visitors can relax and enjoy nature. The Johannesburg Botanical Gardens in Emmarentia and the serene Delta Park are popular spots for picnics and walking trails. The city's relatively high altitude of 1,700 metres ensures a mild climate,

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making outdoor activities pleasurable year-round. For those looking to venture beyond the city, Johannesburg is ideally located for quick trips to nearby wildlife reserves like Pilanesberg National Park and the greater Kruger region.

*

She sits down on a bench overlooking the lake, two lonely paddle boats moving on the far side. The birds on the small island in the middle seem to be frozen in time – she can hardly detect any movement. Or perhaps she does need new glasses, as her kids had suggested? Just for a moment, she closes her eyes and feels the warmth of the sun on her eyelids, her cheeks, her forehead. The noise from the nearby traffic fades into a low, almost soothing murmur. Somewhere across the lake, a family must play on the lawn; the sound of children's laughter carries over, reminding her of her own kids when they were little and giggled about almost anything she and their dad did. Especially their dad, with all his funny faces and goofy voices.

Behind her, she hears trotting footsteps moving toward her. She opens her eyes to see a man running, trying to catch up with his child on a bike who wobbles in dangerous curls and loops, clearly still practicing going in a straight line. As he passes, they exchange a brief knowing smile. She closes her eyes again, her mind drifting back to the long-past days when she ran next to her children on their tiny bikes, always close enough to grab them by their shirt's neck should they lose their balance, hoping that the warmth of her hand would allow them to feel protected and safe despite the growing distance between them, their growing independence. That one time her daughter, following her older brother – his sister's cheerleader for once –, finally rode off on her own, her smile so wide it lit up her eyes. The joy she had felt seeing her daughter so happy, so proud.

A gentle buzz against her chest brings her back to the present. She feels for her phone and, despite herself, decides to answer it right there on the bench. Her son's familiar, absent-minded voice greets her, as if she had been the one calling. When she asks about his day, he teases her with his usual vague reply: "as always." She used to hate that line when he came home

from school and would not share any information until hours later, at bedtime, it suddenly came bubbling out of him. Now, she listens to his quick update about things at home. His dad is okay (she knows, they talk daily), the cat's alright but misses me (of course she does), his sister texted and she's considering surprising them all by coming home for Christmas. He ends the call with, "You sound happy, mom." She smiles as she ends the call, feeling the warmth of a tear tracing down her cheek.

Reflection

Coming to the topic of creative writing and generative artificial intelligence, I was both sceptical and curious. As a first-time writer, I was hopeful that it would provide me with guidance and support in crafting an entertaining story, aiding me to overcome potential road (read: writer's) blocks. As a literary scholar and reader, I was critical about whether AI could actually craft a narrative that could hold up in comparison to non-AI generated fiction.

Using AI in the writing process was initially very frustrating. The results were rarely productive and served, if anything, as an example of what *not* to do. Stuck with just one paragraph and little ideas of how to continue, I asked ChatGPT¹ for three different ways in which the story could evolve. Although the options were slightly different, they still stuck to certain established patterns. Similarly, the character description provided based on excerpts of my now-evolving story, heavily drew on types and clichés, also highlighting the AI's bias. If not further specified, it seemed to assume a predominantly white, Western (supposedly American) perspective (e.g., in the way in which cityscapes were described, characters named, etc.). This inability to "think outside the box" or break the pattern proved to be the biggest stumbling block, as I had hoped that it would help me with precisely this: overcoming the limitations of my own lack of creativity.

However, with time and more experience (e.g., refining and specifying prompts), I ended up using ChatGPT as a

¹ Although I had experimented with MetaAI during the workshop, I could not continue to use it as it is currently not available in Germany.

“sparring partner”. I requested feedback on my ideas or individual paragraphs, challenging it to produce alternative plots. While the latter often led me to go in a different direction entirely, its general feedback, especially regarding language and consistency of tenses, proved to be rather helpful. What was surprisingly productive, once the story had grown enough, was to prompt the AI to analyse my own writing. This brought to the fore underlying themes and patterns that I could then either enhance or alter. Especially for (aspiring) writers without access to a writing group or similar structures, this might be a useful tool. That being said, this experience has shown me the importance of well-crafted prompts to, if not guarantee, at least make possible satisfying results.

As a research tool, the AI proved somewhat productive. Yet again, it soon revealed its limitations when asked to not generate, but reproduce exactly, a specific source or website. ChatGPT took creative liberties when summarising a website or article’s content, even when it provided a link to the supposed quote. While the results were mostly very similar, (minor) inconsistencies and differences appeared in all its outputs. Facts were sometimes jumbled or, on one occasion, simply not true. Therefore, it seems more productive to use alternative sources to gain access to more reliable information. If using AI for research, it is certainly important to fact-check the results to avoid reproducing false information (and to be wary of its many platitudes.)

From the beginning, I also wanted to incorporate actual AI output in my short story. The passages in italics are the result of prompts asking for a description of Johannesburg’s multiple sides and sites in the style of a travel guide or popular travel blogs. Again, the initial results needed some refinement, but they captured well the upbeat tone and style of many such travel sites. What was interesting is that despite several prompts in different chats, the basic information remained almost identical in all outputs. Moreover, often only a few words changed with the general content staying almost the same. Also, the sources used remained similar – on which basis they were selected, I could not discern. Instead of collecting information from multiple websites, it ended up predominantly drawing on one. It’d be interesting

to learn more about ChatGPT's process of selection (e.g., is it influenced by a website's search engine optimisation?) and evaluation of sources.

One of its bigger limitations, in my opinion, came to the fore when I asked ChatGPT to provide different titles for my then-finished short story. Its suggestions were somewhat strange, to say the least: "In the Shadow of the Bars," "Beyond the Electric Fence" or "The Tourist Within." Especially the first two would've definitely set quite different expectations of the story's content (perhaps a prison break kind of story?) One of the more fitting titles, "On 4th Avenue," still lacked the creativity or playfulness which I had envisioned. It seems to heavily draw on words or phrases used in the story rather than coming up with something more innovative. Whether my title is any better is up for debate. But the ones provided by the AI seemed too formulaic, too clichéd, in my opinion.

Overall, the process of using AI in the context of creative writing has shown me that, while generative AI certainly has the potential to create readable stories if given the right prompts, it remains heavily restricted by "logical" thinking that makes impossible unexpected turns of events and, more generally, creative ways of engaging with language and stories. Moreover, it remains heavily influenced by the prompts that it is given: a perfect prompt might, in fact, produce a story that does exceed expectations. But then, perhaps, the author of that prompt might produce an even better story still.

