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IN THE SHADOW OF GOD

DISSERTATION

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

GOTHATAONE MOENG

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

This work of fiction comprises a collection of stories exploring the lives of women in post-Independence and contemporary Botswana, as they navigate love, relationships, traditions, disease, caretaking and grieving in a rapidly changing world.

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CHAPTER 1

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In a different year, on a different day, Kgomotso Motimedi would have joked about inheriting her cooking skills from her mother Mma-Taolo; she of the lumpy porridges, she of the over-salted beef stews, she of the various other atrocities. Not that morning. That morning, standing in her childhood kitchen, Kgomotso felt she should ask her mother how she was doing. She wanted to touch the older woman, cradle the folds of her cheeks in her hands, feel the heat of her forehead the way her mother had when Kgomotso was a little girl down with a cold, or a fever or tonsillitis. Kgomotso thought she should inject her voice with tenderness and ask, “How are you, Mme? Are you going to be alright?”

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That morning, the first Christmas morning without her brother and his deceptions, her mother needed respite, Kgomotso thought. So she had risen early to mix the batter and to mould the dough in her hands before dropping each ball into the muffin pan. She had sat by herself – missing her brother – then escaped back to her bedroom to cuddle with her husband and kiss her daughter's hair. By the time she went back to the kitchen, smoke was escaping from the oven and crowding the air.

"It's going to be fine," Kgomotso said, more to herself than to her mother, as she dropped the pan into the sink. "It's going to be fine." She held onto the optimism of the words as she scrambled to make something new amid her son's cries: sorghum soft porridge for the kids, tea, eggs and bread for the adults. She held onto the words as she watched her mother swaying around the room in an attempt to quiet the crying baby; she held onto them when her mother finally sat down feeding the baby spoonfuls of the porridge.

Her daughter Sethunya walked into the kitchen, her hair disheveled, her face still full of sleep. She wore the fluffy pink Bratz bathrobe she insisted on sleeping in despite the heat. Kgomotso kneeled to kiss Sethunya's cheeks, first the left one, then the right one, then she kissed her lips and her forehead, as if making up for the inevitable time such kisses would be inappropriate, when her daughter would demand that she stop.

In a different year, on a different day, Kgomotso Motimedi would have joked about inheriting her cooking skills from her mother Mma-Taolo; she of the lumpy porridges, she of the over-salted beef stews, she of the various other atrocities. Not that morning. That morning,

standing in her childhood kitchen, Kgomotso felt she should ask her mother how she was doing. She wanted to touch the older woman, cradle the folds of her cheeks in her hands, feel the heat of her forehead the way her mother had when Kgomotso was a little girl down with a cold, or a fever or tonsillitis. Kgomotso thought she should inject her voice with tenderness and ask, “How are you, Mme? Are you going to be alright?”

It would be impolite, prompting an elder to unmask her feelings in that way. Even if Kgomotso asked, she knew she would get the standard answer her mother always parsed out.

“Fine, fine,” her mother would say. “We are still here. These bones are as you see them.”

That morning, the smell of smoke must have summoned Mma-Taolo into the kitchen. The older woman cradled Kgomotso’s youngest in her arms. As he kicked and fussed from the blanket in which he was swaddled, Mma-Taolo, her face stolid, leaned against the fridge and swung the baby left-right-left, her eyes fixed on the ruined scones on the table. Kgomotso scraped the scones from the pan into the rubbish bin by the door, half considering making another batch before the rest of the household awoke.

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VITA

Gothataone Moeng graduated from the University of Botswana in 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies. She has had her short fiction published in *A Public Space*, *Oxford American*, *The Kalahari Review*, *Aerodrome* and anthologies published in Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya. She has previously worked as a trainee scriptwriter for Storyline Media, and as a production secretary for the No.1 Ladies Detective Agency. As part of The Company@Maitisong, she co-wrote Pula! Money Matters, a stage play that she later co-adapted into Madi Majwana: Stories from your Pockets, a radio play on financial literacy. She has also worked as a hard-news and features reporter for the Mmegi and Monitor newspapers.