

**2025**

## ESSAYS/ OPINION PIECES

### 1ST PLACE

#### **Roots and routers: from a rural fire to digital dreams**

***Eyethu Ngcobo***

“In a world where routers hum besides rural fires, I have learned to dream in two languages, one spoken by my ancestors and one coded into the future” - tracing the threads of identity, technology, and transformation in South Africa. In every generation, there are waves - some we ride, some we are caught in, and others we create. In South Africa, a country defined by movement, resistance, resilience, and innovation, these waves come in many forms: oceans that connect and divide us, technologies that uplift or isolate, migrations that build families or fracture them, and emotions that flood or heal. This is a story of waves, of how they shape who we were, who we are, and who we are becoming.

My grandmother tells stories of the sea like it's a living relative. “The ocean never forgets,” she once told me, her eyes fixed on the horizon beyond Durban's beaches. She

spoke of her father, a fisherman from the Indian community, who would disappear into the foggy morning with nothing but a wooden boat, a net, and a prayer. The Indian Ocean wasn't just water - it was a road, a boundary, a giver, and sometimes a taker.

For centuries, the Indian Ocean has connected Durban to places far beyond its shores - India, Mozambique, Oman - carrying spices, languages, and people. But the ocean also remembers the indentured labourers brought here under false promises, their sweat soaking the sugarcane fields. It remembers the stories of local Zulu fishers who navigated its moods with instinct and song.

These narratives, etched in waves, are part of the city's heartbeat. To walk on the beach is to tread on memories.

When I was in Grade 3, our classroom had one broken chalkboard and a single textbook shared by four students. Now, as a university student, I code on a laptop while watching tutorials from creators in Nairobi, Berlin, and New York. The shift has been tidal.

Technology has transformed how we learn, express, and connect. It has opened worlds for people like me. My cousin, who couldn't afford to study further, started a TikTok channel teaching isiZulu phrases. He now makes more money than most graduates. What began as a side hobby became a cultural bridge and a business.

On the other hand, my friend from a rural town still struggles with load shedding and patchy internet, reminding me that technological waves don't crash evenly. The digital device is a real fault line in our society. Still, we are witnessing a renaissance. Young South Africans are coding apps that serve local needs, filming movies with smartphones, and turning hashtags into movements. The digital world has not just changed what we do - it has changed who we can be.

Still, not all change is easy. I remember the day my father left for Johannesburg to find work. I was 10, and I watched him walk toward the bus with a plastic bag full of food and a heart full of hope. We became one of many families shaped by economic migration. South Africa's story is one of constant movement - across borders, between provinces, and within cities. Some movements are forced, like those who fled violence in the townships during the 1980s. Others are chosen, like students moving to study in new provinces, carrying their dialects, foods, and dreams with them.

Today, migration looks different. Zimbabweans, Congolese, Malawians, and others build new lives in Durban and Cape Town. Yet, xenophobia shows that old fears still run deep. "A person is a person through other people", goes the African proverb *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* but the idea is challenged daily when fear outweighs empathy. Migration

brings richness but also tension. Still, in taxis and classrooms, on factory floors and in WhatsApp groups, these new waves are shaping a shared South African future.

We often talk about the big events - protests, elections, innovations - but what about the private waves? The emotional tides that rise quietly, often unnoticed? When I failed two modules in my first semester, shame drowned me. I didn't tell anyone, too scared they'd think I wasn't smart enough. Depression is a tide that sneaks in with whispers and lingers like fog. "You can't pour from an empty cup", my aunty once told me that. It took me a long time to understand what that really meant. But so is healing. I met a therapist on campus who told me, "You are allowed to struggle. But you're also allowed to survive". That sentence stayed with me. Sometimes survival is quiet, getting out of bed, showing up, forgiving yourself.

Love, grief, anxiety, joy - all these are waves. Some come in gentle ripples, others crash without warning. And yet, we learn to swim. We learn to speak our truth, write our pain, dance our joy, and breathe through panic. Our inner oceans matter as much as the ones we see.

Every December, we go back to the rural village for a family reunion. It's a place with goats, open fires, and uncles who tell the same jokes every year. But it's also where culture breathes - where children learn isiZulu proverbs and young

women wear traditional beadwork proudly. Elders sit under trees and tell stories, and time feels slower, fuller, more rooted.

Yet, I'm also a child of Netflix and K-pop. I know how to cook umngqusho, but I also crave ramen. I can sing Brenda Fassie and Beyoncé in the same playlist. Some say this dilutes culture. I say it expands it. Cultural waves don't end; they echo. From the rhythms of maskandi to the poetry of spoken word in Soweto clubs, our culture is not disappearing—it's evolving. The youth are not forgetting their roots; they're remixing them. As the late poet Keorapeste Kgosistile once said, "If I am who you say I am, then you are not who you think you are either".

South Africa's story is built on waves of political resistance - from 1976 Soweto to the 1994 ballot box. Each wave has brought change, but each has also shown us how much remains broken. Gender-based violence, unemployment, inequality - these are the tides we must still confront. But change is not just in protest. It's in youth starting cooperatives, artists reclaiming space, and women leading community safety groups. The wave is coming - it always is. The question is: will we rise with it?

There's an old man who sells books at North Beach in Durban. His name is Mr. Dube, and he used to be a journalist during apartheid. He once told me about stories that were

never published - about women who ran safe houses, kids who smuggled letters in pencil cases, and songs that were banned. "Not everything that mattered made it to the news", he said. "But it still mattered"

These are the hidden frequencies - voices that never made headlines, but shaped the world. Like the Muslim women who ran soup kitchens during the AIDS crisis. Or the sangomas who preserved indigenous knowledge when it was outlawed. Or the LGBTQ+ youth whose identities were erased from textbooks. Our cities are full of untold stories. Sometimes, all it takes is listening. Sometimes the quietest stories are the most powerful ones.