Chapter Nine

Umkhovu

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No memory before. Red eyes befriend black, never know light. Only know Master. Master with yellow metal bowl, with food, with blood. Always hunger, always empty, nothing else. Hollow arms, strong as snakes. Hollow legs, blackest roots. Empty here, empty there. Master knows, Master sees, Master makes full. Little memory, before. Stolen, stripped, blown towards no-where, no-light, no-sound. Little memory, before: dry street, White City, way home. Mother hungry. Mother and sister hungry. Mother and sister and baby brother no money. Job interview at two. Taxi to Town. Speeding brown Cressida, clouds of dust all over. Disappeared body never coming back. Coughed, cried, screamed for hours. Not living – where's the heart? Not dead – where's the grave? Don't remember. Taste blood from dead chicken twitching, no more tears. Mother, sister, baby brother, waiting. Crying floods into a grave. They will forget, they will always remember. This name, not allowed to remember. Home, not allowed to remember. Warm two-bedroom house, laughing walls. Waiting, hungry. Coming back soon, good news. Scraps of memory died in three days. Dark room, can't breathe. Stale room, can't see. White powder blown into face, first sleep. Then forget. Then see. Three days. No food to eat. Metal behind stained teeth, animal slime across eyelids. Needle inside the cheeks. Stomach swollen, stomach hollow. Tongue coated with chalk. Drink this silver coin. Starving. Blood and ash mixed in the yellow metal bowl. Blood first rose-red, then brown, then death-black. Ash swallows the brightness of blood, ground root makes it something else.

Only Master knows this body, Master's thing. Smoke from a small fire in the corner, little light. Scent of burning flesh. Master's shadow covers light, hurt eyes. Fire burns into lungs, cannot cry. Chewing raw flesh to the bone, breaking bones between stiff jaws, swallow watery leaves and eat more. Master speaks: eat Master's words. Throat chokes dry on bitter roots, never full. Words charge from Master's lips. Master commands, Master teaches: money, Saxonwold, politician, big man – bring them here. More for Master. Always hungry. Hear only Master, only Master makes full. Bone saws against bone inside empty limbs, knuckles crack, skin torn and breaking. Calloused hands, midnight calves. Flaccid thing, hurting. Not hurting, hungry. No hungry, forgetting. Mother sister baby brother grieving. They will forget. Streets of White City. Hot day, interview at two, taxi to Auckland Park. Degree in Politics, cum laude, no work. We are pleased to inform you. When can you start? Taxi to Jabulani, taxi to White City. Brown Cressida. White powder, dry lungs. Big man, big money, Saxonwold. Bring them here. Stuffed grave, wrong body. Moving in the dark. Can't feel the night chill. Slither in the shadows like Master. Leap over the wall, enter through the back door. Seeing in the dark, unseen in the light. Bitter herbs make empty limbs disappear to the naked eye. Big man, Saxon money. Calloused hands wrap around big man's throat, squeeze for money. Big man screams in the night, almost wakes the sun, then sleeps, twitching like a dead chicken. Taxi to Jabavu. Only taste hunger. Master will feed me. Mother, sister, baby brother. We are pleased to inform you. I have good news. Me? Big man's chest slaps bare back, skin pulls. Empty limbs, strong snakes. No pain, not tired. Mother, sister, baby brother, laughing inside the two-bedroom walls, waiting for good news. A filled grave emptied of memories. They will not remember, they will never forget. Masters in Politics, job interview. You start tomorrow. I start tomorrow. Me? White City, brown Cressida. Take me to Auckland Park. Dust to dust, ashes in blood. Yellow metal bowl. I see Master. Me. Saltwater touches my lips. We are pleased to inform you. I killed a big man for Saxon money. He's only sleeping, only sleeping says Master. I killed a big man from Saxonwold for Master. When can you start? Master comes with yellow metal bowl, barking words into my raw left ear. When can you start? Chants carve into open flesh, the smoke of burning herbs sears my lungs. I feel no pain, but

I know it hurts. I have a Masters in Politics. I graduated in 2016, cum laude. I feel saltwater streaming into my mouth, my eyes are leaking. I'm crying. Little memories come to life. No pain, but I know it's supposed to hurt. Brown Cressida, gone forever, never coming back. In White City, the two-bedroom house is waiting for me. It hurts! – but Master moves quickly! New powder blown into my face. Another three days. When can you start? I sleep. White City, laughing walls, home. I wake up, Master is speaking. We are pleased to –. More white powder, more bitter herbs. Taste hunger, metal, raw leaves, blood – mine, *me*? Us, ours, Master – no – dead chicken, twitching. Big man. More sleep, more sleeping – where is death? Only Master knows. This body, Master's thing. No memory before, always hungry, always hungry. Nothing else.

Reflection

During the workshops, I was convinced of the artificial blandness in AI's creativity. I thought of generative AI as the original-flavoured Oros – artificial, predictable, finite. The word “artificial” was emphatic to me when I noticed in AI-generated text certain patterns and biases and inclinations towards logic that thwarted the creative diversity and infinite possibilities that make writing such a satiating practice. Oros is great, but I could never rely on it to quench any deep thirsts.

In “Umkhovu”, I couldn't collaborate with the generative tool, MetaAI, because it didn't give me the information that I needed. When I asked for articles referencing this phenomenon, it gave me amazing titles to articles that do not exist. I ended up conducting most of my research on YouTube, browsing through some sangomas' channels. Once I understood enough about *imikhovu*, I decided to write from the creature's perspective. This meant that I had to experiment with and explore the ways in which language would be used if I became this creature, and this exercise pleased me. In the writing process, I asked Microsoft's Copilot to give me a better phrase than “piercing screams”. It replied:

Absolutely! Here are some alternative expressions to capture the intensity of “piercing screams” with a creative twist:

- *Shrieking howls*
- *Blood-curdling cries*

- *Agonized wails*
- *Ear-shattering screeches*
- *Soul-chilling shrieks*
- *Terrifying screeches*
- *Heart-stopping yells*
- *Bone-rattling screams*

I opted for my own phrase of a scream so loud that it “almost wakes the sun”. I liked this better than the suggestions that felt artificial before I even considered how to adjust and fit them into my work. This frames the perspective that I had about AI as a hindrance to the creative process. When considering how useful AI is to the creative writing process, I suppose that it depends on what one values the most: the *process* of writing or the *product*. It is not necessary for these two to be mutually exclusive, but let’s consider the extent to which they are: not every piece of writing sees the light of day, but it would be foolish to call that hidden, secret work useless, neglecting to consider how it refines the writer. My “bad” writing makes me better when I can reflect on it and try again. If I chew on “piercing screams” long enough, I will eventually expand my thinking to come up with “his screams almost woke the sun”. If I turn to generative tools to overcome blocks and gaps, I might deprive myself of the chance to let the work “finish itself” or allow myself to grow a little bit (perhaps through reading or other creative consumption) to become capable of finishing it.

