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Segomotsi

Biographical note:

Eugen M. Bacon, MA, MSc, PhD, studied at Maritime Campus, University of Greenwich, less than two minutes' walk from The Royal Observatory of the Greenwich Meridian. A computer graduate mentally re-engineered into creative writing, Eugen has published over 100 short stories and creative articles. Her story 'A Puzzle Piece' was shortlisted in the Lightship Publishing (UK) international short story prize 2013 and is published in *Lightship Anthology 3*. 'Swimming with Daddy' was shortlisted in the Alan Marshall Short Story Award 2016. Eugen's creative work has appeared in *Meniscus*, *TEXT*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Antic Journal* and *New Writing*.

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Creative writing – Autobiography – HIV/AIDS – Trauma narrative – Grief

SEGOMOTSI – YOUR NAME means a comfort in Setswana. Few people here know you by that name; they call you Sienna McBrown, the Aussie you married.

It is years since you travelled home. Botswana will be a stranger, the village of Lejwana even more. But with your parents gone, and without your sister Mokgosi – that means call for help – what is left to call home?

A girl waits opposite you at the shrink's office. She flicks through pages of a brand new issue of *Women's Weekly*. She is chewing gum. Flick, chew chew. The receptionist ignores you both.

You consider the receptionist. Her face is sharp as a pin, her nose and ponytail equally harsh. Back home, you would chat to strangers like old friends; ask about their cows, their goats, their children. Here, folk don't do that.

The psychiatrist who retrieves you has dimples. His pensive face is complete with lines: forehead lines, crow's feet at the sidelines, Marionette lines run straight upwards from the corners of his mouth. His room is pristine, bland colours disallowed to touch your moods. His leather couch is familiar, wears an easy look like the coin-slotted massage sofa at the Jam Factory in South Yarra. Your settee smells of leather. Nothing like the dusky cowhide on Uncle Kopano's chairs in Lejwana, unbleached skin and hair that smell of wet mud. This leather is coffee coloured, café latte. You recline, face up to the bland ceiling.

'How are you?' Dr Putnam. His voice is bland. It matches the room.

'Cross,' you say.

'Why cross?'

'Work sucks. Been thinking to leave.'

Silence.

'Employee assistance program, three days bereavement, cards, flowers …' you say.

'I'm glad you took EAP – that's why you are here,' says Dr Putnam.

'Still sucks. Work. I was thinking to leave before ...' you choke.

He hands you a tissue.

A week.

'Surprised?' Dr Putnam. Sometimes he is like this, prods you with a question. 'Why so? You say she surprised you?'

'Mokgosi hurts more than when my mother died.' A tear brooks its way round your nose to the corner of your lips.

'How is that a surprise?'

'We weren't that close.'

A week.

‘Tell me how you feel today.’ Dr Putnam.

‘Far.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Too far to mourn.’

‘Why didn’t you go to Botswana when she was sick?’

‘Work, studies … stuff.’

‘How are you dealing with being far now?’

‘I sent money. Western Union. To help with the funeral.’

Silence.

‘But they didn’t need it. Took them a week, a whole week for Uncle Kopano to collect it. The chief is a friend of my family. He paid for everything: hospital bill, ivory-finish coffin. They didn’t need my money.’

‘How does that make you feel?’

‘What do you expect?’

Silence.

‘No Tobin Brothers Funeral services in Lejwana, you know. Nobody to wash her. Nobody saying to you: *How would you like to make your coffin look?* Or: *We'll send out the funeral notice to your friends*. It is the women who washed her, dressed her. Put lipstick on her face. Put eye shadow, angel face. Put her in a white dress with a shiny coat. No curls in her hair; they put a head-dress.’

Silence.

‘There were drums, huge drums, Uncle said. *Doomba-doo! Doomba-doo! Doodoomba-doo! Doo! Doo! Doodoodoo*! The whole village was together, they farewelled her like a queen. All of Lejwana at her doorstep. They sang, they danced, they drank. They feasted: platters of meat and rice, Chief Dikeledi paid for it. People ate fit to burst.’

Silence.

‘I feel rubbish.’

‘What do you regret the most?’ Dr Putnam says.

‘Being seven thousand miles from Mokgosi’s grave. Far, far from home … I didn’t even keep the Aussie.’ Your smile is cynical. ‘McBrown. The divorce was a slap in the face for him, fourth year of our marriage. No wonder he went mean after that, the slap still ringing.’

A week.

‘How are you today?’ Dr Putnam. He sits in a comfortable silence, palms flat, parallel on his thighs. Sometimes he sprawls his arms casually on each armrest.

‘Angry. ANGRY.’

‘Talk to it,’ says Dr Putnam. ‘Talk to your anger.’

‘Why don’t they call it what it is? What it is IT IS!’

