

# UNLIMITED FUTURES

SPECULATIVE, VISIONARY BLAK AND BLACK FICTION

We would like to acknowledge and pay our deepest respects to the traditional custodians and knowledge keepers of the lands on which this work was edited and produced, the Yagera, Turrbal, Whadjuk Noongar and Wurundjeri First Nations peoples. These lands were never ceded.

*Always was, always will be.*

EDITED BY

**RAFEIF ISMAIL &  
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 **FREMANTLE PRESS**

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## Introduction

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**RAFEIF ISMAIL AND ELLEN VAN NEERVEN**

*Compiled from recordings from April 2021 and August 2021  
and edited by Hella Ibrahim.*

**RAI:** Hey sibling, how are you?

**EVN:** I'm not too bad, you?

**RAI:** I'm good! I remember telling you when we first started working on *Unlimited Futures* that I wanted this anthology to be a conversation, so I think it's really fitting we're doing the introduction as a literal conversation.

**EVN:** Such a great idea from you.

*1 | ANTICIPATORY JOY*

**RAI:** What drew you to *Unlimited Futures* as an editor? 'My friend, Rafeif, steamrolled me into it' is a valid response.

**EVN:** [laughs] No, I was really excited. I love the title. The title was the springboard for bringing a collective together.

To have that curation of First Nations voices as well as Afro-Black voices was something unique. Particularly when we really started working on this in early 2020, during an explosion of public consciousness on the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Lives Matter movements. Solidarity between our different communities is really important, I think, in this evil nation state we live in that doesn't care for our bodies, Blak and Black. I note that the usage of 'Blak' in this anthology's title derives from K'ua K'ua/Kuku and Erub/Mer artist Destiny Deacon's use, which dates back to the early '90s. Destiny gave us 'Blak' to liberate us from the terms of reference settlers gave us.

**RAI:** I had the idea for *Unlimited Futures* in late 2018. I read *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* back when it first came out and it changed my life. I really, really wanted something like that here. I was inspired by books like *Octavia's Brood*, *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction & Fantasy* and other works coming out of the US at the time that were First Nations or Afro-Black, but not both.

I thought it would be great to have a conversation. And what better way to have a conversation than through storytelling? That's the language we all speak, to some degree. At the same time, I was wrestling with my place as someone who's in a Black body, but is a settler, and is also a refugee. All of that was something I wanted to explore, and I wanted to give the opportunity for other people to explore it as well.

For me, *Unlimited Futures* was ultimately conversations and

skill-building. Anthologies are such amazing gateways for emerging voices. They can launch a career and, as you know, it's so hard to get into publishing without winning a big prize or creating huge amounts of work. And we're often asked to create work that's taxing to ourselves.

So usually your first published work is a memoir or a personal essay, which are brilliant pathways. But I feel like we are at a time where we can give emerging writers more options than that. All the work we've been doing in these spaces — that you've been doing, that people like Melissa Lucashenko, Maxine Beneba Clarke, Alexis Wright and Anita Heiss and every other artist who's paved the way has been doing — it's given us the opportunity to say 'Hey, emerging writers. You can write to your heart's content in 'genre fiction' and still be published.'

**EVN:** Definitely.

## 2 | 'UNPRECEDENTED' TIMES

**RAI:** How did it feel to be a writer and editor in the middle of an unprecedented global health crisis? Working on a project and imagining the future at a time when creative energies are absolutely exhausted and the future seems so bleak?

**EVN:** 'Unprecedented', how many times did we hear that? No. This is our reality. This is the world that we're living with as Blak and Black peoples; we're in a constant state of panic and alarm and survival. In some ways, COVID-19

was a very familiar time. It was the dealing with white people losing their shit about their world ending that was so fatiguing. It was such a joy to work on *Unlimited Futures* during 2020 and 2021, because these were the kind of works that I needed during that time.