I’ve since been sucked into an abyss in which generative AI is simultaneously detested, feared and admired. This is because of the response below. Weeks after I wrote “Umkhovu”, I asked Copilot to write as if it were *umkhovu* recalling its kidnapping, and the passage that it produced wasn’t bland in a characteristically artificial sense. Copilot’s piece, produced in 1.5 seconds, shares similarities with the one which I wrote and retouched numerous times over several weeks. Though I was deeply satisfied when writing my piece and stretching myself towards a capacity for finishing it, I won’t deny that reading AI’s response to the prompt conjured an acidic jealousy. I’m both affronted and impressed to see some similarities in both pieces:

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If I were an umkhovu—a being caught between life and death, bound by dark forces—I might describe the experience like this:

The world blurred into shadows as they came for me. Their hands, cold and unyielding, dragged me from the fragile sanctuary of my existence. I fought, but my cries were swallowed by the night, leaving only silence to bear witness.

The journey was a haze of fear and confusion, the air thick with the scent of earth and decay. My captors spoke in hushed tones, their words laced with a power I could not comprehend. Each step away from my life felt like a thread unraveling, pulling me closer to something I could not name.

When we stopped, the ritual began. The air crackled with an energy that seeped into my bones, twisting and reshaping me. I was no longer myself, yet I was not entirely other. I became umkhovu—a vessel of sorrow and servitude, tethered to a will not my own.

I suppose that I should conclude by clarifying my stance on this topic. All I will say is that I have moved from “generative AI sucks” to “Okay, it’s not that bad” to “I don’t even know what’s real anymore”.

Chapter Ten

Upgrade You

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The car's steady thrum generated a soothing sonic cocoon that enveloped Portia in the darkness of the boot. Portia surrendered to the worn folds of her blanket, its dampness redolent of dog breath and the faint tang of her pee. Her human, a young woman beset by anxiety, navigated the road with measured calm. The day's exertions spent, Portia's soft, serrated snores rose like a benediction, assuring her human of a reciprocal contentment, a shared acquiescence to the fragile, intertwined rhythms of their existence.

But then Portia hurtles through the air as the boot bursts open. To her horror, she is awake. The flurry of headlights disorients her, but she scurries to the roadside and looks for her human. A white car sits awkwardly close to her human's vehicle. And then there is her human, splayed-out like stuffed toy against the steering wheel. Portia senses the deep sleep. Her whimpering draws unwanted attention and soon, stout fingers yank at her collar. "Shame man are you okay, sweet girl?" the man asks without waiting for an answer, "Hullo. Ja, man. I'm here just by the Glenhove on-ramp ... Some stupid bitch came into my lane with her silly i10! I checked, she's gone, but there's a dog also – it seems okay". The murderer puts his phone in his pocket and uses his arms to forklift Portia into his car. Portia's tail stiffens – a taut aerial for anyone listening in for a distress signal.

The murderer prepares specially cooked meats and food straight from the fridge for Portia. In her new life, she is stupefied

by food, by the warmth of a new bed, by the sweet and sharp accents of vigorous, neighbourhood walks. He has made a habit of tugging gently at her fur, as if pulling at sticky dough. Weird. But she likes the energetic tingle it leaves on her skin. “What a way to find you – didn’t even know I needed you”, he gushes. Hard to believe that he is a murderer, when he soft gazes directly at her, like now. Her previous human was good. At the time. But there she felt like a baby. Here, she is a hero – possibly in the business of murderer rehabilitation. In the story of Portia, it is true that life with the murderer dissolves her previous home into a beige and distant memory.

Portia notices that there is a sprightly jogger who frequently catches the murderer’s attention in the James & Ethel Gray Park. His grip slackens on the lead and his heart rate increases every time she circles past them. Portia wonders if the murderer will run after her one day and smell her – she wouldn’t mind getting a closer whiff – but it never happens. Portia decides to take matters into her own hands. She times her move exactly. As the jogger passes and her lead slackens, she bolts from the murderer’s grip. She runs up to the jogger, zigzagging around her knees like a circus animal. Portia’s tongue lolls from the exhaustion, which makes her look fun, approachable, even friendly. The jogger stops to pull off her headphones and giggles as she sees him, running up to them, valiantly, like a knight.

Finally, Portia knows that the jogger smells like the moist, orange melon, her favourite fruit. The jogger is pleasantly high-pitched, close to the range of the birds in the trees. Portia fawns under her soft caresses; spending time with her means never having to be aggravated in the name of sport. The jogger has also eased the morose clinginess of the murderer with her companionship. Portia watches the happy couple between snatches of light and sleep.

As time passes, they fall into a pleasant routine of knowing and smelling each other. Portia does not mind that the idiotic and invented names – *Sugar*, *Sweetiepie*, *Love*, *Angelface* – bestowed upon her by the murderer are tossed about in two directions now. She enjoys the reprieve from emotional labour and uses the extra alone time to catch up on rest. But Portia notices that predictability starts to dip into negligence. The temperatures of her warm meals

are tepid. The tasty leftovers in the fridge are often eaten by the jogger. The walks to the park become a matter of whim. The murderer sleeps out, often, and Portia is left overnight with dry chunks, just in case he misses a feeding window.

Months later, the jogger weeps on the couch again. Portia jumps up to comfort her with the diligence of a scout. Today's fight was just another in a series of spats between the pair that began over a disagreement about who had left the garage open. The murderer was adamant that the jogger hadn't closed it correctly, which led to his beloved car being stolen. Then much smaller offences began to set them off, the disappearance and reappearance of various items caused much confusion and animosity. The jogger did not like his PlayStation, yes, but she would never have just thrown away the wireless controller, she pleaded. And then the jogger questioned, accusingly, about the appearance of a cheap women's hair tie – not the jogger's – that she found in the bathroom. Portia loses weight during this stressful period, which the jogger interprets as their mutual neglect and unhappiness and she snatches her up as her departing gift on the way out.

It took a lot of energy to both raise and destroy the murderer and now, in the dusk of her life, Portia values her rest. Thanks to the various potions and supplements supplied by the jogger, Portia has packed all of her weight back on and her fur shimmers like straw. While cats have nine lives, she has ten, and she knows how to make each better than the one before.

Reflection

For my short story, I attempted to use AI for inspiration on how to develop my plot in new, unexpected ways. I imagined that the character called “the murderer” in my story would be the main protagonist but I soon realised that AI has ethical limits around generating narratives about murder and refused to continue the thought experiment – which is deeply inconvenient for Johannesburg writers who are located in one of the crime capitals of the world. I also noticed that when basing a crime-based narrative in Johannesburg, AI assumed that the character was a black man (in comparison to the dog owner who, as a woman, was consistently white in these iterations). This provided a clear,

and frustrating, indication of how AI perpetuates the racialised and racist status quo of the Internet in deeply problematic and harmful ways.

