with The Continent

The Friday Paper

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Graphic: Kagiso Diale

The intro

Now the question is: What comes next?

For 12 days, my part of Johannesburg was without power. It has been an exercise in patience, in tolerance of each other's lack of patience and in trust in the video updates from our ward councillor and ward committee members. It was also an exercise in fuel expenditure. Some businesses have spent hundreds of thousands of rands keeping their lights on.

But there is something to be said for being without the quiet din of electricity humming through our homes and businesses. In its absence, the silence is unfamiliar and, you realise, somehow discomforting. It makes you more aware of your surroundings. Everything becomes more real, more immediate. And you are forced to reckon with things you could otherwise ignore.

So when our community WhatsApp groups began to lose it in the past few days, with profanities offered in several languages, you had to understand.

After all, without WiFi, there is not much to do on a Sunday in the dark except let the mosquitoes feast. Then residents looked at the reconnection schedule. The first priority was Garden City Clinic, followed by the SABC. One resident, echoed by others, asked why a multibillion-rand corporation like Netcare, which owns the private hospital, should come before ordinary people who cannot afford to fill a generator.

It was a lesson in how quickly basic empathy disappears. A power cut becomes a competition

It was a lesson in how quickly basic empathy disappears at times like these. A power cut becomes a competition over whose life ultimately matters more.

The lights have come back on in much of the area now. A semblance of calm returns. But what is left of us now?

This is the last edition of *The Friday Paper*'s election run, and it asks the same question: what comes next, for our cities, our neighbourhoods and each other?

Salaam
Khadija Patel

Over to you

Before we go

Last week we asked about ubuntu, your neighbours and your streets.

Meet Khaya Koko

For Khaya Koko, the neighbourhood is "everyone in Hlahatsi Section, Katlehong". Do people there look out for each other? "Yes."

He knows what it is to be looked out for. In 2000, his school bus broke down, and he and his sister set off on foot. A woman saw their uniforms, recognised the school (her own child went there), and offered them a lift. Then she walked them in and spoke to the principal.

Khaya wants to read more about culture, books and sport, and he has a story for us: the death of school sport, and of after-school activities generally, in township and rural areas. What would make his street better? "Less unemployment."

He also got all five quiz questions right, so he wins last week's book: *Stern Gods* by Kamanee Govender. Congratulations.

Also from you

Another reader remembers a man who offered them his food. "I wasn't hungry, and he didn't have much. He offered it anyway." Their neighbour is "anyone willing to show kindness, in a time where it is increasingly rare".

How did you do?

Last week's quiz answers: South Africa's official unemployment rate is 33.7%. Imtiaz Sooliman led the Africa Muslim Party in 1994, before founding Gift of the Givers. It was James Baldwin who said books taught him that what tormented him most connected him to others. Home Affairs is launching an online registration and appointment system for asylum seekers. And 139 councils were left hung after the election.

What would make their street better? "Getting rid of the tyrant who squawks drunkenly all day on the WhatsApp group," and an end to neighbours who panic "whenever a black man walks on the street". And the story they want told is bin theft: "People steal the bins as a source of fuel. As frustrating as it is, isn't it indictment that people need to burn these in order to survive?"

You asked

You asked us to write about inner-city farming. This week we meet people growing food on Hillbrow's rooftops, Soweto's schoolyards and Alex's backyards.

Curtain call

Two months ago Sipho Kings and Simon Allison invited me to lead *The Friday Paper*. These five editions are, in many ways, a testimony to friendship. Nearly everyone here is connected to someone else on these pages. Many of us worked together at the *Mail & Guardian*; others are from the broader media landscape. Thank you.









For their words: Carlos Amato, Thameenah Daniels, Shaun de Waal, Hasina Gori, Janet Heard, Qaanitah Hunter, Lester Kiewit, Lucas Ledwaba, Rosa Manoim, Natasha Marrian, Tebadi Mmotla, Fatima Moosa, Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, Richard Pithouse, Ivor Price, Athandiwe Saba, Niren Tolsi and the Radio Workshop.

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For their books: Philip Harrison and Christopher McMichael, Mubanga Kalimamukwento, Erin Torkelson, Kamanee Govender and Philisiwe Twijnstra, and Shay Heydenrych, publisher at Jacana.

And to every reader who opened *The Friday Paper*, wrote to us, answered our questions and passed it on: thank you. Christian Stephen laid out every page of all five editions. Margot Bertelsmann subbed them. Fatima Moosa has been the glue of every edition. Our cover artist Kagiso Diale's work has been something to marvel at: every week we gave him a new challenge, and every week he came back with a unique concept. Athandiwe Saba, managing editor of *The Continent*, worked with us through election week. And Paul Botes made sure we had photos that told stories themselves.

Thank you to the wider All Protocol Observed team. If this project has taught me one thing, it is how much effort goes into making the boring parts of running media actually work. Our writers were paid on time at a time when writers are paid so poorly. Thank you to the finance team and everyone who works there; to *The Continent*'s team, and to Refiloe Seiboko for her oversight; to the engagement team, Adam Oxford and Dumi Sitole; and to Christine Mungai, editor of *The Continent*, for her wisdom and support.

So what comes next? In the new year, we hope to continue in some way. Join our WhatsApp group to keep in touch with us, and we will keep you updated. If you would like to see *The Friday Paper* continue, have ideas for it, or have thoughts on how we might keep it going, we would love to hear from you at read@thefridaypaper.co.za.

Khadija Patel

Quote Unquote

Six matches and back

World Rugby has banned Springbok coach Rassie Erasmus for six internationals over what he said about the officiating in South Africa's 21–19 loss to France. Here is how it played out.

"I'm saying to you my feeling is that knee-drop tackles is out. They happened 17 times in our game. Not one was penalised." — **Rassie Erasmus, Springbok coach, at a press conference in Dublin (*Sky Sports*)**

"If he saw it and he decided not to act on it, is that not match-fixing?" — **Rassie Erasmus, on the television match official (*ESPN*)**

"The man who has identified what he believes to be a serious pattern of inconsistency has been sanctioned with remarkable efficiency. The questions he raised remain unanswered." — **Vashna Jagarnath, writing on her Substack**



Franc-tireur: Rassie Erasmus has been heavily penalised for speaking truth to power. Photo: Alejandro/Pagni/AFP

"Challenging a decision is not the same as questioning an official's integrity." — **World Rugby, announcing the suspension (*Sky Sports*)**

"Respect is fundamental to rugby, and match officials are central to the sport." — **World Rugby (*Sky Sports*)**

"It was not his intention to allege that any match official had acted with ulterior motives." — **SA Rugby, asking for a full misconduct hearing (*ESPN*)**

"We love you to the moon and back or should I say six matches and back." — **Gayton McKenzie, Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture, on X**

ALL THE NEWS YOU NEED TO KNOW

The week's big stories

Who will run your council?

