

PEELING TIME (DELUXE EDITION)

by Tlotlo Tsamaase

[Intro: Anonymous Girl]

♪♪“My Religion” (Ft. GBV) ♪♪

Ay-ay, yo.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

The corpse of her voice hangs from the murdered legacy tree exhumed from the placenta of her being. *I am a proper woman*, she sings. The burning tree blazes in the dark, the floor made of dark, the ceiling made of dark, the air—there is no air.

Severed organs and limbs crawl from various distances to join her abdomen. No jury. Court in the bundus. Seven men in the audience. It's a tie-reduction function, *we so fitted*. Spotlight on this—*hashtag* me, brah—campaign. Runway show. *Girl, slay, slay, slay*—off-screen voices chant.

Kwaito rises from the grave; the killer's marionette, a woman, devoid of color, hobbles forward; her dismembered limbs attached by invisible senseless tendons are tugged as she bends and sways—*we good, my ho's got some sick moves*—and when she dips forward for the vosho dance her head rolls to the ground—*woo, woo, bag her, gonna bag her*.

A choir of women march behind her, toyi-toying, as the dead body dances, becomes a viral dance challenge, sparking further

outrage. A judge comes in doing the kwassa kwassa, gavel in hand, moonwalks by the choir of women. Taps one, announces, “Twenty-year-old girl. Only worth two years in prison. Going once, going twice—gone to the killer brother in the back.” *This how we do it, teach 'em a lesson. Girl slay, slay, slay.* The killer brother stalks her with a machete, drags the twenty-year-old off-screen, her screams a good five-octave—

[GBV]

Abide. Shut up. Fuck off. Bitch. Stop overreacting. Shut up, woo!
The dead victim watches, unperturbed by the Klaxon of her voice flickering, spitting ash, burning, singing as it burns:

I am a proper woman.

I am proper Black.

I am proper African.

This is my religion, he is my sermon: the brother, the son, the father, the grandfather. My roots tethered, burned for their lungs. I am a proper woman. My voice is my only freedom, bleached, burned, stomped, slaughtered, hacked by the day, the week, the century—

A horrifying sweetness. A chyron ends the night.

And the scene freezes, splices itself, extrudes itself from inside a cranium, outside the galloping brown eyes of a woman, as we dolly-zoom from her face to the outside harrowing dimensions of the four boundary walls of a twenty-seven-inch screen.

Across from it, a twenty-seven-year-old man, Motsumi, slouches in his ergonomic chair, finishes editing the last frame of the dream-song to upload later and send to his associates; the fiery hands of the voice, trying to strangle him, are a neon-saturated flare on his monitor, trapped. Before, ten hours of work in a day produced only one minute of animation. But it's now

only taken five hours to produce 50 percent of the film. He re-plays the song. Again. Again. *The judge carries a newborn into the same grave, takes the time from her body, gives it to a sixty-year-old man, then his gavel knocks the nail into the coffin of her torso.* Motsumi stares at the screen. He needs more women. More . . .

BEFORE

[Pre-chorus: Motsumi]

♪♪“Broke-Ass N*gga” ♪♪

The stress was homicidal. Critic reviews murdered his film direction/rapping career: the plot watery, the narrative nonsensically violent, the subpar acting drowned by a poor story line. His fussy girlfriend, emotions exploding all over the fucking place, wailed that he stole her abuse story, splashed it on the screen in such a shitty impersonal way. Not that anyone would fucking know it was her. Girl, trippin’. Mxm, bitch getting *too* comfortable. Some bite, some banter. She’ll be back.

He’s hit rock bottom, the nadir of his career, a suicidal seesaw. Two options: kill himself or ask the devil for help.

So he bought the muthi-tech in the township of Old Naledi—so proximal to Gaborone’s purity—in an unusual way: He had to spit in an obscure half-cut plastic bottle, which was swirled with some chibuki-like liquid. The other men spat in it, holding on to it with grimy fingers, then disappeared into a shack, returned with the liquid, now thick with red clots of something he didn’t want to compute. Next, they proceeded to a surgical routine of removing his foreskin, dear God, casually in a banter of tsotsitaal jokes. The blood from his manhood, which formed part of this concoction, was important for his astral travels and the initiation of being a spiritual husband and nightmare-sex, if you believe in such things.