**RAI:** I think it's brilliant that our writers created something in such a tempestuous year. There was so much fatigue and fear, and it wasn't an unknown fear. Bla(c)k folk know biological warfare. We know the effects of environmental destruction. Submissions opened and closed in the middle of a major lockdown in the Eastern States, at a time where it was hard to create work. But people still rallied and created. Such a tremendous act of courage, but also such labour. That's really admirable, I think, and just goes to show how much works like this are needed.

### 3 | *RIVERS MEETING*

**RAI:** Our incredible cover artist, Larrakia woman Jenna Lee, created this beautiful cover that looks at the interaction of separate cultures in the most respectful and wonderful way. I love that the cover symbolizes infinity — we're not the first to have these conversations or write these stories and we're not going to be the last. I think this anthology's the continuation of something great, and I love that our cover reflects that.

**EVN:** We were also really happy that it reflected the movements of water in this work. We were going to begin

the anthology with water to allow those kinds of threads of connection and continuation to flow into each other. For me the cover really kind of feels like rivers connecting and the life that is created through water, but is also water that we protect and have a relationship and a responsibility to.

**RAI:** Absolutely. We begin on water and we end on land as we seek new worlds. Just looking at the table of contents, you can see that it does feel like a river interweaving all these stories. One of the themes throughout this anthology is our responsibility to land, to water, to air, and what we must do to protect that which is precious to us, the responsibilities we've been entrusted with. It's a running theme throughout, whether a story's set in so-called Australia or in a different place.

Another thing I want to highlight is the use of non-linear time throughout the anthology. Our works aren't set in this reality's near-dystopian linear timeline. Instead, you have works that exist in the space beyond and the space before and after, but there's no distinct time. I think that's really, really important to show that, for us, the past, present and future, are happening simultaneously.

### 4 | *UNAPOLOGETICALLY BLA(C)K*

**EVN:** I think when you and I talked about the project early in the process, you talked about how much you wanted it to be for emerging writers. It wasn't until after I'd read and worked on the submissions with you that I understood why

you wanted this to be an anthology full of emerging voices — because it's so powerful!

**RAI:** It is, yeah. I feel like that's what's needed in the literary landscape. Anthologies are these beautiful glimpses into what people can do as creatives, without having to produce an entire book right off the bat.

**EVN:** It's incredible to have a strong percentage of emerging voices sitting beside established voices. We opened submissions and we didn't know what we were going to get. We didn't know who would submit. It was incredible to read those submissions and just be blown away by writing that is so different. The new authors excite me the most because this could launch their careers or be a significant moment for them. With the established writers, there's a kind of assumption that what they're going to send us is amazing, but there's an added excitement to reading work by someone who's unknown to you and making a connection with them.

This type of writing can be a hard genre to break into as an emerging writer. I think a lot of people hadn't seen a call for submissions quite like ours before, and they'd been waiting for it. Creating a home for that, for this space, was exciting. I love that we opened it up to poetry. Where else do you see a call out for speculative visionary poetry?

**RAI:** And including a mixture of prose and poetry shows that speculative or science fiction doesn't have to be written in one style. We start the anthology with a poem; it's a really powerful thing, I think, to start with a poem. Then we go on

to short stories, then another poem, and it works. It works so well.

**EVN:** We tried to look beyond the writing and publishing norms to create something that's very global as well. We have writers representing so many different countries, First Nations and cultures, something that's sort of beyond what was possible here in form and in the content.

**RAI:** Absolutely. And accessibility was kind of central to everything in this project. We made it explicit in the calls for submission that yes, these works can be multilingual, they can be recorded instead of written, etc. I think that made all the difference.

All the stories in this anthology are written for Blak and Black audiences: the language used is unapologetically Blak and Black, the absence of the leering white gaze is a palpable relief. It makes it so much more powerful. That's what makes *Unlimited Futures* unique.