Councils have 14 days from the declaration of the 8 November results to hold their first sitting, swear in councillors and elect a mayor and speaker. With 139 councils hung, that has meant weeks of coalition bargaining. Of the country's 257 councils, The People's Register, which tracks them all, had published sitting results for only 20 by Wednesday. Johannesburg and Tshwane were due to hold their first sittings on Thursday 19 November, but Tshwane was granted an extension until 26 November by the city manager, Johann Mettler. Cooperative Governance Minister Velenkosini Hlabisa has told local and metropolitan councils to meet by 27 November, The People's Register reported. In the Richmond municipality, the MK Party elected its first mayor on 18 November. **— The bigger picture is on pages 25 to 27.**

Why are Festive Chickens workers on strike?

Workers at Festive Chickens' Olifantsfontein factory have been on a protected strike since 29 October. They earn between R5 400 and R6 500 a month and are demanding R13 500, along with benefits and safer working conditions. Astral Foods, which owns Festive Chickens, says it cannot meet the demands and denies that workers face unsafe conditions. But on 11 November an ammonia leak at the factory put 24 employees in hospital. An organiser for the Simunye Workers Forum told *GroundUp* that unsafe conditions were behind the demand for medical aid. Astral says it does not recognise the forum, and that its recognised unions have no dispute with the company. **— A striking worker's story is on pages 28 to 31.**

What does the Deutsche Bank leak reveal about Gupta money?

A leak of more than 15-million internal Deutsche Bank files, published on 17 November, shows how money linked to the Gupta family moved through the German bank at the height of state capture. According to the files, Gupta-linked companies moved about $675-million through accounts held by Xangbo, a Singapore-based trading group, between December 2012 and January 2017, often in matching transactions within a single day. The bank only began winding down the relationship in 2021. The Guptas have called the allegations against them politically motivated, and Deutsche Bank says it is "a different bank today". The investigation was led by South African journalist Khadija Sharife and India's Josy Joseph, and coordinated by the South African non-profit Barracuda Media.

Your money and your weekend

Will your bond repayment go up?

Inflation jumped to 5.2% in October, up from 4.5% in September and its highest level since May 2024, Statistics SA said on Wednesday. Fuel did most of the damage: fuel prices were nearly 43% higher than a year earlier. That is well above the Reserve Bank's 3% target, the backdrop to Thursday's final interest rate decision of the year, where the Bank's Monetary Policy Committee announced its rate decision to keep the interest rate unchanged. While not a unanimous decision, Reserve Bank Governor Lesetja Kganyago said, the decision means that the repo rate remains at 7.25%, and the prime lending rate stays at 10.75%. Despite several internal and external pressures, Kganyago said the committee decided to pause for now after two policy adjustments this year. This means your bond and car repayments won't change. On a R1-million bond over 20 years, you will keep paying about R10 150 a month. The bank last moved in September, when it raised rates by 0.25 percentage points.

How do you avoid a Black Friday debt trap?

Retailers have been advertising Black Friday deals since the start of November, but the National Financial Ombud is urging shoppers to think before they buy. Low monthly instalments, it warns, can make a purchase feel more affordable than it is, especially with festive season spending around the corner. Its advice: set a spending limit before you shop, compare the total cost of a purchase rather than the monthly instalment, and know your rights as a consumer. Police are also warning shoppers to stay alert in crowded malls and to watch out for scams online. Black Friday falls on 27 November.

Can you still water your garden?

Not in Johannesburg. Level 2 restrictions take effect on 21 November, and residents may not use municipal water on gardens or lawns at any time, hose down paving or dampen building sand. Johannesburg Water says high demand has left the system unable to keep reservoirs full, and use must fall by 200-million litres a day. Tshwane announced level 2 restrictions this week too. Cape Town's problem is different: its dams are about 70% full, but the city is preparing for a possible dry season. From 1 December, gardens there may be watered only on Tuesdays and Saturdays, outside the hours of 9am to 6pm, and residents are asked to use no more than 85 litres a person a day.



And finally

Was GTA 6 worth the 13-year wait?

The "We got ___ before GTA 6" meme is finally over. Thirteen years after Grand Theft Auto V, GTA 6 launched on 19 November on PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S. In South Africa, the base game costs R1 499 and the Ultimate Edition R1 899. Check your data first: the download is a hefty 212GB, and the *Mail & Guardian* reports that it could put pressure on local internet infrastructure. There is a local twist, too. Rockstar has confirmed that South African artists will feature on the in-game radio.



Cancel your weekend: The latest iteration of Grand Theft Auto is finally here. New Zealand got it first, at midnight on Thursday, local time. Photo: AFP

Why is *Love is Blind SA* in trouble before it has even aired?

Netflix's *Love is Blind* comes to South Africa in December, and it is already causing a stir. In the show, singles date without seeing each other and get engaged before they meet face to face. When the South African cast was announced on social media, the male contestants drew such a backlash that Netflix quietly took the posts down. Hosted by real-life couple Dineo and Solo Langa, the show premieres with six episodes on 4 December, and the finale airs on 18 December. If the reaction so far is anything to go by, the country will be watching.

Who is smiling after the cricket?

The Proteas beat Bangladesh by nine wickets at The Wanderers on Thursday to lead the two-Test series 1-0. Kagiso Rabada took eight wickets and scored a career-best 72, and Simon Harmer's 6/51 finished the job. The second Test starts at SuperSport Park on Monday. Australia, meanwhile, are still arguing about Cape Town. Eight years after the sandpaper scandal at Newlands, Cameron Bancroft, one of the three players banned, now says "it was the whole team". Captain Pat Cummins had called the same claim, made earlier by Usman Khawaja, "complete and utter nonsense". Cricket Australia is setting up a forum for players to "share their truth". South African fans need no forum. They remember.

LANGUAGE

The year in words

The language board has chosen its words. Ours are mostly the same, with one change.

Each year, the Pan South African Language Board and media research company Focal Points sift through a year of headlines, broadcasts and timelines to find the word or phrase that sums it up.

This year's word of the year is "Madlanga Commission". But the shortlist says a lot more than the winner does. Read together, they describe a country that is anxious, angry and still laughing.

Abahambe. "They must go." PanSALB put it on the social media shortlist, but it was never only online. It was chanted at marches, shouted from a police van and promised from campaign stages. Families heard it in Durban as they were chased from their homes. This is our word of the year.

Madlanga Commission. The official winner. It is the inquiry into allegations of political interference and criminality in the police, and it spent the year showing who really answers to whom.

March and March. An anti-immigrant movement whose name became shorthand for this year's protests on the streets, and later for the queues of asylum cases outside the courts.



"They must go": Marchers carry an "abahambe" placard in Durban. It is The Friday Paper*'s word of the year. Photo: Rajesh Jantilal/AFP*

Femicide and gender-based violence. Two shortlisted terms that should be history by now.