Muthi-tech wasn’t actually a device, it was part-hardware part-virus that transmuted a typical laptop’s software to edit abstract

things that stood outside reality's frames once you poured something—*anything* into it. It arose because some men in the city were fed up of not getting away with the shit they used to get away with. There's always a solution for a problem, for a rapist, a murderer, a dead career, addiction et al. And Motsumi found one.

He returned to his home in Oodi, hid the container from his girlfriend, drank the mixture that night when she fell asleep. Toward midnight, sweat-sheathed, he writhes in bed from a cataclysmic pain. He tries to piss, shit, vomit—nothing comes out. Except, standing under the wan light of a moon, his trauma desiccates itself from his form. “Well, let's go murder us some,” it says.

His trauma, shadow-embossed, is a dark abyss of what could only be evil. He needs it, what it can do for him. The last days have already cleaved him from reality, and this makes more sense.

But when he looks back, his body's snuggled in the folded duvets of his bed, spooning his girlfriend. His gossamer form and his trauma climb the back of night and, firefly-lit, travel in its medium, thick with ectoplasm, to various homes, hunting, hungry. It's hours of traveling the span of villages, the midst of bundus through Gweta, Letlhakane, Mmadinare, Shakawe, Tutume, until a sticky innocence caws through the gable roof of a building apartment, on the fifth floor of a two-bedroomed unit.

They slip in through the wooden window—no DNA left behind, no signs of forced entry—and see a sleeping woman, a slight snore. Following the didactic actions of his trauma, he nests on her chest, crows their lust. Their tongues wind their way deep into her ear, wetting themselves with the last sounds she heard: a South African soap opera, the microwave pinging, the voice of her mother on a call—then finally their tongues stride along her ears' canals, float into her mind-tide and swim with the velocity of her dreams . . .

Hours later, intoxicated with the dream syrup, Motsumi and his trauma escape into the thickness of night, returning to the

house exhausted. He finds his body, no longer full and bone-shaped, but fabric-wise. There it is, the chrysalis of his skin, waiting, beady with crystals, as if decaying into some jewel. Drowsy, he slips into it, cocoons himself in his skin, digesting himself into the larva of the sleeper's dream and him, fusing them into one being.

The next morning, he wakes, fresh, awash with vitality. Prepares eggs benedict, chakalaka and butter-furred bread, drizzles them with the homemade hollandaise sauce. His girlfriend returns from a steaming shower, dressed, surprised at the preparation. No apology, but all's forgiven. He kisses her as she sits down across from him at the kitchen island.

"What are your plans today?" she asks, chewing.

"Well, I'm thinking of animating this idea—"

She quips. "See? I told you an idea would come through."

He laughs. "Had a dream last night, and I want to get it whilst it's still fresh."

"You know, I've read some books and watched some movies that originated from a dream. It's crazy what an imagination can develop from a tiny scene of a dream, huh." She realizes his pause, his fear. Reaches for his hand. "Hey, it's all right to be scared, but I believe in you. This time it'll really work out."

"You think so?"

She smiles sweetly. "I believe so."

He wishes her a good day at work. She walks into the garage smiling, thinking, *He's back. The sweet guy I fell in love with is back.*

When her car exits the entry gates, and the trail of its dust disappears, Motsumi slides the curtain back into place, walks into the basement, a bomb-shelter design constructed to contain screams. He sits at his workstation, spits out an insult at the self-defilement of connecting himself to this muthi-tech, a fusion of muthi and technology formed from the hardware of bones, peeled skin, eyes of a particular ethnicity, and the typical cliché of men's desires

hunting albinos, virgins and the Sãn. Of course all this hardwired into the motherboard. It doesn't run on electricity, rather the bio-energy of the culprit, a devil-wannabe—plugged into the orifices of man, hence why it's unpopular. Now, Motsumi pulls his pants down to slip the tentacle of this thing inside himself . . .

[Verse 1: Anonymous Girl]

♪♪ “P***y Love (interlude)” ♪♪

I wake from the assault, in darkness, then neon lights, bling flowing, pussy dripping money. I sit up, my knees lead, my legs lead, my ass drops, splits into twelve of me, twelve mannequins dancing. Dressed in skin, no bone, flexible. Into black, into fog, and I float in that vapor until the next play. My screams heighten the tempo of this song, this song my prison . . .

[Verse 2: Motsumi]

♪♪ “Another One” ♪♪

Stylus in hand, dream-famished now, face lit by his glowing monitor, he realizes something strange: The woman from last night is trapped in the retina of his screen.