**EVN:** I agree. That's what's exciting about this work. It makes no apologies; it gives no explanations. Sometimes our communities feel like they have to write for a certain audience, sometimes there's a pressure as a First Nations writer to represent all First Nations people. We wanted to free writers from those pressures. And you know, we're more powerful as a group, so to have this kind of a critical mass of writers representing Afro-Black communities and First Nations communities means you don't have to be just one person. Each story represents a different aspect or narrative, then they join up together.

**RAI:** These stories are dismantling the idea that First Nations or Afro-Black folk are a monolith. I love that speculative, visionary works aren't ... please correct me if this is wrong but I feel like, at least in African cultures, they're not speculative. Speculative isn't the word; it's just another reality. And what better way to start a conversation between our communities than at the root of it all?

It's just so beautifully interwoven. We're seeing that with how the pieces in this anthology interact with each other. The commonalities, the differences, the hopes and dreams and the fears, but also the calls for action, the calls for change. *Unlimited Futures* is one conversation in an ongoing dialogue. And I think it's brilliant that we got the chance to add to that dialogue.

I also want to acknowledge how incredible the process has been from the beginning. Everything was handled by First Nations and Afro-Black writers. I think it's really important we centred our voices, and we made sure our voices stayed centred throughout the entirety of the process.

## 5 | PARALLEL QUESTS

**RAI:** You know when you pick up a story and you read it and you just ... smile? That was kind of the feeling for every single one of those final submissions, wasn't it?

**EVN:** Definitely. I'm so happy that we had this gathering of stories and we also have some of our established writers, like Sisonke Msimang and Alison Whittaker, writing in genres

that they haven't written before. I wanted to point that out, because I think that is a beautiful thing in itself. Feeling like they had the freedom to explore an idea beyond their usual kind of output is really cool. This genre of fiction is often seen as the poorer cousin to realist fiction or other types of writing that are seen as more literary or more serious or whatever. But genre fiction is so fundamental to our storytelling and our worlds, and it's about time it gets the recognition it deserves. We have works of genre fiction written by Aboriginal and Afro-Black writers that were ignored by both the literary establishment and the mainstream, works that are now out of print or very hard to find. In doing this work we honour those writers, and we also honour the writers who had a fantastic story but never had the opportunity to be published.

**RAI:** Absolutely. And in saying that, I want to highlight that 'The Prime Minister', the piece that closes this anthology, was written in 1945.

**EVN:** I still can't get over that. What a moment to hear about this writer, who's no longer with us, but wrote this amazing gift. It's almost like finding a message in a bottle or something. Incredible to think about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and Afro-Black writers creating these kinds of stories in the '40s and earlier than that, and it being so relevant to today.

**RAI:** Exactly. It shows that our parallel quests for liberation have been ongoing, too, it's not just this recent thing. When we engage in activism, we're imagining new worlds. We're

establishing new worlds. And that's what we do when we write visionary and speculative fiction. We imagine new worlds so that we can build them.

'The Prime Minister' perfectly encapsulates that feeling. This is a piece written in the 1940s, based in Queensland, that dreams of space flights and the first Indigenous Prime Minister and this sort of almost utopian Australia, free of colonial chains. I can't get over how beautiful that vision is and how badly it should become a reality.

**EVN:** I just felt like I was sitting on something incredible. A piece that was going to change the world when it was published. To be publishing a story by an Elder who's no longer with us in the living world, his story of imagining a better country ... it blows my mind to think about how many of our ancestors were writing visionary fiction, telling stories about a different, better, future world. So many of those stories we will never see, but I feel like it's deeply known that they have been told and that they're out there.

I'm really grateful the family allowed us to publish this work, and that they've been able to take care of it and to recognise its significance. I can't wait for people to read it.

I have a feeling it could open up doors for other families to be like, 'Hey, we've also got this story, our ancestor was a sci-fi writer'. There were so many barriers for First Nations people to publish any work seventy-five years ago, let alone science fiction — it's such a gatekept genre, and the political power of these stories would have been too much for white people back then to handle. Maybe people today, too. It's still too much for

them to handle. I just hope this piece encourages people who know of relatives with stories that also need to be told.