Clock it. The social media winner. It means spotting what someone is really up to, which was a useful skill in an election year.

Gone kanje. Scotts Maphuma's "gone, just like that". It could serve as a farewell to several ward councillors.

Nikhona? "Are you around?" The question that opens every group chat.

Oh, I see. The South African Sign Language sign of the year, and a fair reaction to most of the above.

Ashwagandha. The herbal supplement for stress. It's on the list for good reason.

MIGRANTS

Fewer than the noise suggests

Rich countries are cutting back on migration even as they depend on migrants to keep their economies running. South Africa's anti-migrant politics rests on a far smaller share of people.

This year, one word followed migrants across South Africa. "Abahambe", they must go, was chanted at marches, shouted from a police van, promised from campaign stages. It is our word of the year. But how many people is it actually about?

Fewer than the noise suggests. The 2022 census counted 2.4-million people in South Africa who were born in another country, or just under 4% of the population. A later Statistics SA survey put the number at 3.1-million, or 5%, counting documented and undocumented migrants. Most come from neighbouring countries, and about half live in Gauteng.

Set that against the world's wealthier democracies. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, a club of 38 of them, in its annual report on migration found that across its member countries, one person in eight was born abroad: about 170-million people, or 12% of the population, up from 9% a decade ago. In Australia, it is one in three. If South Africa were an OECD country, it would sit among the six with the smallest share, alongside Japan, Korea and Poland.

OECD countries are arguing about migration too, and many are closing doors. In 2025, permanent migration to the OECD fell for a second year running, by 1.6%, to 6.1-million people. The number admitted as refugees and on humanitarian grounds fell by more than a quarter.

Yet at the same time, they went looking for workers. Labour migration rose by 13%. Immigrants now hold 16% of all jobs across the OECD, and in half its member countries they accounted for at least half of the growth in employment in the decade to 2024. "Countries cannot afford to waste the skills migrants bring," the OECD warns.

The traffic runs both ways, because South Africans are migrants too. In 2024, 8,922 South Africans became British citizens, more than in any year since at least 2014. And 230,000 people born in South Africa now live in Australia, up from 177,000 a decade ago.

Back home, the biggest change in Gauteng is not coming from across the border. According to the Statistician-General, the main driver of the province's population growth is South Africans moving there from Limpopo.

The chants tell one story about who is here. The numbers tell a quieter one.

Sources: OECD International Migration Outlook 2026; Stats SA Census 2022 and Income and Expenditure Survey 2022/23; Africa Check.

DATA CENTRES



AI stands for all in: President Cyril Ramaphosa, Ambassador to the US Roelf Meyer, and Minister of Small Business Development Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams occupied the front row of a mega-delegation to the US. Photo: Department of Communications & Digital Technologies

Between Beijing and the Bay Area

President Cyril Ramaphosa has taken 300 South Africans to Silicon Valley in search of AI investment, days after his government agreed to build an AI centre with China. FATIMA MOOSA asks who pays for the data centres as South Africa keeps its options open.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has spent the week knocking on doors in Silicon Valley, with 300 South Africans in tow. The president is hoping to attract artificial intelligence (AI) investment and build an AI economy at home.

The group of ministers, officials, business people, students and academics is the largest delegation ever to travel with the president. He says sponsors are carrying most of the costs. The programme takes them from Stanford University to venture capitalists and tech companies, including Palo Alto Networks and Microsoft. The aim is to

learn from the heart of America's tech industry and bring some of it home.

It is not the first trip of its kind. In April 2022, Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Blade Nzimande visited Silicon Valley to gather ideas for the Decadal Plan for Science, Technology and Innovation, which runs from 2022 to 2032.

Much has changed since. In 2025, the US National Institutes of Health stopped funding work in South Africa, halting HIV and TB trials. The ban was lifted only in August.

Relations between the two countries remain strained, however.

US President Donald Trump has repeated the false claim that white South Africans face genocide, and his administration has cut key trade agreements. One of the loudest voices behind that claim is the South African-born Tesla chief executive Elon Musk.

Speaking in California on 16 November, Ramaphosa said Musk should give back to the country of his birth. The next day, Musk replied on X: "South Africa is now super racist against whites and Asians."

But Washington is not the only option. The government is courting Beijing too.

Days before Ramaphosa flew out, on the sidelines of the China-Africa Innovation Cooperation and Development Forum in Wuhan, South Africa and China agreed on plans for an AI talent development and innovation centre in South Africa.

A Chinese technical team is expected to visit for a first assessment.

The plans build on an agreement forged in September 2024, when the two countries raised relations to an "all-round strategic cooperative partnership" and named the digital economy and AI as priorities.

In July, Nzimande met China's science and technology minister, Yin Hejun, at the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai to discuss closer cooperation.

The push for AI means building data centres, and that is meeting resistance. Civil rights groups say two hyperscale data centres planned in Cape Town would use 4.4-billion litres of water a year, about as much as 18,000 homes

At home, the push for AI means building data centres, and that is meeting resistance. In Cape Town, civil rights group Housing Assembly has protested against two hyperscale data centres planned by the US company Equinix, and has filed a legal challenge with the UK nonprofit Foxglove.

The groups say the facilities would use more than 4.4-billion litres of water a year, about as much as 18,000 homes. Similar fights are under way from Virginia to Kenya.

Whichever partner South Africa chooses, the questions about water and power will be answered at home.

FUTURE FOCUS

Muddling through isn't a plan

South Africans have become experts at making a plan when things fail. As new councils take office, LESTER KIEWIT asks who we should be building for.

We're nearing the end of November. The year is almost done, and before we disappear into the great South African institution that is Dezemba, there's usually a moment when we take stock.

I love Christmas songs. I'm a sucker for schmaltz, and for *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* in particular: a little melancholy, a little warm, and most of all hopeful.

What gets me is the lyric: "Some day soon we all will be together, if the fates allow / Until then we have to muddle through somehow." That's the honest part. No guarantee. No time frame.

How very South African.

In 1998, the government's own energy White Paper warned that the country would run short of generating capacity. The government failed to act. Ten years later, the lights went off. We got very good at the workaround: inverters, gas stoves, solar panels and an app to plan our lives around load-shedding.

Water went the same way: ageing pipes, struggling treatment plants, rising demand.



Pretty when there's power: Adderley Street's famed Christmas lights. Photo: Misha Jordaan/Gallo Images

Maintenance was postponed. The problem patched. Local government sent water tankers out when taps ran dry. Residents were told to install JoJo tanks, buy bottled water or, famously, told by ANC heavyweight and Gauteng premier Panyaza Lesufi to shower at a hotel.

What a remarkably good way of adapting to a problem we should have prevented. After all, this is the country of 'n boer maak 'n plan. Making a plan is what we do when the system fails. Having a plan is what a system does when it's doing its job.

Local elections are behind us, and coalitions in 138 of 257 councils are being stitched together. But a new mayor can't fix in one term what took decades to break. The question is whether we're prepared to give meaningful change the time it takes.