He uploads the dream sequence from his first video, “P***y Love (interlude),” onto his social media pages, a mini-trailer of his upcoming work. It's beyond what he expected, comments flowing in. The imagery, the narrative, the process—his trauma nears him, leers as Motsumi gets to work on the next one, “My Religion,” after getting his laitie GBV to ad lib some sick rhymes. He stops, the flow no longer there. He needs another woman for this one. Or rather a couple more women. This video is more complex, so best he works on it after he's collected more women for the other videos. He schedules “My Religion” to be his fifth video that he'll share with the world.

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” Motsumi says. “This is impossible. Before, to produce one minute of animation run time, it’d take me ten hours. Today it took those hours to produce a half-length film, running time forty-one minutes.”

His trauma smiles, a hoarse voice, a nothing voice. “Conjuring an image in your mind costs nothing and is time-quick. Requires no special effects, no production sets, no labor hires of production assistants, directors, producers, DOP, actors, dancers, set locations and all that fucking money-leeching cohort. The universe that can be conjured in a mind requires no budget—you could be riding a bike in fucking space. We won’t even need a green screen and those gimmicks—it’ll all be simulated by the imaginations and fears.”

Dazed, Motsumi splays back into his chair. “Jesus.”

“Exactly.”

“You know what I can do with this?”

“Exactly.”

“Where the fuck were you this whole time when I really needed you?”

“You’re welcome,” his trauma says, sardonic. “This will not only garner us wealth, we’ll be powerful. Untouchable.”

“But the women—”

“Comatose,” it says, “no one will ever find out. Trust me, no one will touch us. Anyway, once these women end up in hospital, their families will probably kill their life support after some time. *They* always run out of money to sustain them.” It leans in. “Now let’s go fuck up more shit. Here’s what happens next . . .”

♪♪“P***y Love (extended version)”♪♪

He stayed in a sleepless state to pour things out from his dreams onto the floor of his basement until he was dream-famished, rapping all the while, writing down lyrics, editing the mix. Tonal

darks. The aesthetics of the human body splayed on his screen. Then as soon as his girlfriend fell asleep he began his nocturnal travels.

The next one, he entered a woman's sleep cycle and speared through the tunnel of her uterus, where unbeknownst to women, hauntings were seeded and as much as men released sperm into that uterine realm, they cleansed their energies by purging their darkness into them, and sapped what they could from the woman. In this woman's dream where she lacked control, he trickled his cum-poison that would tie her to him. He was giving her p***y love.

During the origami process of bending and folding music, Motsumi's fingers, nimble meticulous creatures, work with the sharp metallic jutting of the sonic electronic music from the wire framing that imprisons the sculptures of women who stand six feet tall. Motsumi's got her voice, and it takes on a white-orchard shade, as he tries to fill the negative spaces with a softer piece of her sexuality. He sits in the sternum, calibrates the subconscious, tweaks the actions, the thoughts. Waits for the waking hour. She's tweaked slowly until she can't tell she's drowning. He continues, working, bending kidnapped women into rap songs . . .

[Verse 3: Motsumi]

♪♪ "Spiritual Bastard I" ♪♪

He woke to the treatment and visuals completed for two songs, "P***y Love" and "Embryo," the notable chorus of the fucking century of his career. His fans were loving it all.

Thirty kilometers north of Gabs, a low-key gathering in Ruretse, straddled with five-hectare farmlands. Some elites of the creative industry: investors, producers, directors, singers, actors et al. His trauma points him to the ones he can trust, who are in the business

of making money. He'll snatch their voice and their faculties if they screw him over. Finds two potential investors, Fenyang and Joalane, gritty with deception, and he begins, "Conjuring an image in your mind costs nothing . . ."

"Listen to this crazy asshole," Fenyang says.

Joalane adds, "Listen, we already have a team. We're due for filming in a week. Everything's down on paper."

"You won't need them," Motsumi says. "Fire everyone."

"You're sucking the wrong dick," Fenyang says. "Run along. Desperation doesn't look good on a man, and you're starting to piss me off."

Motsumi raises his hands. "Fine, fine, give me another artist's concept to develop. Like that newcomer reality star chick, Sewela. You could gamble with her . . . I could do something cinematic and dystopic and ethereal for that song of hers, 'Embryo' . . . I mean, how much did her last one, 'Skin's Prison,' cost?"