**RAI:** I felt really humbled by 'The Prime Minister'. This story was written the year the Second World War ended. My own country was still colonised in 1945. We still didn't have independence. Most of the world was still under some sort of colonial rule.

The hope for humanity that's in this ... in the end, humanity is what visionary fiction is all about. It's the hope that we *can* and we *should* do better. Most of the stories in this anthology are about actions and consequences, how we can alleviate those consequences or how we can survive them. The consequences of imperialist, capitalist, white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchal society is the reality that we're living in. There's a lot of talk around depoliticising 'The Arts', but art is always going to be political; 'The Prime Minister' is a political piece of work. Works like this are pockets of resistance.

## 6 | *UNLIMITED FUTURES*

**RAI:** I can imagine *Unlimited Futures* being read ten years, twenty years, fifty years from now and still being a powerful body of work. What do you think this genre will look like ten years from now?

**EVN:** I think we'll be seeing a lot more of this writing over the next decade. Genre fiction is already vital writing, but I think it'll become even more vital as reality becomes more and more unstable with everything that's happening,

politically and environmentally. We're going to need to pass the tools of visionary resistance down to the next generation and check in with our older generation about it as well. Things are so unstable, and storytelling gives us power. This is what our ancestors have always done — used storytelling as a way to imagine a better future and to have that conversation with the past as well.

**RAI:** We can see that power in this anthology already. And what I love about it is every single one of the stories *does* move towards justice in the end.

**EVN:** I absolutely agree. Justice is a key thing. We're moving towards it.

**RAI:** I want to mention a few of the people who supported us through this project. Maxine Beneba Clarke, who helped champion this anthology; I had conversation after conversation with her being like, is this viable? How do I write a letter, asking a publisher? Maxine was incredibly generous with her time and amazing advice. Leanne Hall, who helped facilitate one of the very first letters of support. Ambelin Kwaymullina and Rebecca Lim, who gave us *Meet Me At The Intersection*, Melissa Lucashenko, who was so supportive of this project and who, along with so many great authors, shaped the literary landscape for us. We also had such great support from Hella Ibrahim at Djed Press, the team at Fremantle Press, and more people than I can name honestly. It was absolutely a community effort. *Unlimited Futures* could never have been something created and sustained in isolation.

**EVN:** I feel like I can't wait to give them the book and say like, 'thanks so much for your help, and for laying down the foundations for us to do this work.'

**RAI:** And thank you, too. I've been so excited to work with you! Your wealth of knowledge and experience has been so absolutely lifesaving, all the times I would come and be like, 'hey, what if we did this?' And you're like, that's not sustainable. Or 'so what is X, Y, Z?' And you'd explain it. It was just such a beautiful experience. I know they say never work with friends, but I'm so glad that we were friends before we worked together. I don't think I would want to do a project like this with a stranger.

**EVN:** I wanted to thank you as well for your incredible vision, and your openness. I hope that this is just the first of many collaborations between us and the other contributors in this book.

**RAI:** Same here! It has been an amazing journey.

*Rafeif Ismail and Ellen van Neerven  
with Hella Ibrahim  
October 2021*

**UNLIMITED  
FUTURES**

# The River

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## TUESDAY ATZINGER

In the savannah, near a mighty River, lay a great village

They were the people who slept under the sun

Prosperous

Ubuntu

Together

The waters of the River ever roiling under the heat

Shallow water so clear that the stones beneath it glistened brightly

Depths dark and mysterious, hiding all that lay below

The River ever a source of sustenance

And of danger

Eons ago

The River had rippled in welcome as the people first arrived

Provided refuge as they began to build their huts

Lapped against the stones as the people huddled over crackling  
fires after dusk

The River had seen passion, grief, joy and courage

As the village grew and prospered

The River had heard whispers, laughter, the clucking of chickens and the lowing of cows  
The wails of every woman and the mewls of every newborn  
The River's waters washed over the backs of the people, fed them, slaked their thirst  
It allowed its waters to dance wildly around splashing children held close by worried siblings