Helen Zille has a point. After the Democratic Alliance won the most seats in the Johannesburg metro council, she cautioned that residents should not expect quick fixes. Real change is incremental. So who are we building for?



Long road ahead: South Africans are adapting to problems that we should have prevented, such as carrying water in response to shortages – and it will take time to repair the infrastructure. Themba Hadebe/AP Photo

I think about two five-year-olds on opposite sides of Cape Town. One is my boy, in Table View. The other is in Tafelsig. They live in the same city, but their childhoods offer them different odds.

When they turn 18, I want both to have a decent school, a safe street, reliable transport and a genuine chance to find work. I want both to be able to contribute to the country they inherit.

I have to care as much about the child in Tafelsig as I do about mine, because a safety net that lets one child fall through isn't secure for either of them.

I'm not asking for a perfect country. I'm asking for one where economists consider a healthy unemployment figure at around three to five percent, instead of 33.7%, according to Statistics SA. Where water is available in taps in all communities. Where walking to school isn't a safety risk. Where the ordinary business of living isn't an extraordinary struggle.

We're very good at being resilient in South Africa. Perhaps too good. At some point, you have to ask whether we're coping with things or simply accepting things we shouldn't have to accept.

A new council should mean refusing to let the next five years become another exercise in surviving the last five. We must measure progress by whether children who are too young to vote are becoming more secure.

I don't know when someday arrives. I don't expect it by next Christmas. But the song says we'll all be together, if the fates allow, and until then we muddle through. But let's make sure we're building something better while we do.

Our turn to eat



Hang out: A shisanyama is a space where sit-down restaurant rules don't apply. Photo: Emmanuel Croset/AFP

The fire and the forecourt

Joburg's best places to linger aren't its parks or its views. THAMEENAH DANIELS goes looking for where the city gathers to eat, and finds it at the shisanyama and the petrol station.

Ask Joburgers what their city has going for it, and sooner or later you'll hear the same answer: "We might not have the mountain or the ocean, but we certainly have the food!" It's hard to argue. This is a city that eats out, and eats together, one food stop at a time.

That got me thinking about third spaces, or what the American sociologist Ray Oldenburg called "third places".

Third spaces are the pockets of life outside our homes and workplaces: the places we go to catch up with friends, meet new people, have a meal or spend a few hours doing absolutely nothing. I think Joburg has mastered the art of creating them around food. Two stand out: shisanyamas and garage culture.

Shisanyama means "burnt meat" in isiZulu, and it is not quite the same as

a backyard braai. A braai is an intimate affair at someone's home; a shisanyama takes that love of cooking over an open fire into a public space. You choose your meat at the butcher's counter, it goes on the grill and comes back with pap and chakalaka. Then you find a spot near the speakers, and everyone from CEOs to workers becomes part of the day.

In Soweto, Chaf Pozi does it at the foot of the Orlando Towers with sport on a big screen; Sakhumzi, on Vilakazi Street, can hold up to 2,000 people. You don't need to know anyone there to feel part of it.

"Traditional restaurants are more strict in terms of rules. You go to a shisanyama and you'll find people eating while they're standing, which is frowned upon in restaurants. People are free to have loud conversations and laugh, whereas a manager would probably intervene at a traditional restaurant," says one regular patron.

A shisanyama is a place where people can let their guard down, he says. "Living in Joburg, you always have to be careful of your surroundings, but at these kinds of establishments everyone is chilled and just enjoying the vibe and food."

Then there's garage culture. Petrol stations are no longer just places to fill up; they've become social hubs where people grab a bite, have a coffee and do a little people-watching.

"Garage culture is a unique part of South African life. A garage is no longer just somewhere you stop to fill up your car. It's become a place where people meet, grab something to eat, have a coffee and connect," says Muhammed Patel, chef at Relish Deluxe.

Relish Deluxe sits on a garage forecourt on Jan Smuts Avenue, where Parkwood meets Rosebank, a few steps from The Pantry, the forecourt store from the Marble restaurant group. The Pantry has grown from that one site to stores in Pretoria, Bassonia and Fourways, and plans ten across Johannesburg by the end of 2027. Relish works on a similar model: it is open around the clock, serving wood-fired pizza, wagyu burgers and ras malai cheesecake to students, healthcare workers and groups of friends. "The food is halaal," Patel told the *Mail & Guardian*, "but the space is for everyone."

And if there's one thing Joburg teaches, it's that a good food culture can make a city feel like home.





Glow-up: Relish (left) and The Pantry have elevated the garage forecourt.

FICTION

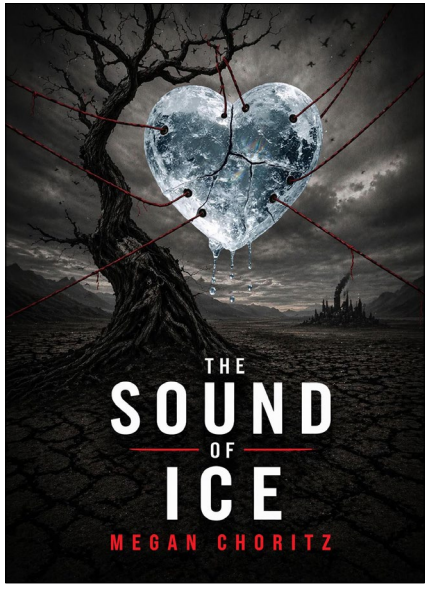
Writers look into our futures

Apartheid's end once haunted South African fiction about the future. Now it's water wars, surveillance and climate collapse. SHAUN DE WAAL reads five novels that imagine what's coming.

South African novels projecting their storylines into the future used to focus on the collapse of white minority rule – even if they were uncertain about the aftermath. Think *July's People* by Nadine Gordimer or Karel Schoeman's *Na die Geliefde Land* (*Promised Land* in English). Even JM Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* broadly fits, though it avoids an analysis of what happened in this near-future South Africa.

Nowadays, fictional futures are different. Recent speculative fiction presents dystopias, a harsh answer to the classic science fiction of optimistic technophiles. Extrapolated from the present, they take what we're suffering now and scale it up: What if the water woes of South Africa's cities today become widespread across the globe? What if our digital lives' mechanisms become insanely sophisticated and controlling?

In Megan Choritz's *The Sound of Ice*, wars over water supply are global. Governance has failed. Chaos rules. Toxic masculinity and gender-based violence are rampant. The female protagonists of this terrifying future thriller are trying to survive against steep odds.