When my friend Amida started a community garden during the Covid-19 lockdown, we all thought it was cute. Now, that garden feeds 30 families. One seed, one spade, one idea - rippling outward. Change doesn't always come with loud slogans. Sometimes, it's a girl tutoring a younger student. A boy choosing not to bully someone. A student donating old textbooks. These small acts become legacies. They shape cultures of care, of accountability, of growth.

In South Africa, where the waves can feel overwhelming, we must never forget the power of ripples. They remind us that we all have a role, no matter how small. We are shaped by waves - of history, culture, migration, emotion, and innovation. They come and go, but they always leave something behind: a changed shoreline, a new understanding, a scar, a story.

As a young South African, I am learning to ride the waves. To listen to the echoes of the past, feel the currents of the present, and imagine the tides to come. Some waves we inherit, others we create. But all of them, together, tell the story of who we are.

We are not drowning. We are transforming.

## 2ND PLACE

**Siyabonga Nqubuka**

***Waves: Stories of Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow***

Whether it is the rhythm of the Indian ocean that is constantly changing or the swings of human life, waves are ever-present in our lives in the literal and metaphorical meaning of the word. Waves are more than elements of nature in the city of Durban which is embraced by the Indian Ocean, they are narrative tellers. They hold the memories of the past, the heartbeat of progress, the movement of the masses and the uproar of human feelings. They put into perspective that nothing can exist in a vacuum, that every action has massive ramifications, and that neither the past, nor present, nor the future actually exist; there is only time.

Ocean narratives: Durban maritime soul

The Indian Ocean does not only kiss Durban shores -it cheers the identity of the city. Since the early trade routes which introduced spices, textiles and ideas in the distant parts of the globe to the busy seaports there today, the ocean has become a highway of interaction. Townships that dot the coast have endured, advanced and developed, both with the blessings and wrath of the sea. Fishermen in the area refer to the sea and consider it a living being, on which their livelihoods depend, as well as cultural festivals of

marine life, coastal practices and roots tied to the sea. The seas beneath the surface have tales of survival, death, and endurance, as the coral reefs and shipwrecks give hidden secrets awaiting to be found. The ocean is humbling, a symbol of continuity, patience, and respect; these themes and sentiments bring resonances through Durban in all its cultural variety.

Technological waves: the impetus of innovation

As the waves of the ocean created the coast, technological innovation waves change society. South Africa, and Durban in particular, is experiencing an emergence of new digital territories, amongst which are mobile technologies transforming communication and online learning, for democratic access to education. These waves of technology do not only enable us to live differently, but they also modify how we think, create and relate. The topics covered in our lectures include the role of social media to give voice to those that have previously been ignored, how artificial intelligence threatens to disrupt established labour systems, and how creative industries turn to technology to ensure their cultures survive and reach vast new markets. However, each innovation has a dual side: it can unite or separate, it all depends on how it is more or less accessible, how it is adapted. In this respect, technology waves of ingenuity are also a kind of mirror reflecting human achievement and at the same time inequality at its root.

### Waves of migration: movement and change

Waves are also metaphorical references to the migratory movement of people- the pull and push of migration. The history of South Africa is characterized by the movement of people: involuntary apartheid removals, the influx of indentured workers of Indian origin and current trans-national and intra-national migration. Durban is a city of mobility, of movement and change manifested in the neighbourhoods where individuals of various languages and cultures live side-by-side. The act of migration is both challenging and an opportunity and imparts on citizens a hybridism of cultural border crossing. These waves are never simple; they change/re-modify communities, alter the economy and re-define social norms. The strength of this flow, however, is resilience: how people bring their pasts with them into a new world and in turn contribute to a story that is shared across generations and around the globe.

### Emotional tides: the human experience

Outside geography and technology, there is the topic of waves that is extremely personal. The relations, dreams and changes are characterised by emotional tides. Life in Durban is like the waves of the ocean, the highs like the high tides and the lows or grief and loss like the low tide. With deeply emotional personal stories of love, resilience, trauma, with each experience that is both unique and universal. These tides serve as a reminder that nothing is ever constant, that

each interesting emotion beats a distinctive imprint, and that often, one grows just because she/he hasn't cruised in calm waters.

Cultural Resonance: the ripples through the generations

Culture even flows like the waves. Zulu heritages, Indian ceremonies and modern art have a reputation of crossing over time thus affecting identity and cohesiveness. Those waves contain memory of all the ancestors and enable them to remain the same after changes that occurred within society. Cultural resonance could be seen in the markets, music and oral histories in Durban where the past is not passive, but hits against the contemporary world in the creation of new meanings and expression of the new. It is like a reminder which is to the effect that culture just like the sea cannot be contained but moves, changes and endures.

Waves of change and hidden frequencies

Durban has been the stage of societal actions, political shifts and people taking initiatives together. We witness history marred with examples such as, anti-apartheid riots, to current civic activism, which has demonstrated the power of communities in its efforts to cause change, and is one of the most important aspects in the future. These movements are in most instances the expressions of previously unknown frequencies- hitherto overlooked voices, suppressed groups, and forgotten history, and this history must be held up to the

light. There is also a slight and inaudible sound of women, immigrants, and the young who like to work on equity just below the radar screen of the social discourse that validates the fact that in actual sense, it is the deepest ripple with which they create just beneath the water, that is not obvious, but the catalyst of change.

Ripple effects: mountain-sized impact, molehill-sized actions  
Waves also make us remember that everything we are doing is not done in a vacuum. A single choice, a stone of good action or some brilliant thought could lead into ripples that will have some implication to the generations ahead. Such waves can be seen as the means through which any history of Durban, and its present-day culture was created: the investments of the early settlers, the protests of community leaders and the developments of artists are all merged to create the Durban that is in sight today. With such ripple effects, there is an impetus to be responsible, empathetic and forward looking, and it keeps us in mind that the smallest of efforts can make a difference, ultimately.