The River flowed beside the village  
Of the people who slept under the sun  
Ubuntu  
Together  
Shallow waters friendly and inviting, offering up glittering treasures  
Depths dark and mysterious, a veil to enshroud all that lay below  
Its waters ever a source of sustenance

And of danger

The River had borne witness to a lineage of Chiefs  
Some wise, some brave, some imperious, each falling way to another  
And now it rested its gaze on Mehluli — the Warrior Chief  
Proud, powerful, commanding and eager  
Arrogant, violent, dominating and greedy  
Born near the River under the moon  
First-born and destined to rule  
Mehluli reigned with open arms and a clenched fist

Kind words and a dextrous tongue shrouding a yawning hunger  
Ambitious outstretched fingers demanding more  
Shrewd words translated into benevolence through gleaming teeth  
All at once the piercing prick and soothing salve  
He held himself with an honour and nobility spoiled by greed  
Hollow and hungry  
A facade of righteousness and virtue  
Nothing could satisfy his aching belly  
Not tribute from the people who slept under the sun  
Nor conquest of the tribes  
pulled into the undertow  
of his want for more  
The ebb and flow of his desires  
neverending

And so the coursing River bore witness to the Warrior Chief  
The village of the people who slept under the sun  
A people spent from war, weary and wary  
Prosperity coming with a price sombre and heavy

The swirling waters of the River also testified to love  
A love known and envied throughout the village  
A tender, soft love shaped by fingers climbing over one another  
A tremendous love echoed in laughter over a shared fire  
A pure love stoked by open embraces and fluttering kisses  
Thandeka and Amandla had such a love  
Their eyes seeking each other in hidden moments

A love woven together each night with every caress come nightfall

Amandla was a hunter  
Her shoulders wide, her gait sure  
Her feet steady as she threw her spear  
Her hands effortless as she skinned her spoils  
Her return almost always a triumph  
Her strength burned like fire

But she held only one fear

Amandla feared the River  
She feared the darkness and the eddys  
She feared the undertow  
And the unknown that lay beneath it  
A product of a childhood terror that a cold hand would come  
And pull her down into the gloom  
Even now, when necessity took them to the bank  
Even now, with Thandeka's hand entwined with hers

She feared the danger

But danger came anyway

Mehluli's ravenous eyes alit on Thandeka  
Her unrivaled beauty calling to his insatiable hunger  
And when Amandla was on the hunt  
Thandeka could feel his weighted gaze upon her  
Knocking against the love she and Amandla had built  
An insistent, unspoken intrusion

The Warrior Chief summoned Thandeka to his hut  
His desire for her shameless and unrelenting  
He offered her the finest blankets and jewellery  
His generosity marred by his artifice  
But Thandeka thought herself cunning, and refused his finery  
She had a lover, she said, and she could not receive his gifts  
Mehluli smiled his double smile, and waved her away from the  
entrance of his hut  
She walked home, her legs trembling, for she knew nobody  
could refuse the Chief  
And he was determined to have her

The Warrior Chief summoned Thandeka to his hut a second time  
His craving for her brazen and unceasing  
He offered her goats and cattle  
His generosity marred by his artifice  
But Thandeka thought herself cunning and refused his finery  
She had a lover, she said, and she could not receive his gifts  
Again, Mehluli smiled his double smile and waved her away  
from the entrance of his hut  
She rushed home, her legs trembling, for she knew nobody  
could refuse the Chief  
And he was determined to have her

The Warrior Chief summoned Thandeka to his hut a third time  
His urge for her unrepentant and persistent  
He offered her a new homestead

His generosity marred by his artifice.  
But Thandeka thought herself cunning and refused his finery  
She had a lover, she said, and she could not receive his gifts  
Again, Mehluli smiled his double smile and waved her away  
from the entrance of his hut  
She ran home, her legs trembling, for she had refused the Chief  
thrice now  
Nobody could refuse the chief outright as she had done  
And he was determined to have her