‘Why don’t they call what?’

‘What it is IT IS she died of?’

‘What do you want to call it?’

‘Break the circle of silence. It’s not malaria. It’s not pneumonia. It’s not tuberculosis. It’s AIDS. AIDS. AIDS!’

A week.

‘What do you want to talk about today?’ Dr Putnam.

‘Like what?’

‘Tell me anything.’

‘I have polycystic ovaries.’

Silence.

‘Tia was a miracle: lucky shot, no miscarriage.’

‘You say it like you are angry. Why are you angry, Sienna?’

‘I felt alone without Tia. When Mokgosi …’

‘Say it.’

‘When Mokgosi died. It wasn’t my week. I phoned him for a swap over. Told him: *You owe me nights from school holidays. Mt Eliza, four nights—I’m taking one*.’

Silence.

‘He listened and said, *What’s wrong?* Getting into my business, personal like we’re still married. I said, *Mokgosi is dead. Tia didn’t tell you?* He said, *I’m sorry. I didn’t know.* Like he cared. *You know you can talk to me. Any time. You can count on me,* he said.’

Silence.

‘Count on me? Tore my heart with the custody battle. Restraining order on me, effin prick. I couldn’t get to a hundred metres of my baby. She was just three years old. Back home men don’t snatch babies from their mothers. My heart cut as bad as now, and he says count on me. It took a judge, two lawyers, many barristers and money money money to get my baby back. Count on me, shit prick. *Talk to Tia about AIDS*, I said to him. *Is that what it was?* he said. *Why Mokgosi died?* Get your nose out of it, prick—didn’t say that. I SHOULD have!’

Silence.

A week.

‘How are the tablets going?’ Dr Putnam.

‘Going? Chucked them down the shoot. Fucken diazepam two milligrams.’

Silence.

‘*Take one tablet at night*, the pharmacist said. Night, day, does it matter? Makes me effin slur, forget to cry my river.’

Silence.

‘Fifty tablets two milligrams each, a whole jar of stupid. You prescribed me fifty times of stupid. I don’t want to slur. Four bloody times and I chucked the effin things. Feel free to refund me. Bucks anytime for forty-six pills, won’t take a raincheck I promise.’

‘If you do the breathing exercises I showed you, we wouldn’t find a need to sedate you.’

‘I’d rather breathe than effin slur, sleep bloody stupid.’

A week.

‘How do you feel?’

‘Better.’

‘Without the diazepam?’

‘Been breathing the exercises.’

‘Good.’

Silence.

‘How do you feel about work now?’ Dr Putnam. Bland bland bland.

‘I go.’

‘Do you mean you still want to leave?’

‘I mean that I go, I work—there’s no more to it.’

Silence.

‘Are you still angry that Mokgosi hurts more than it hurt you when your mother died?’

‘No.’

Silence.

The day Mokgosi died, your sense of loss was so keen, it pierced holes into your gut. Cannon balls entered those holes, and cuddled. You found strength to send a text message to your boss, and text messages from your colleagues buzzed back:

Sirens: *Terrible news. Thoughts, prayers x*

Ava: *Try n remember healthier times. Anything you need xo*

Olivia: *Words fail – heartbreaking for you. So sorry x*

Summer: *She is your scar. Scars are only ugly to people who don't have them.*

Adelaide: *Sounds like she had a peaceful passing. Remember the good times together.*

In Lejwana people sit together, cry together when somebody dies. Here, they text.

You did write back to Adelaide:

You: *The family is crying on the phone. Have to get Tia ready for school, then figure what's going on.*

Adelaide: *You need someone to give you a hug! Don't rush it with Tia. By all means try and get her ready but if she is late for school, she is late. Be kind to yourself.*

Poppy bought you a little box of peace. *You cannot find peace by avoiding life*, Virginia Wolf said. Jackson gave you a baby card with a wispy red tree: 'Heartfelt condolences. May your heart and soul find peace and comfort during this time, hugs.'

You liked Kara's landscape card: yellow, lime, cherry, navy and chocolate in a child's scrawl. Stick trees, dotted birds. A pink butterfly aloft. Signed with a love heart, Kara wrote:

In the world of spirit there is no such place as far away. Your sister exists in your love for her and her love for you. Visit each other. Remember her and she will return.

Dropping Tia to school was mechanical. At eight years old, she understood your grief. You said, 'Auntie Mokgosi has died. Remember she was sick?' Tia, clutched her schoolbag, nodded. 'Give Momma a hug.' Hug.

On the way back, you didn't mind the couple holding hands who stared at you in the car park, tears blinding your parking. But you minded the neighbour and his paraplegic daughter in the lift. You avoided his eyes when he said hello. 'Hello,' you said, flat. You didn't want pity, as pity is what you gave him for his daughter. Next day, again in the lift. You met his eyes, found a need to explain. The daughter was clumsy. Her face bobbed, her arm crooked stiff by her breast. Her curiosity in your dress embarrassed the neighbour. He flushed.