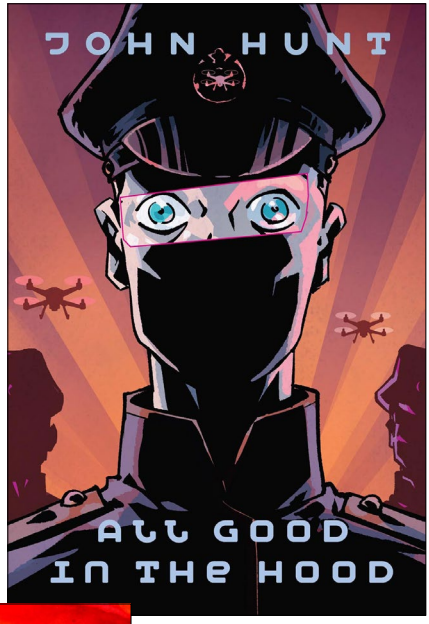


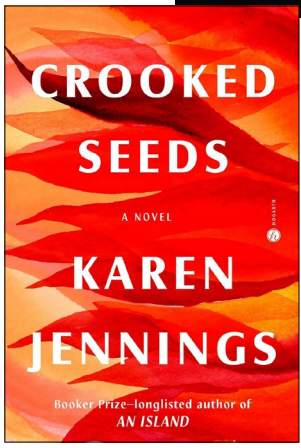
Choritz keeps the overview vague. She doesn't indulge in detailed world-building (usually expected of SF and fantasy); rather, her characters experience this crazed world directly, not intellectually, and without sufficient information to fully understand what's going on. There's no godlike omniscience. That, I think, mirrors the experience of most people alive on the plan-

et today, and it makes the novel even scarier. It also turns the focus of the story on to the relationships at its core.

Crooked Seeds by Karen Jennings also fastens on water as a marker of what we have to face in the future, just as we're facing now – but that much worse. The dreary future depicted by Jennings is immediate: it could be the day after tomorrow. She does not globalise this future as Choritz does, but keeps her focus on a specific locale, Cape Town.

The protagonist is facing her past, but embedded in South Africa's tortured history. This dystopia becomes a reflection on what from our past we carry into the future, or what will haunt us for a long time to come. So maybe it isn't a dystopia as such but an account of how this warped future was seeded decades ago. Again, the crux here is human relationships.





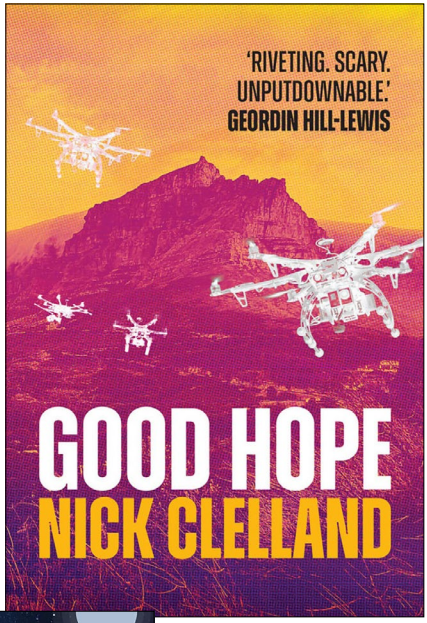
Family and memory are important, too, in advertising guru John Hunt's intriguing novel *All Good in the Hood*. This one's not about climate change, but about what happens when humans are so surveilled and mapped into a matrix that we become mere data bundles to be tracked and manipulated. In the name of a safer, happier society, of course.

Hunt doesn't tackle AI as such, but it hovers there in what feels like a world ordered and run by the US AI firm Palantir. An official in the state surveillance apparatus (significantly named Major Thom) gets caught, himself, producing some unknown data point that marks him as a problem. He's subjected to the full interrogation. Can he ultimately recapture what makes him fully human, including the bits that would be unintelligible to the mega-computer? This is *1984* with better tech, and the scenario is scary – but not in the way Choritz's dystopia is scary.

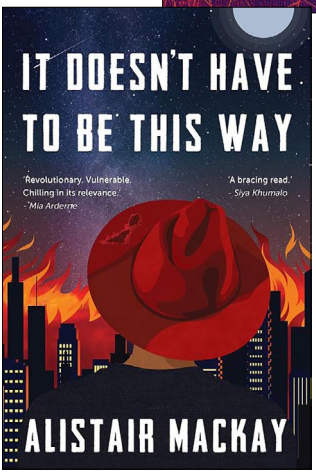
Nick Clelland's novel *Good Hope*, set in a future "independent" Cape, raises

similar questions: What freedoms will people give up to assure their security? Despite his clever way of describing this possible future (think Wikipedia entries), Clelland doesn't quite pull together the themes of political power and personal liberty, in my view. Still, the questions resonate.

Hunt's *All Good in the Hood* is less specific in its world-building. It is thoughtful and well articulated, but it's set in what feels like a generic (white?) first-world suburbia. Maybe that's the point, but this world lacks the grit and grime of Choritz's and Jennings's dystopias and thus some necessary narrative friction. It feels a bit abstract, like a novel of ideas – ideas that are compelling, nonetheless.



It Doesn't Have to Be This Way by Alistair Mackay contains both the "what if?" of climate catastrophe and a picture of what advanced technology does in that context. It's almost an account of a future envisaged by tech lords such as Palantir's Peter Thiel.



Mackay and his protagonists also go through the transition from the present to this immediate future; this is The Change, and it reveals much about them and makes for rich storytelling. They are not among those who can take refuge in The Citadel and live on virtual reality fed into bodies by implants, and they have to fight for their own future. In the end, it comes down, too, to human relationships. How do *we* survive?

South African writers are probing our possible, scariest futures in compelling and provocative ways. Their ways of thinking about what's over the horizon are broad and complex, and we can use their storytelling to not only beguile the waterless, powerless hours but to contemplate our places in that future. And how to stay human.

INNER-CITY FARMING

No land, no limits

You don't need a tractor or a title deed to farm. From a Cape Town rooftop to Soweto's schoolyards and Alexandra's backstreets, city farmers are proving that food grows wherever people refuse to give up, writes IVOR PRICE of Food For Mzansi.

High above the shoppers and parking bays of Kenilworth Centre in Cape Town, about 340 vertical towers fill five tunnels with basil, tomatoes, peppers and chillies.

"The footprint may look compact, but the work inside is constant," says Zubayr Sydow, operations manager at HandPicked CityFarm. "The farm is only three years old, and every season teaches us something."

One regular client takes about 10kg of basil every two weeks, but Sydow is clear about the farm's first job. "This site is primarily a training facility," he says. "People don't realise how long harvesting takes. It's not just harvesting and sending it out. You have to make sure the size and quality are right."



Growing up: Zubayr Sydow of HandPicked City Farm says the rooftop training farm uses 340 vertical towers in five tunnels to grow vegetables. Photos: Supplied

Rooftops like this one capture what makes city farming so powerful in South Africa. For generations, the question of who gets to farm has been tied to the painful question of who owns land. City farmers look at rooftops, schoolyards, pavements and abandoned dumping sites, and they see fields.