Conclusions: the waves of embrace

Both types of waves, literally speaking, and in the metaphorical sense, are factors of nature, which defines the character of human existence. They produce landforms, societies, feelings and chronologies. Being a city on the Indian Ocean itself, Durban is an illustration of how powerful and complex the waves which can be characterised as oceanic,

technological, migratory, emotional, cultural and social are. It is through tracing, thinking and living in these waves, that we not only become cognizant of the beat of the past and present, but find that our life is used to producing the wave of the future. History clears its way amid the raging of the waves, and we can extract the teachings and experiences that the waves carry in themselves and embark in this world of learning, openness and connections that is not time bound.

### 3RD PLACE

#### **Cultural waves Cultural Resonance**

***Lucky Mabaka***

Culture illuminates the way for those who are here and will lead the way for those who will come. It becomes clear that language is not simply a means of communication; it works as a repository for our ancestors' memories, wisdom, and rhythms of life, our identity, our heritage. A library burns when a language dies. Railways follow the coast of South Africa where the Indian Ocean lapped and dipped into Durban's sea ports, basking in assorted tongues – a wave rolling through time. These waves have shaped our narratives: the waves of struggle, migration, and hope. Unfortunately, that wave has been squelched by social norms, the English language, and colonialism. Because when language is muted, a part of us is extinguished.

This essay explores the cultural wave and contends that language serves as a trigger for the ripple effect of cultural practices and identity through generations in South Africa. It will demonstrate the interruptions that have happened to bring about that decline in indigenous languages, the relevance of language as a cultural repository, and the liberation struggle, historical facts aside, the revival of their strength. To protect our language is to protect the memory

ocean that sustains our identity as citizens in South Africa.

### Importance of language

Language is a home we return to when we need a refresher of who we are and what our identity is. A Setswana proverb goes, “Motho ke motho ka batho.” There’s a similar one in isiZulu, “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” that isn’t fully translatable to English without losing its meaning. The Setswana saying “Mafoko a matlhong” has become popular with modern society to acknowledge the power of our speech and its long-lasting effects. These proverbs are not mere words; they are semiotic codings, nursing the ages of wisdom into one phrase. They are tidal pools of stories, passed down from grandparents to future generations of grandchildren, shaping how communities understand their world.

When a grandmother shares a Venda folktale about the powerful lion, or a grandfather recites an isiZulu poem to honour and praise their ancestors, they are doing so much more than simply keeping the children entertained. They are conveying morals, values, and history that can never be taught from a textbook. This is cultural resonance at its very best. But this resonance doesn’t hold water for a lot of South Africans today. Words may be recalled only in droplets, or not at all, submerged by the tides of English. You could say it’s as though that ocean of memory has receded, leaving a dry, barren expanse of sand where once rich waters flowed.

### The decline of indigenous languages

The demise of indigenous languages was not inevitable. It was the product of colonialism and apartheid, whose purpose was to control not only bodies and land but also language and thought. Mission schools often discouraged or banned the use of African languages, and advocacy took place for English or Afrikaans to be used as the language of instruction. Classroom use of isiZulu or isiXhosa could result in punishment. The subtext was clear: indigenous languages were inferior, and not to be used in intellectual or professional contexts. We thank gentlemen such as Sir Steve Biko and Sir Chris Hani, who sacrificed their lives for black excellence.

The legacy of this long-standing repression remains with us even today. Many parents choose to raise their children speaking English, believing it will offer more educational and occupational opportunities. In cities like Durban, Johannesburg, and Cape Town, English is being used as a medium of interaction for people from various linguistic backgrounds. As a result, children often do not speak their native languages fluently or feel embarrassed when they have difficulty doing so.

The pity of this disruption isn't just that words are being lost; it is also that cultural perspectives are being lost. Every language is like a new pair of spectacles through which you

can see the world. Take the isiZulu word ubuntu, whose meaning, a kind of interconnectedness that English can't quite capture in one word alone, you've doubtless heard. And the Tswana word seriti is equivalent to an individual's spiritual aura or essence, a concept English does not contain in one instance. When languages die out, it's not just that they lose some tools for looking at the world, and the philosophy and culture that came with it; future generations are also cut off from their ancestors.

This cultural amnesia is what the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o refers to as the "cultural bomb"; it wipes out language and memory intentionally through colonial actions. South Africa experienced this too. And the cultural bomb detonated here, too; its aftershocks resonate still among young people who struggle to pray or sing or share a story in their mother tongues.

### The Revolution

As with the ocean, language doesn't ever exactly vanish. That's even when the waves are pulling away, they're always coming back. Today, South Africa is in the midst of a revival of its indigenous languages, in both subtle and significant ways. The study of isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, and Setswana in schools is increasing. Blogs are stimulating research and creative writing in African languages by universities. It must be noted now that Dr Bodibadi Modungwa is the first person to ever receive a PhD in Setswana at Pretoria

University. While this cannot be measured, it confirms the extent of her language and culture, and it represents an enormous milestone in the history of indigenous African language development.

Meanwhile, in the digital realm, young creators are reclaiming their languages on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube: telling jokes, reciting poems, and acting out skits in isiZulu or isiXhosa; making them chic once more. Music, too, has been a centre of this linguistic renaissance. From the melancholic isiZulu of Maskandi songs to Amapiano tracks that are gaining a worldwide following, mixing local languages and beats, young people in the country show that language is alive. Each song is like a wave in that it washes culture up onto new shores, tying together old and new.

In your everyday lives, you can find it. In the markets of Durban, on township streets, in family WhatsApp chats, people are incorporating indigenous languages into their conversations, even if it's just a sprinkle here and there. A grandmother's isiXhosa blessing before dinner, a Setswana saying lazily tossed off in the middle of a conversation, or bits of isiZulu slipped into an English sentence: all these things are signs of cultural echo, reminders that the wave is coming back.