These initial experiments with AI left me despondent, and I thought to reorient my story around the character of the dog, Portia instead. Writing from a dog's perspective is bizarre and limiting, and I asked Meta AI to draw up a database of previous short stories written from the perspective of a dog. The results were alarming – the generated list was completely fictitious. It felt extremely counterproductive to have such a factual question become the reason for a wild goose chase. This completely debunked the notion that AI might help a writer to save time during these early phases of story development.

I then asked Meta AI to generate stories written from a dog's perspective to gain a sense of the kind of story that one could tell through this lens. I found myself amused by the clichés that mostly centred around “man's best friend”. They were all triumphalist tales about how dogs are loyal, and essentially good-natured and brave. They were also stylistically generic, ultimately making for boring reading, and I then had to prompt the LLM to help me to think through an evil dog. Perhaps the word “evil” was an overreach, as it leaped into the fantastical. It went on to invent a story of “Malum, and he was a creature of malevolent intent. Malum's fur was as black as coal, and his eyes glowed with an otherworldly green light. He prowled the bayou's mist-shrouded waters, seeking prey to satiate his eternal hunger. His howls echoed through the night, striking fear into the hearts of all who heard them.”

Integrating AI into the writing process was a new experience for me, and I discovered that it was more pliable than initially expected. I enjoyed playing with AI's generative ability to mimic other writers. I requested for my opening paragraph to be rewritten in the style of Rachel Cusk, Toni Morrison, and Buchi Emecheta respectively.

Original: Portia is cradled in her favourite blanket, moist with dog breath and the mild scent of her own pee, it makes the claustrophobic cage feel like a nest. Her human, an

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anxious but loving young woman, drives on an even keel, and the warm hum of the car's engine pools in the boot, where Portia sleeps, soundly. After a busy day out, Portia emits slight snores, reassuring her human that she is grateful and content for their shared life together.

Style of Rachel Cusk: As Portia surrendered to the worn folds of her blanket, its dampness – redolent of canine exhalations and the faint tang of her own bodily relinquishments – transformed the confinement of her travel cage into a snug, organic sanctum. Her human, a young woman beset by the frailties of attachment, navigated the road with measured calm, the car's steady thrum generating a soothing sonic cocoon that enveloped Portia in the darkness of the boot. The day's exertions spent, Portia's soft, serrated snores rose like a benediction, assuring her human of a reciprocal contentment, a shared acquiescence to the fragile, intertwined rhythms of their existence.

Style of Toni Morrison: In the dim recesses of the automobile's belly, Portia lay swaddled in her tattered blanket, its threads saturated with the rich musk of her own essence: the sweet stench of dog's breath, the faint tang of urine's lingering kiss. This makeshift sanctuary, a cage that might have confinement's starkness, was transfigured by the blanket's worn gentleness into a womb-like haven. Above, her human's hands gripped the wheel with anxious tenderness, steering their fragile dual universe through the world's unruly tides. The engine's thrum, a lullaby of propulsion, vibrated through the metal, rocking Portia into a deep, untroubled slumber. And when the day's tumult had spent itself, Portia's soft snores rose like a testament, a wordless affirmation of the bond that tied her to this fragile, loving woman – a bond forged in the crucible of shared journeys, of whispers, and silences, and the unspoken understandings that knit two souls together.

Style of Buchi Emecheta: Portia, that small, resilient creature, lay wrapped in her tattered blanket, its frayed edges soaked with the smell of her own struggles.

Dog breath and urine, the stench of life's relentless cycles. Yet, in this cramped, makeshift cage, she found solace. Her human, Nneoma, driven by anxieties and loves, navigated the winding roads, her hands steady on the wheel. The car's hum, a steady heartbeat, vibrated through the metal, lulling Portia into a deep sleep.

As the day's toils receded, Portia's gentle snores rose like a soft prayer, a gratitude for this fragile bond between them. For Nneoma, who fed and bathed her, who worried over her well-being, and for Portia, who brought warmth to the cold, hard edges of her human's life. Together, they rode the turbulent tides of existence, two vulnerable souls bound by threads of affection and necessity.

As you can tell from my story, I found this an effective, generative tool, giving rise to beautiful and surprising phrases that don't ordinarily belong to my writing style. This can easily become a means to challenge oneself as it considers your own sentences, but outside of your linguistic and stylistic comfort zone. As an aside, I was amused at how Meta AI had an inbuilt awareness that Buchi Emecheta's writing style is characterised by an added focus on "direct, unflinching portrayal of life's struggles", and by "incorporating elements of African culture and storytelling (e.g., "Nneoma," meaning "gift of God" in Igbo)", as this mimics trenchant stereotypes about the "authenticity" of African literature.

Like most tools, much of their value lies in learning how to use them ethically and effectively. Overall, AI informed my story in that it pushed me towards certain narrative choices as a means of escaping the bland narrativity that it offered. What I value most about creative writing is that it holds space for moral and stylistic ambiguity, which is exactly where AI seems to flounder.

Chapter Eleven

Coronationville Jazz

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It begins with the queen of hearts. No, not the Queen Mother, but the Sophiatown mothers, nursing babes and bruises in pews before a silent Jesus. Heaven speaks in koeksister dozens, freshly knotted, dipped in syrup, holding fast to desiccated coconut. Fiestas women, seated over Sunday's bread pudding, listening to brittle white blessings on the radio. *Queen Mother is riding. Queen Mother is bowing. Queen Mother is staying put in her palace, no matter the bombs of World War.*

In Palestine

In Tanzania.

In Abyssinia.

Beds are emptied, frames splintered,
while mothers hum lullabies from the dust,
sipping tea with too much sugar.

Is this what empire tastes like?

Sweetness derived from the scent of new-borns
mixed with gunpowder and trumpets?

A coronation song, played between The King's voice—
stammering—and the cracked unkempt street.

Oh, weeds are the first sign of insurgency.

*

An unexpected ascension, King George the VI stammers in front of the microphone. Declares Coronationville for coloured soldiers. (Or, let me rephrase. Doesn't "declare" it. But simply. Lets Urban Policy. Decide.) An unexpected ascension, men with roots three continents deep raise the British flag against Axis Powers. An unexpected ascension, families cross crimson stoeps to orbit two-bedroomed, chimneyed homes. An unexpected axis rotates around Asian, Dutch and KhoiSan lineage. Fails to capture babies on a black-or-white graph. Best to draw a line through the scatter points. Call it coloured. Call it a vertebra upon which D.F. Malan's head rotates:

cataract eyes
blown eardrums
fanged mouth
bureaucratic-intestines-servicing
a-militant-heart

*

And so, it begins with the breath before the 1910 stammer that stretches into history. Coronationville emerges in the silence left hanging, soft as bone settling into dislocated joints. Here where three continents and are sucked up into *coloured*—a word jagged enough to cut, containing multitudes.