In Meadowlands, Soweto, Tebogo Makgatho is one of them. "Bringing vegetables to school for career day was my way of showing that I already had an idea about farming," he says. "I wanted to be a farmer even back then."

In 2023 he registered Agrolimo Farms, starting on a 37-square-metre plot where he intercropped maize and pumpkin. Today he farms land at Tsumbedzo Primary, Mbuyisa Primary and Mathediso High School, and employs six part-time workers. "Owning a farming business in Gauteng is the greatest achievement, and I go to the farm almost seven days a week," he says.

Water outages are his biggest headache. To fight pests, he leans on older farmers nearby. "I occasionally visit other

farmers, especially the elderly, who share their insights on the challenges I face."

Across the city in Alexandra, University of Pretoria postdoctoral fellow Blessings Masuku and colleagues interviewed 40 gardeners. Most were women who had farmed for a decade or longer, growing spinach, pumpkin leaves and indigenous herbs in backyards, at schools and even on a former dumpsite.

"A kitchen garden is like having a pharmacy in your backyard," one gardener said. Another added: "For me, growing plants is more than just for the stomach."

Urban farming will not replace the farms that feed the nation. But it puts fresh food within walking distance of families who struggle to afford it, and turns forgotten spaces into places of pride.

In Hillbrow, urban farming has reached new heights. On the roof of Lake Success, a Johannesburg Housing Company building, residents grow hydroponic spinach and other leafy greens. For volunteer Busisiwe Mkhwanazi, the rooftop garden is a welcome escape: it supports residents' mental wellbeing, and it teaches practical skills, from planting seeds and nurturing seedlings to making compost.

Nearby, Sibongile Cele was farming the sky long before property owners and city planners caught on. The former Deloitte auditor turned the roof of the Outreach Foundation building into Mcebo Wealth Rooftop Farm. As a "landless South African", she says, she looked up to the skies instead. "It's been implemented, and we are bringing the change in the inner city."

Two years ago, Cele donated the farm to the Outreach Foundation and its church community. Today, young people who come to the foundation for counselling also use the garden, so a rooftop that started as her business now helps grow the next generation. Her words could speak for every city farmer in this story: "When you've got purpose and vision to see things change, there is tenacity in finishing strong and being the difference that you want to see in the community."





Urban farmers: (Top) Sibongile Cele on the Hillbrow rooftop where she started Mcebo Wealth Rooftop Farm. (Bottom) Tebogo Makgatho farms schoolyards in Soweto through Agrolimo Farms. Photos: Supplied

POLITICS



In the balance: The DA is well placed in Nelson Mandela Bay and has retained its majority in Cape Town, but in Johannesburg (pictured) it may cede to an ANC-ActionSA coalition. Photo: Emmanuel Croset/AFP

No monopoly on power

The coalition talks are being told as a choice between salvation and disaster. SIZWE MPOFU-WALSH argues that the likeliest outcome is more ordinary, and healthier: different parties running different metros, each with a record to defend in 2029. The bigger reckoning may be inside the ANC.

South Africa's coalition negotiations are being narrated with the familiar vocabulary of impending catastrophe. Every possible partnership is presented as a choice between salvation and disaster. Yet the likeliest outcome is more ordinary: different parties governing different metros, with each having to defend its record before 2029.

We should welcome that prospect. No party has a monopoly on competence, and none will have a monopoly on power.

My expectation is that the ANC, ActionSA, DA and MKP will share the spoils across the metros. An ANC–

ActionSA pact looks likeliest in Gauteng, with ActionSA leading Johannesburg and Tshwane and the ANC taking Ekurhuleni. MKP appears closest to governing eThekwini. The DA is well placed in Nelson Mandela Bay, and has retained its outright majority in Cape Town. Buffalo City will probably go to the ANC. Mangaung remains anyone's guess.

'Doomsday' is overdone

Some DA supporters suggest that excluding the DA from Johannesburg would be to invite disaster. Others treat the DA's vote share as an entitlement to govern. Neither argument survives scrutiny.

The largest party still needs a majority. The DA accepted that principle when it helped keep MKP out of the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government in 2024. It cannot become undemocratic when the same principle works against the DA.

Nor does the DA's record in Cape Town guarantee success elsewhere. Its years in charge of Tshwane hardly produced an unqualified triumph. Gauteng's financial and infrastructure problems will constrain whoever takes office. Governance will be imperfect under any coalition; that does not make every alternative to the DA an apocalypse.

Under the likely Gauteng deal, the ANC would also be diminished: one mayor instead of two, and fewer seats with which to dictate terms. That is welcome. But fewer ANC mayors will matter only if coalition partners use their greater bargaining power to insist on better appointments and services. I expect ActionSA to drive a hard bargain.



Power play: At this stage of the coalition talks, Jacob Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe party seems likely to govern eThekwini. Photo: Rajesh Jantilal/AFP

The DA has also contributed to its own predicament. By ruling out partners the ANC remained willing to approach, it narrowed its own options and strengthened the ANC's hand.

Its recent willingness to talk more broadly is sensible, though it may have come too late.

Even so, winning Nelson Mandela Bay would give the DA two metros, dou-

ble its present tally. A turnaround there would strengthen its case in 2029 and help show that its governing competence travels beyond the Western Cape.

ActionSA could be Gauteng's biggest negotiating winner. It would also inherit the hardest assignment: Johannesburg. Herman Mashaba would face broken infrastructure, strained finances and coalition partners with competing demands.

Winning the mayoralty would settle none of those problems. Failure would be highly visible.

eThekwini could be the bigger national story. Leading a metro would force MKP to answer for decisions about public money and services. Expectations among its critics are low. If it performs better than they predict, it could enter 2029 with a stronger claim to govern. If it fails, voters will have a record to judge.

The EFF faces a different paradox. Despite its poor showing at the polls, it could secure positions in ANC coalitions across the country. Electoral losses need not mean exclusion from office. Negotiating strength depends partly on whose votes other parties need.

Whither the GNU?

The DA will be angry if it is shut out of Gauteng, but I doubt it will leave the government of national unity immediately. It has swallowed plenty of disappointments already. Walking away would mean giving up its Cabinet posts and admitting that its central political wager had failed. For now, it has more reason to stay and fight.

The ANC is harder to predict. The party has said its national executive committee will meet again to assess the election. That meeting will force a discussion about responsibility for the result.

I expect demands for an early elective conference, and even for the resignation of top leaders, to surface. Those calls are already being made within the party.

President Cyril Ramaphosa will struggle to escape that reckoning. He led the ANC into two successive electoral disasters and made the GNU his answer to the first. His opponents can now use the second to challenge both his leadership and his choice of partners.

This is the weakest Ramaphosa has been since becoming ANC president. The centre of power is shifting back towards the NEC

In my view, this is the weakest Ramaphosa has been since becoming ANC president. He and his faction can no longer assume that the NEC will endorse their preferred course. The centre of power is shifting back towards the NEC, where rivals have greater room to contest coalition policy and the terms of his departure.