Why?

Why is this important? Some may argue that in a globalised world, English is all one needs. Yet this view is superficial, veiling the essence of cultural meaning. What is 'lost' with language are the particular vantage points that make up our languages. Without Setswana, with which we construct meaning there! How do you understand full botho? How can we admire the beauty of izibongo (praise poetry) that ebbs and flows like the rhythm of drums without isiZulu? And there is no way to understand the oral tradition of imbongi (the praise singer), whose function is not only artistic but deeply political, without isiXhosa.

Language is more than communication; it is a feeling of fellowship. When you hear your native language spoken in a crowd, it makes you feel recognised; that is something that speaks to our desire to not be lone operators. To lose it is to become a stranger in your own country. It is for this reason that it's critically important to revitalise and preserve indigenous languages; it's not only an academic project, but a spiritual and cultural necessity.

### Conclusion

Language is like a wave. It has encountered silence and suppression that have long been oppressed, defeated, but never annihilated. Each word spoken in isiZulu, Setswana, isiXhosa, or one of South Africa's indigenous languages is a ripple that keeps our memory alive. When we speak these languages, we're not only talking to one another; we can also

give voice above all to our ancestors. It is our generation's job to keep the wave moving. That means teaching our kids, telling our tales, singing our songs, and ensuring that English does not define us alone. It's about being comfortable in our multilingual South Africanness, which doesn't hold us back from engaging well and easily wherever we go in the world, but helps us keep one foot in our own household. In the end, speech is not unlike the deep sea of our identity. It holds our joy, our hopes and dreams, our sorrows, and answers. To mute it is to empty the ocean. Speaking lets the tide flow back in, carrying the echoes of culture throughout time. So let us swim, and breathe, as we move forward in time: whale-like minutes that don't linger only in the past, but well up to oxygenate our being, to remould itself into the present.

**POETRY****1ST PLACE****The breaking tide*****Luke Krishnan***

*Waves do not end at  
the shore. They return.*

This poem is an adaptation of a short-story that I was commended for, during my high school years. It is no experience of my own, but rather an empathetic perspective of South Africa.

Waves don't ask who stands in their path. They come.  
Some bring foam. Some bring blood.  
I was nine years old the night the ocean taught me fear.  
Driving along the coastline, the waves beside us whispered  
against the shore. Blue lights arose in hindsight - violent and  
sharp  
Dad gripped the wheel tighter than usual. I felt the silence  
between his breaths. The siren swallowed our car whole.  
Hands - pale and commanding - tore him from the driver's  
seat

I remember rain, not because of the cold, but because it made it harder to see him. Every drop blurring my father's outline as he vanished into a storm of fists and boots.

From the window, the colours melted: black under white, red over black.

I stayed still like he told me to. Even when the screaming stopped. Even when the flashing lights faded. Even when it was just me and the rain

Some waves break bones. Others break silence.

Years passed. The ocean stayed. But I stopped visiting it.

its rhythm reminded me of a heartbeat that stopped that night. Apartheid ended...

But where does my pain go?

Where do I bury the screams that never made it to the headlines?

The new generation cannot be blamed for the sins of their fathers...

But where do I place my rage? What shore do I cast it toward?

Can injustice be dissolved like salt in water? Can blood be rinsed from memory?

Yesterday, I drowned. Today, I remember.

Tomorrow, I rise.

Waves are not only destruction. They're also movement.

And in 1994, a country exhaled. A tide of voices washed over ballots and borders. We didn't just end something - We began.

My father's name was never in textbooks. But I carry him forward.

His blood didn't just stain the road,  
it watered the roots of a new South Africa.  
Waves do not end at the shore. They return.

## 2ND PLACE

### When the machines began to dream

*Sibusiso Zakade*

A tide of glass and code rolls in,  
humming through copper veins beneath our streets.  
Once, we carved stories in red dust,  
now machines script our memories,  
their circuits dreaming louder than drums.

Wi-Fi winds sweep across township rooftops,  
carrying laughter and sorrow in emojis,  
while AI tongues translate our voices,  
turning whispered prayers into global echoes,  
and lullabies into livestreams.

AI eyes scan the horizon of our hopes,  
predicting tomorrow in binary whispers.  
It translates our tongues,  
counts our heartbeats in data streams,  
and teaches us truths we never asked to know.

Children scroll galaxies in their palms,  
elders seek wisdom in electric oracles,  
and the village fire burns inside glowing screens.

The classroom is a cloud now, teachers are voices of code,  
and the future blooms in algorithms  
that see further than our ancestors' stars.

We are a nation riding a storm of silicon,  
our laughter stored in endless archives,  
our pain compressed into silent servers,  
our dreams mirrored in machine made visions.

The ocean roars not of water, but of thought,  
an intelligence that learns and grows without rest.  
And still, we rise surfing these waves of light and steel,  
unshaken, unbroken, glowing.

**3RD PLACE****Emotional tides*****Asive Dlamini***

I am not always whole  
sometimes I am sea foam,  
scattered by winds I cannot name.  
Love came like high tide,  
rushing in with salt and sun,  
flooding the quiet corners of me  
I thought were long abandoned.

We danced in the shallows,  
barefoot and brave,  
until the moon pulled you away  
and I was left with driftwood memories  
and the ache of receding waves.

Grief is a slow current,  
it doesn't crash, it carves.  
It reshapes the shoreline of who I am  
without asking permission.

But healing,  
healing is the still water at dawn,  
where reflections return,

and I see myself again, not as I was,  
but as I've become.

Each tide teaches me:  
to let go,  
to hold gently, to rise again.

And so I do.

## SHORT STORIES

### 1ST PLACE

#### The Undertow

*Pikolomzi Qaba*

*A Personal Story*

The waves never lie. They crash, they recede, they return honest in their rhythm, predictable in their chaos. Unlike people. Unlike promises. Unlike the person I thought I knew better than the sound of my own heartbeat.