On a cold evening, with dusk creeping over the horizon  
Mehluli visited Thandeka and Amandla as they sat over their fire  
He wished to go on a hunt, he said, and he commanded  
Amandla to join him  
Amandla warily gathered her hunting gear  
And kissed Thandeka on the cheek  
Just as the last vestiges of sunlight kissed the furthest reaches of  
the land  
Mehluli waited patiently outside, biding his time  
The pit in Thandeka's stomach dragged her voice down into a  
whisper  
'Stay safe. Stay careful.  
Come back to me, my love.'  
Amandla allowed herself a guarded smile  
She could not refuse the chief

The hunt had been unsuccessful, and as they returned

The moon rose up over the quiet village  
Amandla clenched her fingers around her spear  
Mehluli had taken her to the edge of the waters

He walked into the river, chest deep, and beckoned that  
Amandla follow  
But she stayed near the bank, thinking of cold hands and dark  
depths  
Thinking of Thandeka and his double smile  
As the stones beneath her feet glimmered in the moonlight  
Mehluli beckoned once again  
But she stayed near the bank, thinking of cold hands and dark  
depths  
Thinking of Thandeka and his double smile  
As she bathed herself in the shallows  
Mehluli laughed, and swam out of the river, his skin wet  
Turning her back to him and towards her home  
Amandla didn't see his gaping hunger stretch out to swallow  
her whole  
He stretched a powerful arm across her chest  
And stretched his powerful hand across her mouth and began  
to drag her to the depths  
Amandla was strong, the Warrior Chief stronger  
The frenzied struggle churned the water

And then

There was

Nothing

And Mehluli walked out of the water alone

And in the darkness

In the depths

In the murk

The water began to swirl around Amandla

‘Do you wish to die?’ The River Spirit asked

‘No,’ Amandla answered into the pressing darkness

‘I have been shackled to this River for eternities

I was here before the people who sleep under the sun

I have watched friends and I have watched enemies

I have overseen the lives of everyone

I have slept and woken with you

Ubuntu

I have rippled across each stone

I have been here all alone

But I want more

Allow my water to douse your embers

Take my place

So I may wander from shore to shore.’

‘Yes.’

And so, under the moonlight, the River welcomed a new guardian

And an old man, wizened and bent, left the water and walked

into the brush

Unseen by anyone but the River he left behind

And as Mehluli slept, he dreamt of the lapping of water

Thandeka awoke to an empty hut

Discomforted, she searched the village

But nobody had seen her love since the night before

Foreboding loomed over Thandeka like a shadow

Smothering hope

Besieged with distress, she sought out the Warrior Chief

His tongue curled around a lie

Unsuccessful

He and Amandla had parted ways after swimming in the river

The darkness of the lie suffocated all hope

For Thandeka knew that Amandla feared the River

Thandeka returned home

Thinking of the Chief and his double smile

Tendrils of dread snaking their way around her heart

For she knew Amandla

And her love would not swim in the River she so feared

The lie still ringing in her ears

Vestiges of hope giving way to grief

She knew the Warrior Chief had severed her love

Her tender love, her soft love, her raging love

And crushed it beneath his heel

Because she had refused him

And he was determined to have her

Spirit awash with sorrow  
Thandeka wept  
Heaving sobs that shook the bones beneath her flesh  
She would never again feel fluttering lashes on her cheeks  
She would never again gather Amandla into her arms  
The fiery light in her life extinguished  
Her cries soon gave way to the gnashing of teeth  
Her fists so tightly clenched, her nails drew blood  
Her fear of the Warrior Chief giving way to an atrocious loathing

Misery muted  
She vowed to shatter Mehluli  
To splinter his lies in his throat  
She discarded all her softness  
And steeled herself  
Thandeka began to plot  
To make him choke on his own hunger  
For to her, now, he was but a bloated man  
Her hatred rose with the moon  
She would mangle him  
Destroy him