The DA may be prepared to keep backing Ramaphosa. Whether he can still persuade the ANC to keep backing the DA is becoming much less certain.

OPINION



The left has nowhere to vote

Weathered: The ANC's campaigns have not stood up to the elements. Photo: Paul Botes

The ANC's collapse at the polls has rewarded the right, from the Democratic Alliance to ActionSA and the uMkhonto weSizwe Party. And by allying with Zuma's party, argues RICHARD PITHOUSE, the South African Communist Party has betrayed the left.

Jacob Zuma's rape trial in 2006 began an open and insurgent populist challenge to the ethical and political commitments that had animated the African National Congress in government since 1994. Looking for support, Zuma told the left within the Congress alliance that he was on their side. Despite the grim scenes at his trial – the gross sexism, ethnic chauvinism and all the rest – the bulk of the left in the alliance offered Zuma their support.

Zuma had come to lead a constituency in the ANC that, often lacking capital and certification, was shut out of the forms of accumulation that had enabled people like Cyril Ramaphosa to become fabulously wealthy. Its dominant ideology was aggressive and authoritarian nationalism, saw laws and regulations as barriers to progress and framed the enrichment of a counter-elite as national progress even though it was plainly at the direct expense of society as a whole.

As Zuma built an ever more brazen kleptocracy, reorganised his party and

the state to enable private looting of public wealth and destroyed state institutions and capacity, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the ANC Youth League all came to realise that they had made a catastrophic error of judgement. Cosatu began to speak in terms of a "predatory elite" and the SACP described Zuma and his allies as "criminals and demagogues".

As pressure on Zuma mounted, he turned to the kind of Manichean ideological strategy that puts everyone in one of two camps – for Zuma or for white monopoly capital – and began to repress dissent.



Brazen: Jacob Zuma's 2006 rape trial signalled the beginning of a populist challenge to the ethics of the ANC, says the author. Photo: Paul Botes

Support for the ANC had begun to decline during Jacob Zuma's period in office, but has now crashed in the local government elections

The roots of our current crisis, made so clear in the recent election, reach into two sources. The first is that while the opposition to Zuma came from a wide array of forces, including trade unions and grassroots struggles, the left in the Congress alliance was not able to run a candidate and develop a project against Zumaism. White capital, supported by the white-dominated media, invested huge amounts of money in successfully backing Cyril Ramaphosa as the alternative to Zuma. He was presented as the man who could clean up corruption and run a centrist government friendly to business. He proved to be much more of a certain kind of ANC man than his backers had hoped, never had the will or power to effectively move against the corrupt people and networks in the party and, while sustaining neoliberal macroeconomic policy, did not give capital the support it needed to thrive.

The second source of the current crisis is that when Zuma was forced out of office, and then out of the ANC, Zumaism continued to fester in the ANC, in the state, in several new parties, as well as in nodes of the media, the academy, some churches and trade unions.

Support for the ANC had begun to decline during Zuma's period in office, but has now crashed in the local government elections. The primary reasons for this are that years of the sort of austerity and neoliberal tendering associated with Ramaphosa's ANC and the gross corruption and lack of regard for basic professionalism associated with Zuma's faction had combined to leave cities and towns across the country in precipitous decline.

The primary beneficiaries of the rout of the ANC were the centre-right DA, the far-right ActionSA and Zuma's MK Party, which, unhinged from the rest of the ANC, poses a serious danger to society, to governance and to democratic values and practices. The MK Party is demagogic, has a clear ethnic character, prefers authoritarianism to the constitutional order, includes a grim collection of corrupt people, backs the worst elements in traditional authority, has clear links to extortion rackets and has been on the streets with March and March as it has blockaded hospitals and threatened and attacked migrants on the streets. Zuma himself is homophobic and sexist and supports the monarchies in eSwatini and Morocco. The capacity for street violence built via xenophobic mobilisations may well be sustained and deployed against new targets.



A stretch: The Zuma years did damage to the tripartite alliance, Ramaphosa's neoliberalism alienated the SACP, and there are few authentic left choices remaining. Photo: Rajesh Jantilal/AFP

None of the alternatives available to the ANC to build the coalitions required for it to retain some municipal power accord with its stated principles and policies. The DA is white-dominated and neoliberal; ActionSA is to the right of the DA on economics, extreme in its xenophobia, and willing to make deals with corrupt actors – and its leader is demagogic; the Economic Freedom Fighters are progressive on paper and principled on issues such as Palestine and xenophobia but seriously corrupt, while the MK Party is a clear and present danger to basic standards of governance and democratic values.

The SACP is also progressive on paper but has, via the Council of the Left, formed an alliance with a range of corrupt and xenophobic actors including the MK Party. If the party were serious about its stated principles it would have stood apart from these parties and worked to build a coalition with the people, to be in solidarity with struggles and build the left in society. Its decision to ally with the MK Party and others is a gross betrayal of the principles of the left and has shattered its political standing on the left in South Africa, and around the world.

The years ahead will be hard and the left, which does not have any credible place in electoral politics, will have to be built from within society.

Photo essay

Holding it together

Johannesburg runs on women more than it admits. They fill the buckets before the next water cut, walk home together after the night shift, keep the neighbourhood WhatsApp groups going when the lights go out, and hold vigils that outlast every promise. This week RUMANA AKOOB spent time with six of them: a striking chicken worker, a young woman in Soweto, a survivor of apartheid violence, a civic organiser, a neighbour who helps keep her street running, and a mother waiting for her taps to flow again. Each told her what she carries, and what she needs next.

Photographs by Rumana Akoob



Portia Masolokie, 40, Olifantsfontein. For six years, Portia (holding the placard) has worked at Festive Chicken's plant as a casual, employed through a labour broker and earning about R5,600 a month. Her shifts can end at 3am, when she and her colleagues walk home together for safety. There isn't enough protective clothing for the freezers, so she brings her own from home. A single mother and her family's only breadwinner, she supports a daughter at the University of Johannesburg and a son who lives with her mother. She sees them only on annual leave. On strike since 29 October, she hasn't been paid for weeks and has no food at home. "No one is helping," she says. "That's why we decided to take a chance and protest."



Babalo Sepanya, 20, Mofolo, Soweto. Babalo's family went without water for days the week before this photograph was taken, and the taps ran dry again two days before it. In her home, nobody wonders whether the next cut will come. They know it will. Every day, after using what they need, Babalo refills the family's 20-litre buckets so they are ready. The water tankers that used to come no longer reach her street. When the water does return, she says, it is dirty, and people around her are getting sick. Babalo is unemployed and lost faith in politicians long before this election. "Before we voted, we had everything," she says. "Now we're done voting… even if you don't have water, it's fine." Her message to whoever becomes mayor: "We really do need change. Consider us as the youth."