I'm writing this on the same bench where Imamazi and I used to watch the sunrise over Durban's Golden Mile, where we planned our future with the confidence of two twenty-somethings who believed love could conquer anything. The Indian Ocean stretches endlessly before me, its waves rolling in with the same persistence they've maintained for millennia. But I am not the same person who sat here two years ago, dreaming of weddings and baby names.

My name is Pikolomzi, famously known to my friends as Pkay, and I am learning to drown in silence.

### The rising tide

Love, I've learned, arrives like a spring tide, gradually, then all at once, lifting you higher than you ever imagined possible. Imamazi entered my life during my first year at university, a brilliant communications student with eyes that lit up when she talked about helping vulnerable children across KwaZulu-Natal through her own pocket and using communication to find sponsors for that work. She had this way of making even the most ordinary moments feel extraordinary. A simple walk to the campus library became an adventure. Sharing bunny chow on Florida Road became a feast fit for royalty.

"You know what I love about you, Pkay?" she said one evening as we sat on this very bench, the lighthouse beam sweeping across the water in its eternal rotation. "You're not afraid to show your feelings. You're going to change the world with that public relations degree and that big heart of yours."

I believed her. More importantly, I believed in us.

We moved in together after graduation, a small flat in Berea that overlooked the harbour. The walls were thin, the neighbours loud, but it was ours. I landed a position, while Imamazi was working in a retail store for a short period. Our schedules were demanding, but we made it work. We always made it work.

At least, I thought we did.

The storm

The signs were there, subtle as the shift in wind before a storm. Imamazi staying out later with her "girlfriends." Phone calls taken in the bathroom. A new perfume that made my stomach turn because it wasn't the scent I'd grown to associate with home. But love, especially when you're a man taught that showing doubt makes you weak, has a remarkable capacity for denial. I explained away each red flag, told myself that real men trust their women, that questioning her would make me controlling.

"You're being paranoid, baby," she'd say when I asked about the late nights. "The girls and I were just catching up. You know how it is."

But I didn't know how it was. I only knew that something fundamental had shifted and admitting it out loud felt like admitting failure.

The truth crashed over me like a rogue wave on a calm day. I came home early from a site inspection, excited to surprise her with tickets to see Black Coffee perform at the stadium. The sound of laughter from our bedroom stopped me cold. Not her laughter alone, but his too- a laugh I recognised because it belonged to X, her closest friend apparently. I

stood in that narrow hallway for what felt like hours but was probably only minutes, listening to the soundtrack of my world collapsing. The waves outside our window continued their ancient rhythm, indifferent to the tsunami tearing through my chest.

The silence of drowning

What they don't tell you about betrayal especially when you're a man is that society hands you a script for how to respond. You're supposed to get angry. Fight for your woman. Confront the other man. Show dominance. What they don't prepare you for is the hollow ache that makes you feel like you're suffocating even though your lungs are working perfectly.

I left that day without confronting them, walking the streets of Durban like a ghost until I found myself here, on this bench, watching the sun set over the water. The waves seemed to mock me with their consistency. How dare they maintain their rhythm when mine had been shattered?

When I finally told my close friend, his response was predictable: "Molo, Pkay. These things happen. Get another woman. Show her what she lost."

My other friend laughed it off: "Haibo, Pkay! There are plenty of fish in the sea. Don't be soft about it."

Even my cousin, usually the nurturing one, seemed uncomfortable with my pain: "Men don't cry over women. You'll find someone better."

But what happens when you can't simply "get another woman"? What happens when the person you trusted most in the world shatters your ability to trust anyone, including yourself? What happens when you're drowning in plain sight, but everyone expects you to swim like nothing happened?

The statistics of silent suffering

I started researching, desperate to understand if what I was feeling was normal. The numbers terrified me. In South Africa, suicide rates among young men are climbing. We lose bright minds like Riky Rick, the rapper who seemed to have everything but couldn't escape the darkness that consumed him in 2022. Internationally, the statistics are equally stark with men like Robin Williams, who made the world laugh while dying inside, or Chester Bennington of Linkin Park, whose music spoke to millions of broken souls before he succumbed to his own demons in 2017.

Closer to home, I learned about the rising rates of male suicide across Africa, where traditional masculinity often becomes a death sentence for those struggling with mental health. Even global figures like Anthony Bourdain, who seemed to live the dream life of travel and adventure, couldn't escape the undertow of depression that claimed

him in 2018. On the other hand, the football world mourned the loss of German goalkeeper Robert Enke in 2009, who battled depression silently while the world expected him to be unbreakable.

These weren't weak men. They were human beings crushed under the weight of expectations that men don't break, don't hurt, don't need help.

I wasn't suicidal, but I understood the silence that kills. The expectation that men should bounce back, that heartbreak is temporary, that showing vulnerability is weakness. I was expected to be angry, not devastated. To seek revenge, not healing. To move on, not process.

#### Learning to surface

Through seeking help all the people around me became unexpected teachers during those dark months. Young apprentices, some not much older than teenagers, carried burdens that would crush most adults. Seventeen-year-old Kamva, whose father had abandoned the family when he came out as gay, taught me that survival isn't about meeting society's expectations of manhood; it's about defining your own version of strength.

"Pkay," he said one afternoon as we worked on a foundation, "my uncles say I'm not a real man because I don't like girls. But I work harder than any of them. I send money home to my mama. I protect my little sister. What makes a man real?"

His question haunted me for weeks. What did make a man real? Was it the ability to suppress emotion? To pretend betrayal didn't cut to the bone? To smile through the pain because admitting hurt somehow diminished my masculinity?