"About six million," responds Joalane.

"What were the sales, revenue, rates—"

"Didn't break even."

Motsumi adds, "For a higher quality than that, I'll charge you a mil—"

"Nah, you've dunked all your projects," Fenyang says. "We'll put you on trial. Show us what you got first, then we'll talk."

"Sho, sho skeem," he says. "I'll have it to you within five days."

They laugh. "Mfetu, what you smoking? You keen on burying your career further, huh?"

"Five. Days," Motsumi says.

"A'ight, we'll give your 'ad hoc idea' the green light. See you in five days."

After talking to the investors, they put him on a trial. He knows they're trying to cheat him. If he produces something good, they'll run away with it and screw him over. But if it's so good, to maintain working with him, they'll hire him for other projects.

He ends the night by flirting with a writer, more open and

flexible than the others. Tenth girl this month. They're sitting in some gazebo, getting high, snorting stuff, laughing over their munchies.

Forgetting he's in reality and not the other realm, he leans over, whispers wetly into her ear, "My emotions are narcotics. I don't know if you can sniff this well, that you can roll it well. I don't think you can handle it, but you sure you wanna try?"

Gone, gone, he's gone into another world. This body too tight to breathe in, emotions hotboxing inside his body.

"Shit, brah, you good?" she asks.

"The dark, gonna let the devil out," he whispers.

Smoke pillows out from her lips. "Hee banna. You got there faster than me," she says. "Don't leave me; shit, lemme catch up, give me something to chase this down."

"Shit, shouldn't have mixed it," he says. "Time ain't clocking in right. Where the sun at? Where my head at?" His head, it's going up the stairs, where they drag themselves into one of the rooms.

He doesn't get horny anymore, and this is not a typical sexual act.

As they kiss in bed, she reaches for a condom in her handbag, gives it to him. He unwraps it, and she lays back waiting, at peace. He scoffs, thinks, *Women, so fucking trustworthy. Just 'cause I'm well-known she thinks I won't do anything reckless.* Then, listening to his trauma, Motsumi pretends to put the condom on, but throws it aside and enters her, contaminates her with his sperm, unlike that of usual men: He disposes something, not wholly semen. Seven days later she loses her job, her car dies in mid-afternoon traffic, her uninsured house burns down, and two years down the line, she'll find something in her womb killing her babies. The other women, the more viable ones, they'll find new partners, get married or pregnant out of wedlock, matters none. When they give birth, it'll be his being inside their baby, another him, another him, another him—"Me, me, me, fucking me," he croons—a certain immortality, living simultaneous lives . . .

[Chorus: Motsumi's Doppelgängers]

♪♪“Embryo”♪♪

The only place I am my own is the planetary region of the womb, before any of us are disposed of our identity, of place, of sex. This is where he put me and this is where I wait for the other sperm to join me before we fuse with her egg. To be born. To replicate him. To immortalize him. To live in parallel of each other, building the brand, becoming the workforce of our empire. The sole reason behind the hubris of a man with talent and fame is not his vices, his crimes, his inhibitions—it's the people who see, who encounter, who collate evidence in their interaction with him to strip him, to see him put away for his crimes. These people are generally employees, his social circle, his colleagues. If he eliminates the workforce that sees too much, then no one will see the workings in his studio. If he multiplies himself to be his own workforce, that way, no one will know; twenty people can keep a secret if they are the same person multiplied in one reality, the same time, the same context. Sure, when we're born, we'll be a tad diluted, but purity's useless when it ain't used.

Contraceptive agents can't begin to eradicate us. We wait, in many wombs, where he put us. So far, twenty-three wombs and counting . . .

CGI-taut and noir-classic tinged lights fill the soundscape as she rises in the dark-fog center. She wonders who she is, how she got here and why her thighs hurt. A mirror looks upon her, but her reflection bears no skin or hair. If her identity is stripped and she can't tell who she is, then who will? “Hello,” she tries to say, but a hurt throbs in her voice box like an open wound. It hurts to attempt speaking. Screaming will stretch the wound wider. A sonata voice drips through, light but hazy as drowning rain, and she realizes it's her voice pit-pattering around her . . .

[Verse 4: Motsumi]

♪♪ “Spiritual Bastard II” ♪♪

He sent in the draft music video at 02:00, the call comes in at 02:02, way before the music video is over. He answers, groggily.