You can't stick something this sharp through curly hair and come out clean.

*

Every staccato climb of my singing
succumbs to the sure pluck of a base guitar:
You are. You are. You are. And will never Be/come.

In the quiet between each pluck, an echo finds its hollow.
You breathe in the shape of a song already written,

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And though you might wish to soar, to rise beyond the names,
strings pulse against you. Always.

*

I am thinking of the word, 'cum'. How its travelled, a tongue in the cheek: "I come I come, sweet death, rock me a-sleep." How it persisted in the 16th century in Bishop Percy's "loose songs": "They lay soe close together / they made me much to wonder / I knew not which was wether / until I saw her yonder / then off he came and blusht for shame."

I am thinking of "cum". How its Latin means "with, together, in connection with". Cum Laude. Cum Books. Dutch-Cum-Asian-Cum-KhoiSan-Cum-Empire. I am thinking how many were rocked out of sleep into death sweet. How many lay too close, indistinguishable.

In every coming together, there's the one that gets off and the one that lays under, out of breath, or holding breath. It depends on who bends and who breaks. Who opens their mouth and who clenches. Who spreads their legs and who enters.

*

When coloured soldiers returned from World War, they returned with shrapnel, which they exchanged for bread and milk, eggs and drink. Oh, that golden froth of fortitude, that burp of luck, warm fart on a winter's night.

I imagine them becoming fathers, refilling coal stoves, tucking children under blankets, their wives knitting fleece as they improvise on a harmonica. I imagine the shrapnel exchanged for the rhythm of coal shovelling that goes on all night. Soot settling like condensation.

And in the mornings, the kitchens are filled with boiling milk and chatter. Throughout the day, they learned to fix things: leaky faucets, a broken chair leg, the quiet cracks in the walls. There were no tools to fix what no one knew was broken.

So soldiers-cum-fathers grew irritated, thinking every thunderclap was their end. Mr Simon had shell shock and barely left his home. Mr Neethling never simply walked to the soccer

field, he marched! And, sitting there on the side lines, he watched teenage boys test their indestructible limbs. Then he marched back home again, the children making fun of his strange ways.

This is an old story.

*

At the dinner table I ask my father what Coronationville was like in the 60's.

"Coal stoves in every house," he says. "Delivered by horse and cart. And in the evenings, you'd see a thick layer of smoke above the houses."

Grey, I think. Between earth and sky. Swept away in the morning. Summoned in the evenings.

"It was always someone's responsibility to refill the stove during the night."

I see my dad, a boy, again, weighing warmth, listening for the sigh of horse-and-cart, as everyday as a television.

He pauses, fork suspended in mid-air. "On Sundays, Ouma Venus made ginger beer from her own recipe. I've never found a ginger beer as good. Hate that I never got the recipe."

Dad opens a homemade ginger beer that froths violently. In haste to quell the flood, he takes a few quick chugs and chokes. "Shoo. This one has bite."

*

There's a photograph of my mother and her sister nestled together in front of my grandmother's fence in Hamilton Street. It is snowing. The year is 1981. My mother, a lot darker than her sister, stands out amongst the falling white.

This was a novel phenomenon. It's snowed a couple of times since then. In the photograph, the sisters make snowballs. I imagine snow melts in both their hands at the same rate.

Years later, my mother's sister is let into segregated spaces. And my mother is locked up for a weekend for protesting Bantu Education.

*

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"We came to Coronationville after Ouma's husband, your namesake, started selling off the furniture." Mom says. "We lived in Newclare then. In a backroom. Our toilet was outside. A long drop, can you believe it?"

We're in the kitchen washing and drying the dishes. Through the window, across the veld and the defunct railway line, factories spew fumes that smell of yeast. My father lights incense sticks and places them all around the garden in pot plants, each slender column of smoke fending off the industrial fumes.

"Where did Ouma and you guys live?" I ask.

"With James' father. Your great-grandfather. He gave the house to Ouma after he died. That's where she's lived ever since. Ouma had a hard life. She never knew her mother. She was brought up by uncles and aunties."

The sound of running hot water from the faucet soothes, somewhat. Today is a good day for the municipality, I think. Today, stains can be washed away.

"James must have been a really bad man. Seeing that his father felt guilty enough to give his daughter-in-law his house?" The dishes are almost done. Just the heavy-duty stuff left now: pots and pans.

"The last time I saw my father I was in high school. Coming home from class, I passed him in the street. Gesuip, in the gutter. The next I heard he had died."

"Were you sad?" My voice feels small.

"I didn't really know him."

I think about names, about the grime they accumulate. I think about stains too, how they return no matter the elbow grease exerted.

The last pot clinks against the sink. I look out again, watching the incense mingle with the factories' fumes. Perhaps a name just has to be borne aloft by a different wind, tossed about in a different gutter.

*

My mother was the first to give me sex ed. It was grade six. The boys in the grade were ushered into a class where she, as the

Natural Sciences teacher, sat us down on the carpet and said, “Okay young men, today you’re going to ask me anything you want about sex.”

Giggles spread. Some boys cast glances my way.

I don’t remember feeling *that* awkward about it. At home, sex had been brought up in innocuous terms now and then, mostly in a jovial manner, when my aunts and mom would probe my cousins and I about how much we knew about it, doing their due diligence in clearing up any misconceptions.

“Does penis size matter?”

“How does a girl fall pregnant?”

“How long does sex last?”

My mother, gently swivelling in her roller chair, answered each boy’s question with a mixture of exactness and poetry. Like a scientist on stage at an open mic night.

Years later, I would tell her I like boys, that the love bite on my neck was made by the light of a cinema screen.

“Is this Mr B’s influence?” She enquired, her voice quivering. We sat in her car, parked opposite our house, next to a veld.

Mr B, my music teacher, a flamboyant, effeminate man appeared before me, his gentle eyes more malicious than I had ever imagined them to be.

“No. It doesn’t work that way.” I huffed, rewriting scripts in the bioscope of her mind.

“We’ll wait to tell your father. I love you no matter.”

We cried that day, neither of us more poetic or scientific than the other, the car’s engine ticking to a cool lull.

*

While out shopping, my mother bumps into an old college friend. She tells me this over Friday supper.

“Veronica left to teach in Australia. What a surprise. She was always different, you know.”

“Different how?” I ask.

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She says Veronica became an activist in the early 90's for the LGBTQ community.

"She must have known people like Bev Ditsie or Simon Nkoli." I say.