The turning tide

Recovery, I discovered, isn't linear especially when you're constantly told that recovery shouldn't be necessary in the first place. Some days I felt strong, capable of building a new life from the ruins of the old one. Other days, well-meaning friends would ask why I wasn't "over it yet," as if heartbreak operated on a masculine timeline that I'd somehow missed.

But slowly, gradually, like the patient work of waves reshaping a coastline, I began to change. The pain that had initially felt like drowning transformed into something else not the absence of hurt, but the presence of hard-won wisdom. I started seeing a therapist, who specialised in helping men navigate emotional trauma.

"You're treating her betrayal like a verdict on your manhood," he said during one session. "But her actions tell her story, not yours. Your worth isn't determined by your ability to remain unaffected by pain."

For the first time in months, I cried in front of another person. The therapist didn't tell me to man up. He handed me tissues and told me that tears were proof of my humanity, not evidence of weakness.

### New foundations

A year and a half after that devastating afternoon, I was offered a training position with an NGO focusing on men's mental health awareness on a part time basis. The irony wasn't lost on me - the breakdown that had nearly destroyed me became the foundation for work that might save other men from similar devastation.

I moved to a new flat, this one in Morningside with a view of the Berea Ridge rather than the harbour. I needed distance from the ocean for a while, space to rebuild without the constant reminder of what had been washed away. But eventually, I found myself drawn back to the water, to this bench, to the waves that had witnessed both my breaking and my rebuilding.

That's when I met Mamazi<sup>2</sup>.

She wasn't a dramatic entrance, no love-at-first-sight moment that would make for good storytelling. Just a quiet woman reading on the next bench over, who offered me half her sandwich when my stomach growled loudly enough to disturb the seagulls. We started talking about the book she was reading, a collection of poetry by Maya Angelou and discovered we shared a passion for breaking down societal barriers and terrible jokes.

"I should warn you," I told her on our third coffee date, "I have trust issues. And I cry during movies. And I talk about feelings more than most women expect from men."

She smiled, the kind of smile that reaches the eyes and makes you believe in second chances. "I should warn you that I snore, I'm obsessed with rugby, and I once dated a man who thought crying was attractive. You're in good company."

The new normal

Mamazi<sup>2</sup> and I have been together for three years now. It's different from what I had with Imamazi I, less desperate, more grounded. We don't avoid difficult conversations because they might make me seem "unmanly." We take things one wave at a time, building trust like careful architects rather than rushing to completion like eager children.

Sometimes she asks me about my journey, about the depression that nearly swallowed me whole, about the therapy that saved my life. She doesn't flinch when I tell her about the nights I considered joining the statistics, about the shame I felt for feeling anything at all.

"The bravest men I know," she says, "are the ones who admit when they're drowning."

Lessons from the tide

Betrayal, I've learned, is a peculiar teacher especially for men raised to believe we're immune to its lessons. Harsh and

unforgiving, but thorough in its instruction. It taught me that masculinity without emotional honesty is just elaborate pretending. That strength includes the ability to be vulnerable. That my heart is more resilient than society taught me to believe, capable of breaking completely and still finding ways to beat.

The young men I work with now continue to astound me with their courage in admitting struggle. Sande, now nineteen and studying part-time while working construction, still checks on me when I seem overwhelmed by our workload. Last week, he told me he'd started seeing a counsellor about his family rejection.

"You showed me it's okay, Pkay," he explained. "Real men get help when they need it."

The rhythm continues

As I write these final words, the sun is setting over the Indian Ocean, painting the sky in shades of pink and gold that would make poets weep. A group of children are playing in the shallows nearby, shrieking with delight as each wave chases them up the beach. Among them, I notice several young boys, maybe seven or eight years old, who cry openly when the waves knock them down, then get up laughing and run back into the water.

No one tells them to toughen up. No one says boys don't cry. They're simply allowed to feel whatever the ocean brings them.

My phone buzzes with a text from Mamazi2: "Dinner at 7? I'm making my famous disaster pasta."

I smile, gathering my things from the bench. The waves will be here tomorrow, and the day after that, and long after I'm gone. But today, I have somewhere else to be. Someone who makes me laugh, who holds my hand during scary movies, who knows my story and loves me not despite my broken places, but because of how I've learned to heal.

The undertow that once threatened to drag me under has become the current that carries me forward. Not backward to who I was, not even to who I thought I wanted to be, but toward who I'm still becoming, a man who knows that strength isn't the absence of pain, but the courage to feel it fully and still choose to keep living.

Too many good men have been lost to the silence society demands of us. Ricky Rick. Robin Williams. Chester Bennington. Anthony Bourdain. Robert Enke. Each name represents countless others who drowned in plain sight while the world expected them to swim.

I refuse to be another statistic. I refuse to pretend that men don't break, don't hurt, don't need the same compassion we freely give to others.

The waves never lie. They crash, they recede, they return. And so, it turns out, do we, if we're brave enough to admit when we're drowning, and wise enough to accept the hands that reach out to pull us to shore.

## 2ND PLACE

### WAVES: Emotional Tides

*Kekeletso Nhlapho*

*Based on a true story*

For it ambushes one while dwelling in their still state of mind, where the happiness declared reflects the calmness that is felt inside. A still moment that remains prey to change. Change that I had regarded as unmerciful, unless it is a good one. The kind that disfigured a woman's life, reshaped it into something unfamiliar, something she least understood, and which completely stole her peace. Peace that came wrapped up in shame and made her out to be a social leper, for a baby was not conceived out of her own desired will.

Suddenly, eyes could speak louder than mouths. Streets had echoes of judgement at every corner, and the silence in the household concealed the rage her parents felt from their broken hearts. She had become an example, but the one not to follow. Overwhelmed as she was, it felt like the world had left its place and sat on her shoulders. The brutal reality she now had to face turned her dreams and goals into delusions. The universe seemed cruel to have set such a destination for her, and life was unkind to have accepted it.