'Yesterday,' your eye on the girl. You tried a smile but it didn't feel right. 'Yesterday was sad. My sister in Botswana died.'

'Sorry to hear,' he said. The lift bumped, doors opened. 'Take care,' he said.

'Arrggggh,' the girl hummed.

You lie in bed, unable to sleep. You flick on the lights, look at the white of the ceiling speckled with the cream of the apartment sprinkler, a fire safety gadget with circular

ridges, indents and protrusions. Three silver hooks fasten the clear of the translucent plate covering the bulb.

Had to happen in March?

Death is easier in November—New Year round the corner. Come January, you set your mind to new thinking. You leave death with the year gone. Sucks in March; you have to live with death the whole year.

You look at your watch. 4am.

Op-shop. That is where you got the watch. You are not an op-shop girl except to give things. Like Tia's purple and white tricycle. Like the Darth Vader Lego set. Like the Cookie Monster pyjamas. Like the Miss Muffet tea set. Giving – it's what people do in Lejwana. They help each other, share even when there is little. Here, they hoard, cling to material things they don't need. You hate hoarding; you efficiently get rid of what you don't need. Like Mokgosi's drama when you were little. You were younger but stronger. Clop! Your knuckles firm on the head against Mokgosi's corn rows displaced unwanted excitement. You hate waiting too. You had time on your hands, so you popped into Salvos.

The watch sat right there by the entrance, in a glass showcase, four-shelved with lights. The Salvo lady – stern spectacles with metal rims, words as sharp as the tip of her lips – spoke clearly, concisely. Her lipstick was a cool bronze. She wouldn't take your hesitation. She fetched keys, unlocked the display shelf. She lifted a handful of watches but you didn't want those. You wanted the one of gold: gold face, gold chain, gold dials. It reminded you of the dazzle of ornaments around Chief Dikeledi's ankles, of the blonde wildebeest on Mokgosi's earlobes.

On a whim you do something crazy. You phone a friend, 5pm London time. You chat 40 minutes of gal nonsense. The camaraderie is soothing. You find sleep—the sleep of a thousand warriors. You wake up six hours later. It's Saturday.

Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre. You prefer the outdoor pool. You swim like the physio instructed: 'When you turn to breathe, level your cheek with the water surface, not nose up.' You agree with the physio: this way is less strain on your neck.

Peace is the result of retraining your mind to process life as it is, rather than as you think it should be. Wayne W. Dyer in Poppy's little box of peace.

Water enters your nose, your mouth, just enough not to unsettle. Breathing cheek level with the water, you like it. It is almost like a water hug. The sun is playful. She patterns the base of the pool with her rays. A white ray bounces off a window to reflect on your tinted goggles as you breathe. Your face is in the water. The sun's rays are a comfort, like your name. The sun feels intimate.

Like Mokgosi's gaze.

A week.

Silence.

Silence.

‘Tell me anything.’ Dr Putnam. Bland bland bland.

‘Anything.’ You.

He smiles.

Silence.

Silence.

'I know to see when I'm drowning,' you say.

'Good. Make sure you keep swimming.'

You smile.

Silence.

Silence.

Research statement

Research background

In story writing, characters and their creators share a symbiotic relationship. In protagonist Sienna, the story subconsciously, and then consciously, unravels forms of grieving and guides its players (author, character, reader) toward reconciliation with loss and self.

Research contribution

Gandolfo writes, 'The question of what compels writers to write and then to write particular stories is one that writers, readers and critics have been asking for centuries (2014). Colyar examines writing as a product, process, form of invention, and instrument of self-reflection (2009: 421), finding writing 'a symbolic system which articulates what we know, but it is also a tool whereby we come to these understandings' (422). Even the most reclusive writer connects with something. As Gandolfo states, the artist 'cannot stand at a distance – observing, watching – they have to become part of the person, thing, and event that they are creating' (2014: 21). Integration with the work positions the author within a Freudian 'process of sublimation': refining basic drives and converting them into creative and intellectual activity (Carter 2006: 72).

Research significance

'Segomotsi' borrows from reality and the imagined, from the conscious and unconscious. I am applying the self as data in the 'lived experience' of studying my own grief (auto-ethnography) and that of Sienna's (ethnography). In its study of grief, the story indicates there is no clean separation of author and reader. The story offers knowledge of being 'betwixt and between worlds', a self-made refugee in a 'postmodern existence of border-crossing and life on the margins' (Conquergood 1991: 185). With the self as subject, cathartic narrative can be a starting point for viewing new worlds.

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