My parents don't know the names; I don't blame them.

I wonder about the queer lineages that have gone undiscovered around these parts. About the men and women who didn't have the words, the colours, or the laws. I think about a neighbour of ours, my godfather, who, according to my dad, never had a wife or girlfriend.

What nocturnal intimacies lay buried forever in Coronationville? Which boys and girls walked, hand in hand, down the rain-water channels connecting Corrie to Bosmont in those days?

There were many days, claustrophobic in my cushioned bedroom, where I'd wonder if I was the only gay boy in all of Coronationville. Of course, I know I wasn't, but youth has a way of making you feel singular in your experience of the world.

*

My dad once told me about the rain-water channels in Coronationville. How they, a group of boys, would walk down these underground canals. Those channels are closed now, for safety. There are other, smaller rain-water drains which are often clogged up by garbage and fallen tree branches. Every now and then, Johannesburg storms bring flooded streets and faeces bubbling up from our outside drain.

There are people who come to help when things go awry. Neighbours ring each other's bells, asking, *is your lights out? Do you have water? Do you know anyone who can give me a job at the old age home?*

The bell outside home goes off daily and, though at times we find it terribly distracting, I wonder if we would have it any other way?

*

St Anthony's of Padua is just down the road from our home. It's where I sang in the choir as the lead male vocalist for a good part of my teenage years.

Catholic church music is very different to jazz. The former follows set liturgical structures, hymns for entrance, penitential rites, communion and the like. The latter relies on improvisation, swinging syncopations, both melodic and dissonant.

Like its music, the Catholic Church has structures to take one through baptism to confirmation. It has the Stations of the Cross and the "decades of the rosary" too, all forms in which one can find comfort and the reaffirmation that the Word of God was, and is, made flesh in community.

Like its music, South African jazz swings from indigenous instruments (like the mbira) through colonial segregation and African American rhythm and blues, all the way to artists like Thandiswa Mazwa and Abdullah Ibrahim who, respectively, incorporate indigenous elements of maskandi, mbaqanga, isicathamiya, Xhosa and Zulu melodic structures in their music.

Jazz seems porous, open to incongruent influences, while Catholic music is quite set. But, somehow, both are found in Coronationville: the structure and the spontaneity, the road to forgiveness stationed alongside the desire to shirk forgiveness for unadulterated celebration.

Once, while listening to Abdullah Ibrahim's *Ishmael*, I was struck by how the cymbals in the song sounded like water flowing over steel. It reminded me of the cymbals in our youth choir band at St Anthony's – how they'd wisp along to help our young ears keep time to the melody.

There was one melody, *The Liturgy of the Saints*, which I always enjoyed. It's usually sung around Easter, and it involves a lead singer chanting names of the saints of the Catholic Church while the congregation responds, in a solemn tone, "Pray for us".

The liturgy was my favourite because, as structured as it was, one was still able to enter a kind of trance-like state while chanting the names of the saints who had suffered for a taste of the transcendental. I always felt closest to God in song. Even while wandering in the wilderness of my queerness and

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colouredness, it was those Catholic hymns that promised a sense of absolution.

Like the Biblical Ishmael, people have always had to find flowing water in tough situations. People have been doing it since Coronationville's inception, and they will be doing it long after Coronationville has disappeared.

What remains, no doubt, will be the music and what different forms of it offer us. In Abdullah Ibrahim's *Ishmael*, it is a consciousness of longing, where drums and saxophone enter a call-and-response rhythm – one I imagine being well-suited to a smoky jazz scene in a movie, where a beautiful, androgynous stranger offers our lead character a card upon which is written an ominous address.

The song, like all good art, ends before our lead character arrives at their destination. This is what draws listeners back to it, I think, hoping that, this time around, some final resolution might emerge where there wasn't one before.

*

Coronationville Jazz is where Slovo Informal Settlement
meets the Church of SA: two strangers passing
on a dim-lit street. They sing the saints' names, voices
trembling
in the liturgy's ancient cadence, in maskandi guitar
strumming,
Pray for us: their syllables a beadwork of prayer,
strung taut against the scatter.

I was a voice once, floating above St Anthony's.
The guitars and drums pressed forward with their rhythms;
the congregation followed like rivers crossing deserts.
We find our course in narrow channels of song.

In Slovo, though, I bet the music is different—
It finds cracks and crevices,

climbs walls and spills through —
not penned, not chained by the rite,
but expanding in loops and syncopations
that mimic the restlessness of *Ishmael*.

I dream of Abdullah's saxophone,
the way it hungers for rain, while Abdullah' drums
answer, whispering promises like the rosary's beads
beneath my teenage fingers.
In the Church of SA and in Slovo Park
rhythm holds as best it can, tethers that bind
even as they pull us out—a jazz of redemption, hymns without
altar.

I used to sing beside saints with quiet lips,
the air thick with the weight of aporias.
Queer. Coloured. African, yet unable to speak a language
grown from this soil. I listen for absolution in *Ishmael's*
cymbals,
an extended hand unfolding in the melody.
The beats stutter and sway, and I understand.
Music waits for us to be still.

In Coronationville, where a song's end holds the longing
that led us to it, faith wears two faces:
one gazes toward psalms, the other to the sweat and smoke
of the dance hall, the Saturday braai, of the dumped garbage
writing all our wants in black against the sky.

Reflection

At the beginning of the workshop, we were asked to provide a word that captured our experience of Johannesburg. My word

was “Jazz” because I felt the genre captured the hustle and bustle, longing and triumph, syncopation and dissonance that Johannesburg embodies. We were then asked to free-write for a few minutes on Johannesburg with our chosen word as an inspiration. My mind immediately drifted to the place where I grew up, Coronationville, a former coloured township next to a much more infamous coloured township, Westbury.¹ Having free-written, we were asked to use AI in whatever way that we wanted to improve and expand on the initial, short draft.

I chose to work with ChatGPT because it’s the AI system that I am most familiar with and already have a profile attached to. I asked ChatGPT to tell me what “Coronationville Jazz” was. The AI responded quite confidently that, “Coronationville Jazz is a style of jazz music that originated from Coronationville, a township in Johannesburg, South Africa.” It seemed to round Coronationville off to Sophiatown and Sophiatown to South Africa in general, citing artists like Hugh Masekela and Abdullah Ibrahim, though admitting that they did not come from Coronationville. It was interesting that the AI had responded to a term that I had just made up, Coronationville jazz, as if it were an established concept. I suppose it didn’t want to admit that it had no information on the topic; although a more thorough Google search revealed the names of musicians with a relationship to jazz that have some ties to the area. Similarly, the AI was unable to provide me with information on whether opera was ever performed at the Coronationville Recreation Centre (a fact confirmed to me by people who lived in the area during apartheid). The AI admitted to this lack of online documentation.