The disbelief toward her new reality threw her into a hollow of thoughts, irrational and tangled, even she could not resolve them. And each time realisation hit her, she shed a tear. It felt like a dream she was impatiently waiting to wake up from, but the only time she truly woke up was when she was about to welcome a soul into her life. A son was born. One that her family had no history of. A pure soul that lit up a mother's weary spirit. A life that poured its bit of living into the lifelessness of a woman. A boy who gave her the chance to love shamelessly, by just existing.

It was truly a beautiful moment, bringing home the genesis of sons to follow. The silence in the household broke into scolding. His hands touched on everything, and his name would frequently fall on their tongues. Suddenly, everything became so interesting, and according to him, even the neighbours' cars needed some fixing. So, he would sneak his way underneath them to give them the fixing they clearly needed.

For a three-year-old, he had the most eidetic memory and would remember even the smallest detail about his day, so he would sometimes give vivid and captivating accounts of his day. He was the joy of the house, and replenished peace of his mother. She might have felt angry at the destiny that gave her a child at 18, but perhaps the universe knew better. That she had to understand the concept of true love through herself, though in a way that first seemed to be the worst.

Little did she know that her son was just a phase, like a clearing in a fog that appears when the sun shines through. A fleeting phase of love, hope and encouragement that became a memory carried behind a name. This was her first pregnancy, the one that taught her both the sweetness of love and the bitterness of loss. He was no more, that is what she was told, and what her eyes saw when the machines fell silent.

Seeing her son being deeply rooted in those machines felt so unnatural, especially with his eyes open. Her heart was heavy, so were her lips to utter a word. The strongest communication was between their eyes, with his always brimming with hope and encouragement, always bound with his identity. It felt like an assurance to his mother that he was going nowhere, yet that was the exact moment he left her. She could feel the lifeless beeping of the machine through her beating heart.

Doctors clung to his bed like thorns on a rose as they pushed her away from his bed and out of the room. Inaudible and blurry as everything was, coming her way was one doctor, and all she could see was mumbling, trying to explain the situation she already knew. It was a reality she denied accepting this time, the brute her heart could not bear. Like any other mother, she could not imagine losing her son. So, when she later began to see him again in her mind, it felt like snapping out of a *déjà vu* of loss, as though her heart insisted, he had returned.

Unlike the days when she was woken up by an alarm, her grief, heavy as the sea, began to paint visions for her, dreams so vivid they felt like life itself. She now imagined freely opening her eyes at the exact time he used to stir, as if to wake him for his little nightly pee. In her mind, she never missed a single part of his routine, from getting ready for daycare to eating, playing, and falling asleep. She replayed each detail with vigilance, making sure he did it all perfectly. A feeling of failure haunted her conscience, so she did everything she could, at least in her imagination, to extinguish that spark.

Although his rambunctious behaviour often got to her, the visions always carried his true nature. It would not have been a complete or true reflection of him without it. It was the signature of his presence. So, she would hear herself calling him to stop, even when he wasn't there. The sound of his name filled a void whose origin was untraceable, yet the void never closed; it leaked because it never felt enough. These nightly visitations were never flesh and blood, only memory and longing, but they went on until the night he decided not to visit anymore. She waited for him the following night, but one night became ten, then forever. That silence was when she fully knew: her child had truly died.

But her suffering did not end there. Children in the community, even those of her family, became thorns in her side. Their laughter pierced her like sharp glass, their play

sounded like mockery, and she found herself hating them for carrying what she could not keep. The pregnancies that followed, one after another, ended too soon. Each loss deepened the crack in her heart, and slowly bitterness began to grow where hope once lived. Her womb had become a grave, and her soul recoiled from the sight of life outside it. Hatred became her shield, though it was heavy and suffocating.

What had completed her had truly died, and with it a part of herself, her peace, her joy, and even her faith in her Creator. The fantasies she had clung to could no longer withstand the weight of reality. Pity grew in the eyes that met hers. The street corners, once filled with echoes of gossip, now fell into silence, as if they too felt her grief. Her loss had snatched the breath from her life and thrown her into a dark pit with walls too thick for her cries to escape. There she flailed, hopeless, until a hand of grace reached down.

She was not alone in her pain. Her Creator knew it, too. He brought her the gift of acceptance, though at first it came clothed in hurt. Grief crowned her like a king of misery, making her sorrow visible as if it were an age-old scar, tattooed into her being. Her questions multiplied endlessly, as though drawn from a bottomless well. Yet no one had answers, except the One who knew the time to reveal them. Her life had become a strange and bitter reality, too heavy to live alone. On the edge of losing herself, God caught her and

breathed life back into her. In the midst of her hurt, confusion, and permanent scars, His hand reached deep into her broken heart, piecing it together again. Pain that once threatened to define her turned into a testimony. Shame that once shadowed her transformed into the light of a conqueror.

And slowly, her hatred softened. The sound of children's voices no longer cut like knives; instead, it became a distant echo of what she once longed for. Where she once saw a threat, she began to see a possibility. Where she once saw a wound, she began to see healing. Her Creator was loosening the chains around her heart, preparing it for joy once more.

Her peace finally rested in its rightful place. She embraced her reality, but this time she did not walk alone; her hand was held. Though her questions were not directly answered, the void within her began to fill. Her life calmed, like gentle waves settling on the shore, and she could at last hear the whispers of her mind. At the perfect time, she gave birth again, to a son. One who carried on the rare family trait of bearing sons. With his birth, the broken part of herself that had died during her grief began to grow again. What seemed impossible through human eyes, God made possible. Not only did she bear this one son, but she was blessed with another, two beautiful children whose lives became the proof of her victory over storms. She named them in a way that declared His blessings and His holiness. Her life, once

crushed by storms, now flowed again with the rhythm of waves, yesterday's sorrow giving way to tomorrow's hope.

