

Runner Up of Vindigo Press Short Story Competition 2023

# THE GOLDEN VOICE OF A MINER'S PRAISE

By Mlamli Mlee Tyulu



**Mlamli Tyulu** is a South African writer, artist and Candidate Attorney working for the biggest Human Rights Organization in South Africa. He was shortlisted for the prestigious Inaugural Toyin Falola Prize in Nigeria in 2020. He was also invited to conduct workshops on creative writing at the Cape Town Arts' Festival, which was held at the Artscape Theatre.

He has been published in the Sock Drawer Online magazine and the Kalahari magazine. He was also invited to speak at the 2021 African Feminisms Conference in Cape Town. Furthermore, he was invited by Utrecht University to submit a chapter for an upcoming book which tackles crucial social issues. He is interested in themes that help us understand life and the human experience - better. He was selected for the David Kramer Playwriting Masterclass Sessions as well as the CASA Think Tank, where he developed the play that he is currently working on: "AmaQaba: The Ochred Ones".



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## THE GOLDEN VOICE OF A MINER'S PRAISE

The sun diffuses through the leaves of memory, hiding in its shadow the image of boys crying for their fathers and girls longing for a mother's touch. In the liminal space between the present and the open palms of the past collecting the unwanted, the desired and the lost – the clock has just leaned forward and struck midnight: 1 January 2050.

Hopetown lies quietly at the edge of the Great Karoo, in the womb of the Northern-Cape. A church, the Methodist Church, sits on the bank of a dried up river that hides an old mine behind it; that marks the juncture between the Thembani Township and the cemetery that doubles as an initiation site for amaXhosa boys who mark the transition to manhood between their legs. At 228 Victoria Mxenge Street lives Nokapana's son, Andries, who has worked as a miner for the past twenty years. Rumour has it that this young man, raised by so many of us here, the only son of the daughter of the amaNtande clan, discovered a diamond the size of a Granny Smith apple, in the uterus of the mine, where he has mined illegally since its owners abandoned it for being barren and costly.

The news spread like a wildfire in Hopetown and hope decorated people's faces like angel's dust. "Good morning, suster. In this karoo heat, I hope that you've heard that Andries has brought the jewels back to our crown." "Yes, my suster. I have heard. May the weight of this victory put bread and moer koffie on our tables." This was the mood that carried the town, in the opium of the moment. The year had just started but it was already giving so much: a diamond that promised economic change, and hope that resurrected in the marrow of the



bone that was the community. Before they knew it, delusions and dreams quickly became intertwined.

Meanwhile, at 228, Andries silently battled a cloud that his father had fought hard to overcome, a war that his mother had so tenaciously wrestled, a curse that his grandfather before them – loathed. Battles that neither had won. It was common knowledge that his grandfather was found floating lifeless in the stream in front of St Mark’s Anglican Church several years ago. His father overdosed on pills in the bathroom outside and his mother’s body was found hanging lifeless on a piece of string.

Residents started complaining that sounds of “take me home,” could be heard in the dead of the night coming out of his house. They started off slowly and then morphed into a violent utterance of terror. He had never shown signs of ‘the thing’ that the Koyana family was known to be suffering from and for a while everyone thought he had evaded it, but clearly, he had not managed to escape it. Those who looked through his window at night say he looked possessed when ‘the thing’ took over. The woman he stays with had to punch him hard on the back and burn his feet with hot water before he recovered sanity. They started keeping him indoors more often, because ‘the thing’ took over without calling ahead and strangled him, until his eyes were bloodshot, and he started foaming at the mouth. Sometimes people brought him camphor water to keep him calm. Some sighed out of heartbreak as they passed his house – lamenting what a pity it was to be a hero of your people but to not savour the sweetness of your own success, as was the case with Andries.

At the mine, things were going well and moving at a fast pace. Lines of people seeking employment ran from the gate and because there were women, stopped near the sacred bush, where teenagers entered as boys and came out as men. The Van der Merwe’s had decided to



reopen the mine after the discovery of the diamond and promised to give back, by supporting Andries and offering employment to the rest of the town. But as the ‘the thing’ took over his life, his name became a silhouette reflected on a naked wall. The diamond had made the owners of the mine rich, and they in turn, to quote Nongqawuse of old, had ensured that the community had buttons without holes (money) in their pockets. But to Andries, this had all become a worthless exercise. His discovery had betrayed him – akin to the thirty pieces of silver in the hands of Judas. So heavy was the blow that life had dealt him.

Contrary to his reality, life had started changing for the better for some of the residents of the town. “Did you hear of Hottie, my suster?” “What about him my suster?” “They say that ever since he started working at the mine, he no longer eats chicken. He only eats lamb chops.” “What of Hantjievol who no longer smokes twak, ever since she started working at the mine. She only smokes cigarettes now.” “Have you heard of Ossie who now insists on calling papsak – table wine, because it sounds more sophisticated?” Life had clearly changed in Hopetown: the streets were cleaner and the streetlights were on earlier than they ordinarily would have. A small portrait of Andries hung on the fence of the clinic and many spoke of his good deeds but a silent thread of pity flowed in the hearts of all who knew that all of this meant very little to him, as he wrestled demons he had not recited an incantation to. Many joked that 2050 was the year of New Things and Good Things. Ouma Siena, the seer who came from Nama ancestry even said that the grass had been greener than it ever had been, which was a good omen. A sign of better things to come.

Andries had always been a sharp boy. Some even say that he was born with teeth. This was a sign that he was born to be great, the old people often said. His mother nicknamed him, ‘Vis’ because he loved water. After High School, he decided to make the closed mine on Donkin Street his second home. He was there every day – searching and searching, for something we



suspect his ancestors had whispered into his ear. In his last moments of sanity, just after the discovery of the diamond, he recounted the discovery of the diamond. He said that there had been a commotion inside the mine. In the seconds that followed, a rock dislodged above him and he fell to his knees, as the rock remained suspended above him. It was at this point that he discovered a diamond in his hands – pure as though purified ten times in silver. They say that he let out a scream of praise in a voice that sounded borrowed – from the belly of the mine. To misquote Sandile Dikeni: who can ever forget the golden voice of a miner’s praise from the belly of a cemetery carrying within it voices and possibilities and dreams and dead bodies. No one can ever forget that voice, ushering the tide of 2050.

But, like all transitions, Hopetown could not reconcile the heaviness of its past with the magic of its present. Gradually, the air became dangerous and the inevitable nodded in agreement, like a gathering of clouds. Andries was found with a glass of rat poison on his bed. His lifeless body faced the direction of the garden, where he once sat and dreamed of a Hopetown laded with opportunities, where songs of gladness lined the street like confetti. Everything slowly felt like a dream turning into a nightmare. Very little had changed in 2050: the bread bins were still empty in many of the homes, the farm grasses lost their greenness and hope dissipated like an odourless gas. Boys were still crying for their fathers and girls still longed for a mother’s touch.

Maybe Ouma Siena was wrong. Maybe 2050 wore a costume that hid our wounds and scars that won’t stop bleeding – just for a little while.