Devour him

And as Thandeka remade herself  
Mehluli dreamt of the lapping of water

The next day, Mehluli summoned Thandeka to his hut  
His desire for her bold and unfaltering

He offered her jewellery and blankets  
Goats and cattle  
And a new homestead  
'Your lover has abandoned you,' he said, 'and you cannot refuse me any longer.'  
But Thandeka was cunning and refused his finery  
'I cannot accept your gifts, for I am without a lover  
And have nobody to enjoy these spoils with.'  
Mehluli smiled his double smile, and waved her away from the entrance of his hut  
Thandeka walked home, vengeance within grasp  
She had refused the Chief once more  
And he was determined to have her

That night, as Mehluli dreamed of the lapping of water  
The River rotted  
Rancid water rising up past its banks  
Dead fish with white eyes floating under the moonlight  
The water rolled against the huts closest

And flooded them inside  
And when daylight came, and the village of the people who slept under the sun awoke  
They saw that all who had touched the water had sickened  
The villagers ran to Mehluli  
Lamenting the turning of the River  
For a moment, Mehluli thought of his dreams of lapping water

A moment brushed away by arrogance  
And he ordered the villagers move their homesteads further from  
the river  
And tend to their sick  
As the river had always looked after the people who slept under  
the sun  
And would not forsake them now

But the sick would not heal  
They would not eat  
Nor work  
Nor rest  
Silent tears pouring from glassy eyes  
traced rivulets across their empty features  
Bodies swaying in tandem with the blighted water  
The afflicted sighed lifelessly about cold hands and dark depths  
About devotion devoured and sacrality submerged  
About the cold  
About carcasses gutted by the light of a shared fire  
And carcasses stirring in the silt  
Undeterred by the efforts of their families  
The sick soon began to stagger toward the rotten River  
Ensnared by its silent, sinister summons  
For days they stood near the fetid water  
Enchanted by its macabre adornments  
Disfeatured fish with ragged scales and cloudy eyes  
Snared on darkened water weeds

Mehluli watched on  
As his people begged and dragged and offered muti  
wailing invocations to the sacred and supernatural  
But in answer to their anguished chorus  
Fathers, sisters, infants, cousins, the childing  
All possessed by a savage thirst  
Knelt for the first time in days  
And desperately drank the cloudy water, ignoring interfering arms  
And filling their bellies beyond nightfall and past daybreak  
Before rising to their feet, still weeping,  
As the dead air carried their hollow whispers  
Of cold hands, dark depths, gaping hunger  
Cold hands, dark depths, gaping hunger  
Cold hands, dark depths, gaping hunger  
Nothing  
Come back

Nothing  
To me

Nothing  
My love

Then whorls of water circled over drowning bodies  
As they embraced the River and disappeared into the deep.

Through their mourning  
The people who slept under the sun  
Began to whisper that the River was cursed

And shunned the sepulchral waters  
But Mehluli held steadfast  
Ignoring his dreams of lapping water  
Ignoring the keening of the villagers who slept under the sun

Thandeka visited the Warrior Chief in his home  
Her heart dark with hatred  
'Have you come to refuse me once again?' he asked  
'No,' she answered. 'If you will take me as your wife, I will be yours.'

Enchanted by her dark skin and seductive features  
And thinking himself in love  
Mehluli agreed

That night, as Mehluli dreamed of the lapping of water  
The rotted River once more rose beyond its banks  
Flooding the huts of those closest  
And sickening more of the people who slept under the sun  
Weeping  
Standing  
Staring  
Kneeling  
Drinking  
Whispering  
Drowning

The few who dared to venture close to the River

Told stories of limbs lying prone atop glittering stones  
Of sunken bodies staring at the sky, eyes unblinking  
And soon the villagers pressed their strongest and bravest  
To collect their loved ones from the water  
So they could lay the profaned to rest  
Before long, those chosen by Mehluli  
Tentatively approached the River  
Careful not to succumb to the blight  
Slowly, they reached out for the limp hands at the River bank  
But as soon as Mehluli's chosen touched skin  
Once insentient fingers clenched tight over outstretched arms  
And onlookers watched helplessly  
As the water churned violently, and all who had ventured too near  
Were pulled mercilessly into the gloom by cold hands into the  
dark depths