Regina Lolo, 60, originally from the Eastern Cape. Regina walks on crutches, a daily reminder of the night in 1994 when apartheid police broke into her family's home. They killed her two sisters and her brother, and shot her with rubber bullets, leaving permanent injuries. Her doctors say she now needs an operation. For the past four years she has slept on the pavement outside the Constitutional Court with other survivors and families in the Galela Campaign, demanding reparations. She voted in every election until this one. "Every time they promised us," she says. "Can I vote for staying here outside, sick?" What she needs next: "Build us houses and address our wounds."



Nomsa Mbatha, 70, Yeoville.
As a student, Nomsa fought apartheid for a bigger stake in the country. Decades later, she is back on the streets, this time fighting for water, electricity and refuse collection. Through the Yeoville Bellevue Civic Movement, she organises Saturday clean-ups, door-to-door bin audits and WhatsApp groups where thousands of residents report outages and emergencies. This year she stood for ward councillor under the slogan "People before politics". She didn't win, but the work goes on. "Most of the time it's women [who lead]," she says, "because we care about the person." What she needs next is a councillor who does the job, "so we can do much bigger stuff": recycling programmes, feeding schemes and a basketball court for Yeoville's young people.





Jade Abbott, 37, Braamfontein Werf. Outages hit Jade's neighbourhood roughly every six weeks, cutting power for days at a time. When the Mayfair substation caught fire this month, residents went without electricity for more than a week, losing freezers full of food, working hours and sleep. Now the community has become a big part of the solution: residents of her precinct organise their own generators, plumbers and backup plans, and work out among themselves who can afford to pay. "I like to call Joburg a series of densely packed villages," she says. "In a village, people have to look out for themselves… We are doing the job of the city." Still, she sees possibility in it. "We're learning very fast. We might actually come up with systems that are more sustainable. I believe in the people in Joburg."



Alecia Frinks, 38, Eldorado Park. Two weeks without water, and two baskets of washing waiting. Alecia, a mother of two, has heard the cuts could last through December, but nobody has told her why the taps are dry. "We don't actually know the truth," she says. She plans to take her children, aged seven and five, to a relative's home for the holidays. She didn't vote this year. "The party I vote for never wins. I just feel that there's no use of voting." She isn't waiting on the city to change her life, though. Next year she will study and start her own clothing line. Her children, she says, are coping with the water cuts better than she expected. "It's funny how they understand."

BOOK EXTRACT

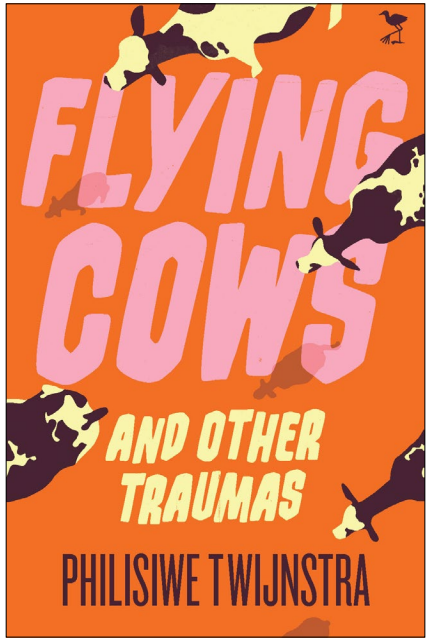
The gift of disappearing

Girls keep going missing from the township, and the local radio reads out their names like a shopping list. In this extract from the short story *I Ate the Bones of My Mother*, a daughter creeps downstairs at night and hears her parents fighting about it. The story is from *Flying Cows and Other Traumas*, PHILISIWE TWIJNSTRA's collection of magical realism, speculative fiction and fantasy, in which black women are thrust into terrifying, spellbinding worlds, past, present and future, and find a way through.

There were several reasons why mother was quiet, and one of them was that father had the gift of disappearing; nights often fell on the roof without him. Mother and the steaming brown gravy pot she had prepared both waited for him. But Mother dismissed Father's activity as a passing pleasure, an activity he did at night. "Men are built differently," she would say.

Father fixed cars in the community: if someone had a flat tyre, they called him; if they needed petrol, they called him; if they got stuck on the highway, they called him. Many people would visit and ask for advice or for a cup of sugar, or bring their broken cars, broken televisions, broken heaters and broken two-plate stoves for fixing. My parents were helpful and kind, always willing to hold the fort for the next guy.

However, nine days ago, things changed when Zakhona, the township beauty-pageant queen, disappeared. She was last seen bringing an empty Tupperware back to our house.



There had been many girls before. The local radio listed the missing girls, their names and ages, like a shopping list. This one was Zakhona, Mr Mngomezulu's daughter.

I heard voices in the night from the dining room, as if the walls had stepped aside: my parents were at each other's throats. I touched the doorknob, and the door opened. Mother hadn't locked it. She used to, every night. She said it was because of my sleepwalking.

I tiptoed down the stairs from my bedroom to the kitchen. There was a wall dividing the kitchen and the dining room, and I stood quietly behind the wall to eavesdrop on my parents.



Speculative: Author, actor and director Philisiwe Twijnstra's short stories pit black women protagonists against an array of malevolent forces.

Mother's breath arrived late at her lips. I could hear the chair scoot. "Gaja! We cannot live like this," she said.

"You know very well that if I do not do this, they will come for her," Father said.

"She sees them at night. She cannot sleep."

"It's only night terrors."

"She is a child. She should sleep. She should have good dreams."

"Come on. She'll be eighteen soon."

"And you are not worried?"

Father didn't say anything. I could hear my own breathing.

"Listen to the radio, Gaja. For the sky beyond the stars! It's getting out of hand."

"What do you suggest I do?" There was silence, again, and I heard Mother's breathing became frantic. "I will get more goats, chickens for you," she said.

"Don't insult me." Father clicked his tongue. "Insulting me will not ease your guilty conscience."

"At least I hold my guilt, wholeheartedly. What about you?"

I heard Father clear his throat, the sound of his feet renegotiating the floor. "It is my nature, Rabe. I cannot run away from it."

"Girls are missing Gaja! People will find out."

"We have been careful. We have a system."

"It's not working!"

"We will be fine."

"We are not fine." Mother paused. Her voice softer, she said, "This Zakhona thing has brought too much attention, and it's going to end badly." The last words held a tremor.

***Flying Cows and Other Traumas* by Philisiwe Twijnstra is published by Jacana.**

The Big Picture



Top edge: Kagiso Rabada dismissed Towhid Hridoy (right) during the Test between South Africa and Bangladesh at The Wanderers on 18 November. South Africa won by nine wickets. Photo: Phill Magakoe/AFP

"Because technology without wisdom doesn't just fail – it devours the very humanity it promised to serve."

— **Michele Sagan, *Future Shaping: Future Proofing Your Organization, Leadership, and People in an Era of Disruption* (Penguin, 2026)**

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