The voice that comes at the end of the call is alert: “A car will fetch you at six, contracts will be prepared and we’ll be convening with the artist and her management team to prepare on developing Sewela’s music video ‘Phallic Gun.’” A pause. “If you continue being this good, fuck, we’ll hire you for our dossier of clients . . . we have another one, ‘Whores and Nuns,’ if you can do that in one week, we’ll pay triple.”

He yawns, smiles. “Ayoba, let’s get it.”

[Verse 5: Sewela]

♪♪ “Skin’s Prison” ♪♪

Sewela Gauta. Motswana. Twenty-six. Actress, singer, filmmaker. A triple threat. A quadruple threat if you add the bitch part, but whatever. She’s prepping dance moves for her gqom track, “Skin’s Prison,” at her rustic residence in Ruretse village. Sewela and her choreographer, Leungo, have been watching music videos, analyzing dances moves to assist with her routine that she wants to discuss with her new team who’ll be producing her music video for “Whores & Nuns.”

They’ve spent hours doing variations of the voshu dance and the gwarra gwarra, with some fast footwork in her living room, donned like a dance floor with strobe lights. The first hit she takes, at this equivocal terrain, time is unpeeled, past and present stirred with a dash of the future. It’s February. The sky is scant grey and creased with sunset as they’re scattered on the dance floor; the swaying gravity and air’s tessitura climaxes to a high as they drag another round of powdered white into their bodies,

time slips into their nostrils like molten lava. Oxygen shouldn't burn like this—took too much.

On a teaspoon, they've burned the molten form of morality, God and the devil into a liquid drug. "Take this," Leungo says, "gonna make the vibes grand." He leans back, watching a song play out on her Plasma. "I swear Michael Jackson was a pantsula, I mean look at those dance moves, brah, shayamagetdown." And he's elevated; he hops up, drops low, screaming, "Woza, woza! Hae-haebo!" as Sewela laughs.

She does this a lot. Hasn't killed her yet, instead catapults her career. Allows her to straddle realms. It's all good for her creativity, narcotics that is, which she started sipping from her ex's lung, except the breakup didn't wean her off them. On the last round, when the strobe lights knife the room in sharp bursts, her inner being pulsates outside the boundaries of her skin; its viscous form spreads out to the edges of the room, expanding her silhouette. If she hangs on to this dizzying moment, not giving in to slumber or purging, it'll shuttle her into that utopic zone burning with a delicious death-taste.

So she sniffs in more, punches her veins with needles.

Inside her body, everything is a beautiful mess, a tornado of thoughts, anger and hatred spinning to a climactic explosion catapulting her to the stratosphere of her being. Her eyes are quickly blind to the reality outside her body. She's never felt this sin-struck, the culmination of her ideas. Her viscous soul-matter repeatedly blasts against the cavernous boundaries of her skin, can barely perforate the fucking epidermal prison—finally she breaks through the empyrean of her consciousness where anything is possible. Her body spews her soul-matter out, a spluttering potent creative juice, sprawled on the dance floor. It sits there, a glob of an entirely different universe as it watches the physical body it's been ejected from: Her body, life-wan, falls to the floor, a loose fabric of skin and bones. This time her mother's bewitching

words may come true, that her addiction will kill her, that this time she's gone too far, that what kind of woman is she living like this, dancing like a whore on stages, twerking her voice as an insult to their culture, telling her: *Black woman sit the fuck down, shut the fuck up, abide, respect him, respect your culture.*

Initially domiciled in domesticity, she's exiled herself. Name any artists this devout to their craft, willing to sacrifice all for its evolution. She's not hurting anyone, just herself. Slippery on this weird terrain, she tries to rise on her soul-feet, but she's sucked back into her cranial vault, wreaking havoc with the meteoric crashes of her thoughts—she gonna die, she gonna fucking die this time! Darkness ensnares.

Sewela wakes to the results of last night's escapades. A tome of written-down lyrics, snippets of singing in the booth, additional tracks for her deluxe album, *Peeling Time*. Leungo video-recorded what they got up to, some of which she barely remembers. In one of the videos, she stands on her balcony's balustrade, singeing her voice with high notes. No wonder why it's hoarse this morning. Now, time for the detox. If she's experienced her death like this, a creative magic, what would the outcome be if she murdered and experienced someone else's death? No. She's not that far gone. She will be the only victim to her villainous actions.