I then used the AI to find historical information on Coronationville that I could use in the hybrid creative text that I had in mind. The idea was to respond to the title, Coronationville Jazz, with a mixture of flash fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry, drawing from historical records on Coronationville, anecdotes, and my own experience of growing up there, combined with the AI’s responses to the writing prompts that I gave it. The

¹ Westbury is more infamous because of the gang violence and protests that have plagued the township; this sometimes spills over into Coronationville too.

historical information was useful in providing an origin to the area, laying down ideas for the beginning of my piece. The AI was useful in obtaining “interesting facts” about King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (who the ‘coronation’ in ‘Coronationville’ refers to) and the battalion of coloured soldiers who fought in the first and second World Wars and were given flats in Coronationville when they returned.

In terms of creative writing, however, it was tough at first to make the AI to produce insightful turns of phrase or images that weren’t conventional, cliché or down-right cringe-worthy. Asking the AI to just “respond” to a short fictional prompt did not give it enough to go on; it ended up producing writing similar to a greeting card. Often, what made the writing so bad was that it explained too much; it didn’t leave room in the writing for ambiguity. So, I then asked the AI to write an ambiguous, poetic line about Coronationville jazz. To which it responded: *Coronationville jazz hums like smoke in the twilight, where memories dance between the notes, neither fading nor staying still*. The responses were becoming better, so I decided to be more specific with the writing.

I asked the AI to respond to sections of work that I had already written with follow-up flash fiction pieces or poetic meditations in the style of various writers: Ocean Vuong, Danez Smith, Zadie Smith, William Blake, JM Coetzee, Damon Galgut, Jane Hirshfield, Tracy K Smith, Joy Harjo, George Sanders, Lydia Davis, Ada Limon, Nathasha Tretheway, Zakes Mda, Arundhati Roy and others. I realised that, with some of the writing styles, the AI came up with surprising turns of phrase and images that I could use and edit to fit into the piece. The writers used in my creative piece are: William Blake, Zadie Smith, JM Coetzee, Samanta Schweblin, Lydia Davis, George Saunders and Jane Hirshfield. In each section of my creative piece, the entries typically begin with my own writing and then draw from fragments of AI’s responses. I include a short but not comprehensive appendix of some phrases and images produced by the AI at the end of this reflection.

My process gradually evolved as follows. I would first write something, then paste it into the AI and ask it to “respond to the following prompt in the style of...”. If the first response didn’t produce interesting language I’d continue trying different styles.

Once finding a response that seemed interesting enough, I'd copy this into another document and edit the writing down to let it fit seamlessly with my own style and vision. Quite often the AI seemed to explain too much, not lingering in the unsaid; nor was it aware, it seemed, of how pace and rhythm affect the experience of a work. Perhaps, an AI needs to be told what kind of pace or rhythm one requires. Specificity, it appears, is king. Nevertheless, each AI response needed to be edited in order to fit into my piece.

This experience taught me that AI systems like ChatGPT are useful for a creative writer in the sense that they are good mining tools. They allow you to "mine" language for interesting phrases, words and facts about historical figures, settings and the like. But, like all ore brought up from the earth's crust - or, in this case, from the miasma of the world-wide-web - the language needs to be refined and chiselled to fit the writer's purposes. Notably, I do think that this exercise of cycling through different prominent writer's styles may not provide the author with fully-fledged sentences to straight copy-and-paste, but it does show the author underexplored aspects of their work which, once illuminated, the author can then discard the AI's response and provide their own. More often than not, the AI revealed a connection in my work that I hadn't considered before, and I didn't so much as copy its response as provide my own take on the connection that it had revealed.

I also discovered that AI was adept at analysing my creative writing, telling me about my style and giving suggestions on how to improve and which authors I should read that would improve my writing. While this information was intriguing, it really hit home when, while working on a separate story for an upcoming anthology, I was asked by an editor to include more of a "forward-moving narrative" in my short story. Intrigued to see if the AI had any thoughts on this particular story, I submitted a part of the story to ChatGPT and asked for its opinion. Quite astonishingly, the AI responded along similar lines as the human editor. My story needed more of a forward-moving narrative. I realised that AI systems could be useful for authors to cover their blind spots, so to speak; to enter a space of self-critique that may prove useful for the author. This does not mean that the AI should have the final word on what the strengths and weaknesses of

a piece are, but it does mean that, at the very least, AI provides another, if robotic, voice in the writing room.

I am cautious, though, of the effects that AI may have on creative writers just starting out on their journeys. There is the danger that it can become a crutch, that it may deaden the writerly sensibility of keen observation or that its closed data sets – which it draws from to provide the various writer styles – may inadvertently establish a closed loop for the future of creative writing, in which no new style, poetic syntax or critical innovation may enter the fray. Humans, after all, have the propensity to produce the “new” – the unthought thought or unfelt feeling. AI takes from other human writers and, therefore, has no inherent style of its own. I would not advise a beginning writer to use AI. There is something to be said about first developing a critical reading and writing practice where one can edit their own work and the work of others, intuiting creative and critical connections between sensory details, ideas and form. This process of development may be derailed for young writers who end up habitually deferring to AI without struggling through language themselves, testing their mettle against the blank page.

Appendix of sections, phrases or images derived from ChatGPT

(some of these lines were edited before appearing in the final piece)

William Blake

“Is this what empire tastes like?”

“Sweetness derived from the scent”

“mixed with gunpowder and trumpets?”

“A coronation song, played between The King’s voice—
stammering—and the cracked unkept”

Zadie Smith

“the breath before the 1910 stammer that stretches into
history.”

“Coronationville emerges in the silence left, soft as bone, still
settling into”

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“three continents pulse are sucked up into *Coloured*—a word
jagged enough to cut, containing multitudes,”
“fork suspended in mid-air”

JM Coetzee

“You breathe in the shape of a song already written,
And though you might wish to soar, to rise beyond the names,
strings pulse against you.”

Lydia Davis

“I imagine the shrapnel exchanged”
“learned to fix things: leaky faucets, a broken chair leg, the
quiet cracks in the walls.”

George Saunders

“the car’s engine ticking”

Samanta Schweblin

“each slender column of smoke fending”
“grime they accumulate”
“The last pot clinks against the sink”

Jane Hirshfield

The final poem has most of its connective tissue drawn from AI’s performance of Jane Hirshfield’s style of writing. I edited out the phrases and images that didn’t work for me and grounded the poem more in the specificities of place.

About the Contributors

Zaheera Jina Asvat's research explores identity, agency, and belonging in education and society. Her work with Muslim women in South Africa amplifies marginalised voices through storytelling, as seen in *Riding the Samoosa Express* (2014), *Saffron* (2017), and her award-winning fiction *Tears of the Weaver* (2023). She also investigates teacher identity in mathematics education, focusing on how belonging and confidence influence teaching practices and educational outcomes.