Once more the villagers called upon Mehluli  
Who thought once more upon his dreams of lapping water  
And deciding it was an omen  
Ordered the villagers to move away from the rotting river  
Away from the village that slept under the sun  
And deep into the savannah under the shaded trees  
Satisfied that he had outwitted the river  
Mehluli took Thandeka as his wife  
The ululating of the weary and wary people subdued

Thandeka poured Mehluli beer all night

A shrewd ploy to avoid his embrace  
Patiently, she waited for him to fall into the arms of sleep  
Her eyes on his spear  
But Mehluli was troubled by the river  
And did not succumb to the depths of slumber  
So Thandeka, heart cold, bid her time

The next morning the people who slept under the sun awoke  
To find the rotted River had followed them deep into the Savannah  
And sickened more of them  
Again, the people lamented to Mehluli  
Who was grasped by terror at the sight of his people  
Void and sighing, embracing the dark, stinking waters  
He ordered his soldiers find a sangoma  
To rid the river of its curse.

Many sangomas tried to unravel the mystery of the River  
All of them succumbing to the rot and sickness  
All except Sibakhulule  
Sibakhulule was both old and wise  
Her face wrinkled and weather worn  
She sat at the edge of the River, fearless  
The people who slept under the sun watched on in awe

As she suddenly sat up, and walked into the befouled water  
The waters swallowed her up, rippling first before they stilled  
The villagers looked on for hours, hope dwindling

Before the waters began to undulate and Sibakhulule emerged

She fixed her gaze on Mehluli  
And recited what the River Spirit had told her  
'I was a hunter, strong and proud  
Until I was untimely drowned

I seek to pull my love to the deep  
Her beautiful face to see  
To wrench her away  
from the one who killed me.'

A cold hand gripped Mehluli's soul  
'We need to move far, far away from the river,' he decreed  
'It is cursed.'  
Sibakhulule shook her head  
'The River will follow,' she said  
But Mehluli was adamant, and sent the sangoma back to her tribe

The air around the village was cold  
Though none dared defy Mehluli  
His crimes were now open to all  
And the villagers began to whisper among themselves

That night, plied by beer, Mehluli sank into the depths of sleep,  
dreaming of rapids that buoyed him this way and that  
Before a cold hand pulled him into the black  
Thandeka, gripped by hot rage, took a heavy rock  
And raising her arm, smashed Mehluli in the head

He awoke, vision bloodied, and fought her off  
'Why, my love?' he shouted, rousing the villagers  
But Thandeka struck him once more, teeth clenched to cracking  
'I exist only to destroy you  
As you once destroyed my perfect love,' she spat

Vengeance demanding satisfaction  
But before she could strike again, the villagers subdued her  
And began to drag her to the River  
For it was her the River wanted, not the people

Mehluli looked on at all he had wrought  
'Baba, what have I done?' he cried to his ancestors  
His hunger was no more  
Nor his double smile  
He saw himself as he was  
A husk of a man, no more than those that had sickened  
He had led his people to ruin  
For lust, and greed  
For his aching belly  
He raised his hand, and the villagers stilled  
Thandeka still within their grasp

And the people who slept under the sun watched  
As the warrior chief, who had lost everything  
Walked into the River.

'Do you wish to die?'

'No.'

The waters stilled, then stirred, as Amandla walked out  
All the sickened villagers in tow  
The River had a new guardian

In the savannah, near a mighty River, lay a great village  
They were the people who slept under the sun  
Prosperous  
Ubuntu  
Together  
The waters of the River ever roiling under the heat  
Shallow water so clear that the stones beneath it glistened brightly  
Depths dark and mysterious, hiding all that lay below  
The River ever a source of sustenance

And of danger