### 3RD PLACE

## The Moon Only Pulls So Far

*Andile Bhengu*

Part I: Yesterday – The rise

“The first time I heard her laugh, it tasted like salt-bright and fleeting, like a wave catching sunlight.” They never warn you that the hardest part of love is watching it vanish while you're still in its light.

He wasn't looking for anyone when she entered his life, yet she arrived like a quiet tide, rising steadily until he was knee-deep in a relationship he hadn't dared imagined. She was calm, soft-spoken and intelligent. She didn't need to raise her voice to be seen; she simply was herself. What started as casual chats quickly grew into late-night conversations, voice notes filled with warmth and inside jokes that stitched the two of them together.

Soon, he was timing his day around her replies, refreshing his messages with the giddy anticipation of someone rediscovering joy. Everything felt like the beginning of something special, like the shore bathed in early morning sun. He found himself eagerly waiting to hear her thoughts on music, life and the world. She softened him, shaping him into a man he never imagined he could be.

Her laugh was like light through a cracked door. That sound lingered long after their calls ended, echoing like a melody in his head.

There was a quiet grounding about her, a magnetic stillness. She didn't demand space; she invited it. With her, vulnerability came naturally. They shared fears and dreams as if sketching blueprints for the future. They stayed on the phone after everything was said, breaths overlapping in a silence that felt sacred.

One of his most treasured memories came after the academic year ended. He stayed in a university residence while she, not studying at the time, had been away for months. When his roommate left for the holidays, he invited her over and sneaked her in. Just like a scene from a cheesy campus film. They spent a week tucked away from the world. Days filled with video games, movies and endless talking. They danced in that cramped room to their favourite songs, offbeat, carefree and glowing. Time seemed to bend around them, granting them a perfect, brief eternity.

Then came his birthday, a day he'd never cared to celebrate. To him, it had always been another mark on the calendar. But not to her. She planned every detail with care, turning an ordinary day into something that felt like it was made just for him. She made him dress up, took him out to a fancy

restaurant and smiled at him like he was a marvel. At that restaurant, under soft lighting, they glowed - not just because they looked good together, but because they felt good together. She handed him a gift, but the real present was her presence, her effort and her love.

They took pictures that day, laughed until their cheeks ached, and came home late with their fingers entwined like a promise. For the first time, he felt celebrated, not by the world, but by someone who saw his worth before he did.

It was perfect. A memory suspended in warm saltwater, untouchable by time.

Part II: Today – The fall

But tides always shift.

What they had didn't collapse all at once. It eroded, slowly, like waves pulling away from the shore, inch by inch, until the sand was bare. At first, it was subtle: texts became shorter, silence became the new norm and warmth slowly faded with time. He told himself it was temporarily a passing wave. He clung to hope like driftwood, whispering to the tide instead of her. But tides, he learned, don't always return.

There was no explosion. No dramatic goodbye. Just the quiet retreat of something once vibrant. Morning texts arrived late, or not at all. Phone calls went unanswered. Conversations once rich became brittle. He began sending longer messages,

pouring his heart into every word, only to receive replies that shrank like low tides.

One evening, he couldn't take the silence anymore. He picked up the phone and called her.

It rang. Once. Twice. Then, she answered.

"Hey," she said, her voice distant. "I'm kind of busy right now... can we talk later?" "Yeah," he replied quietly.

But later never came.

That silence echoed louder than any argument. It was her answer without having to say it.

The end didn't break. It dissolved.

When his next birthday arrived, the silence was deafening. No message. No call. Not even a whisper. The phone stayed dark. The room stayed still. He didn't eat. Didn't move much. Just lay there, staring at the ceiling. Does she even remember? he wondered, and What if she doesn't?

It wasn't just her absence he mourned. It was the self he had become through her, the brighter version of himself, the one who smiled more, who believed more. With her, he had bloomed. Without her, he wilted. He had to grow used to waking up without reaching for the phone, how to laugh

without expecting an echo, how to exist without a shadow beside him.

Some days, anger replaced grief. Others, he felt hollow. He would scroll through old photos, drinking in a life that no longer belonged to him. Once, he even drafted a message: I miss you. His finger hovered over the send button. What's the point of casting words into an ocean that no longer answers? he asked himself, just before deleting it.

He thought healing would be a straight road. But instead, it curved and doubled back, like waves retracing the same shore. He wore a mask in front of friends, smiling, nodding, and then fell apart in private, cliffs crumbling beneath waves. He waited for closure that never came. No explanation. No goodbye. Just his own thoughts echoing where her voice used to be.

### Part III: Tomorrow – The healing

Healing didn't burst in like sunrise. It moved like water, receding, returning, never quite the same.

It arrived in small moments: the day he heard their favourite song and didn't wince. The morning, he walked past the restaurant they used to visit without looking in. Healing came in fragments, soft as shells. It wasn't loud. It was a daily promise, not to his heart, but to himself.

One evening, he found their old playlist, the one they curated together. His thumb hovered. He pressed play. He expected tears. Collapse. But the music washed over him gently. He listened. He remembered.

He smiled. Just enough to know, I'm okay.

He understood that not every ending is a failure. Some are transitions. People change like water, uncontainable, beautiful, ever flowing. Some loves are a season. A storm. A stillness. A tide.

He still carried her, not as a burden, but like salt in his skin. Still present, no longer painful. Her laugh, her kindness, that restaurant glow, and that week in res, they lived inside him like driftwood from a ship that once sailed proud and full.

But most importantly, he carried himself. The boy who once loved her still lived within him, but now he walked forward. He understood that some people are oceans, vast, breathtaking and impossible to hold.

And that was okay.

### ***A Letter Never Sent***

I hope you're well.

I hope your smile still finds you in quiet moments.

I hope you remember us - not with regret,

but with warmth we once shared.

Thank you for teaching me how to love with my whole chest  
and how to let go with grace.

Wherever the tide has taken you,  
I'm grateful we swam in the same ocean,  
even if only for a while.