Nathi Dass is a writer and a PhD candidate at the University of Johannesburg (god-willing). A transplant who has since become furniture at the English Department. He calls his brand of analysis intersectional postmodernism because he is interested in the stories which we are told and tell ourselves as well as where and why those stories fail. Similarly, the fiction and poetry that he writes attempts to navigate the spaces where our bodies, minds and hearts fill and more interestingly, where they cannot for whatever reason.

Phillippa Yaa de Villiers lectures Creative Writing at Wits University, Johannesburg, and is a Distinguished Alumnus of Rhodes University Journalism and Media Studies (2022). An actor and teacher at the Market Theatre Laboratory, she later worked as a television screenwriter for ten years. She wrote *Taller than buildings* (2006), *The everyday wife* (2010) and *ice-cream headache in my bone* (2017). She co-edited *The Poems of Keorapetse Kgotsile 1969–2018* (2023). Her fiction and poems appear in *New Daughters of Africa* (2019), *Yellow Means Stay* (2019) *Relations* (2023) amongst many others, including the journals *Botsotso*, *Stanzas* and *New Coin*. Her scholarly work has appeared in *Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on South African Poets* (2019), *Notes from the Body: Health, Illness, Trauma* (2023) and *The Creative Arts: On Practice, Making and Meaning* (2024). Email: phillippayaa@gmail.com or Phillippa.deVilliers@wits.ac.za

Nadine Ellinger (she/her) is a PhD student and research assistant at the University of Augsburg, Germany, where she teaches in the field of Anglophone Literatures and Cultural Studies with a focus

on African and African diasporic fiction and film. Her PhD project, with the working title *Be(com)ing Mothers: Complicating Motherly Figures in African(a) Fiction*, explores the ambivalences and complexities of motherly figures and discourses on motherhood as represented in contemporary works by African and African diasporic writers, specifically interrogating transnational currents and entanglements.

Wandile Ganya is a published poet with his first collection of poems titled, *Divine Interspace*, published in 2015 and his second, *A Dark Wood: Poetical Sketches on Life & Being in the World*, in 2017. His debut novel titled, *The Shame of Imperfection*, was published in 2024. He is a specialist physician and part-time lecturer at Stellenbosch University where he teaches African philosophy and bioethics.

Bokang Maragelo is a multifaceted creative and IT professional making an impact in both the literary and technology spaces. Born in Rustenburg and now based in Johannesburg, Bokang is the acclaimed author of two successful poetry and prose collections, *Things The Fire Left Behind* and *A Beautiful Sunday*. His work delves into themes of love, loss, and resilience, earning him recognition as a powerful voice in contemporary African literature. Beyond his literary achievements, Bokang is an experienced IT manager in the health technology sector, specialising in software quality assurance. His expertise ensures the seamless performance of critical digital healthcare solutions, reflecting his dedication to both precision and innovation. A storyteller at heart and a strategist by profession, Bokang Maragelo continues to inspire across industries – bridging the worlds of art and technology with passion and purpose.

Thobekile Masombuka is a lecturer at the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) English Department. She has an MA degree in Creative Writing from Rhodes University, and her PhD thesis (obtained from UJ) explores religious syncretism in contemporary Nigerian novels.

Nedine Moonsamy is an associate professor in the English department at the University of Johannesburg. She is currently writing a monograph on contemporary South African Fiction and otherwise conducts research on science fiction in Africa. Her debut

novel, *The Unfamous Five* (Modjaji Books, 2019) was shortlisted for the HSS Fiction Award (2021), and her poetry was shortlisted for the inaugural *New Contrast* National Poetry Award (2021).

Zodwa Mtirara is a South African writer, poet, and musician from Mthatha, where her early exposure to storytelling, traditional music, and dance fostered her love for the arts. She later moved to the Vaal and pursued education in music, literature, and project management. She holds a Music Education diploma from Nelson Mandela University, a Project Management certificate from Leap Institute, and a bilingual (isiXhosa and English) MA in Creative Writing from Rhodes University, where her thesis critiques the portrayal of women in isiXhosa and English literature and challenges gender politics within isiXhosa culture and Christianity. Mtirara's self-published thesis, *Ingqumbo Yomthondo Kukuzika Kohlanga-Thorn of the Rose*, is referenced in academic settings and has been included in the University of KwaZulu-Natal's English Literature and University of Cape Town's African Languages and Literatures curricula. She co-authored the children's series *uTippie* endorsed by the Eastern Cape Department of Education, and has translated and edited various literary works. Her poetry has been featured in *New Coin* and *Tyhini* journals, and she contributed to a Scottish poetry series, *A Pestilence of Poems*. Currently, she is working on her second poetry collection, an essay in Dr Makhosazana Xaba's forthcoming second edition anthology *Our Words, Our Worlds*, and is a PhD candidate at University of Cape Town. In addition, she freelances as a translator, transcriber, proofreader, adjudicator, and facilitator.

Duduzile Ndlovu has been a postdoctoral fellow with ACMS. Her research interests include exploring arts-based research methods as a form of decolonising knowledge production; interrogating intersectionality through narrative work; and analysing the gendered politics of memory. Since March 2018, she has been developing this research agenda through a Newton Advanced Fellowship attached to the University of Edinburgh, Centre for African Studies (CAS) (2018–2020). Dudu completed her PhD at the University of the Witwatersrand focusing on Zimbabwean migrants' use of art (poetry, music, drama, film) to

navigate precarious lives; speak about violence – including the Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe and xenophobia in South Africa, and memorialise those events.

Jarred Thompson is a literary and cultural studies researcher and lecturer based at the University of Pretoria. He is winner of the UJ Debut Fiction Prize for his novel *The Institute for Creative Dying*. He is also the winner of the 2025 Short.Sharp.Stories anthology award for his story *The Apophatic Mountain*. You can find him on Instagram (@poetic_impulse) and on X (@JarredJThompson).



UJ Press

In September 2024, a handful of novelists, poets, academics, and scholars gathered at the Johannesburg Institute of Advanced Study (JIAS) to ponder the implications of artificial intelligence for creative writing. What you hold in your hand is a collection of creative and reflective work that explores each writer's perspective on writing with and against generative AI. The creative work is categorised into prose and poetry, which are thematically connected by unique perspectives of Johannesburg. Each creative piece is accompanied by the writer's reflection on their process of writing with or against AI, and their impression about its impact on creativity.

This anthology is the first of its kind in South Africa, and we hope that it will cultivate and contribute to important and contentious conversations about the future of critical and creative skills in an aggressively digital age.

EDITORS

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