[Verse 6: Motsumi]

♪♪ “Kill Me Saintly” (Ft. Sewela) ♪♪

Boss up.

Motsumi and his trauma watch the hit-maker bitch he's supposed to work with. *I'll be gentle, baby.* Sewela's mind slips, trips into an EDM-tranced coma that hustles her into REM sleep. Her electrifying meridian lines are probed by a horny bastard. In bed, hands touch her. Move her. Hogtie her voice. She watches her

voice, black-slicked, crippled and tied under the blinking eye of the moon. She knows she'll be dead before death's even bled into her. They shush each other, the things in her room. She prays that no man rapes her. Her thoughts scream: *At least kill me saintly. Kill me saintly and quietly so I go quick.* She tries to scream again, kick again. But they clip her voice with some utensil, gleaming in the light. When she looks back, her body still remains in bed. Peaceful. Comatose, as these monsters take her . . .

[Verse 7: Sewela]

♪♪ "Placenta of Evil" ♪♪

There's a hammering in her head. Her brain is a quarry; a migraine blast makes the splintering daylight unknown, the location unknown, her body unknown. The room is opium, muffled in moth-smoked perfume. It's too husky to define. She is half elsewhere, half here. Here? Suddenly the present time billows into her sight the daylight and morning traffic, the white curtains undulated by a morning breeze into her bedroom. Then she's spat back into that other realm: It's a song, a music video, and in it her searing fear colors a sculpture with a sharp taste of red.

Present day pools around her. Sick groans in her gut. She stands on weak legs, shaking, terror bleaching her brown skin—no, no, no, it's her sight, sapped of color. The labor pains of evil burn her thighs. She reaches the toilet, hangs her head in. Tremors spurt vomit into it. Not enough. She rises, sits, pushes, pushes, pushes, exorcising the haunting from her uterus. Then, a plop. Suddenly, relief, the peace, vitality. She wipes, turns around, inspects the thing: The placenta of last night's haunting is gaunt, fleshy and slick, cuddled in the toilet bowl like large dark clots. She knows with a keen sense someone tried bewitching her, didn't take all of her. She fetches the *thing* into a plastic bag, the key to trailing him. She reaches for the toilet handle, whispers, "Bastard, fucker, I *will* find you."

[Verse 8: Motsumi]

♪♪“Monster”♪♪

Motsumi, skin stammering crystals. He bends over the bathroom sink, splashes cold water onto his face. Fists his hands, punches the mirror. Shatter, blood.

“Bitch!” he spits.

His trauma, a flickering flame of shadow, watches from within the bathtub, with deep, dark sockets, and says, “Her blood was salty from a protection, from an elder who doctored traditional medicines. The times during the wars, when they’d raid this area.”

It burned like acid, and almost dissolved him, almost killed him in the act. He returned home, half himself, because of her fucking spiritual warfare.

“I’ll be careful next time,” Motsumi says.

“You’re getting greedy,” it says, a venom of dark. “Such greed only leads to mistakes—”

A door, opening. “Babe?” His girlfriend peeks into the bathroom. “You all right?”

The thing in the bath, a venom of dark, spreads itself toward her. Motsumi grabs the door, pushes her back. *Does the bastard actually have a heart?* it wonders, no longer in him so unable to discern. It smiles: *No, he doesn’t trust women now.*

“Listen,” Motsumi says, “you’re gonna have to sleep somewhere else tonight.”

Her eyes, sadness. “What? Why?”

“Something’s come up, I can’t explain.”

“You *never* can explain. Oh my God, is that blood? What happened?” Pushes herself in, and the thing inhales her, drinks her—*Don’t get greedy*, it reminds itself. She shrinks back, instinct suddenly on alert, eyes scanning the room as if . . . *As if what?* she thinks. Something’s amiss, she can’t pinpoint it, but she’s suddenly

afraid. *Run*, her thoughts, a clamor. She swallows. Steps back. “All right,” she whispers.

Feeling jeopardized, Motsumi assesses her as she backtracks. She’s never seen him like this, menacing. “No,” Motsumi’s trauma says. “You can’t leave a body behind, not in this reality. She’s too close. You’ll be the first person the authorities come for—it’s too, too soon, the rest aren’t even born yet. This will compromise everything we’ve done. She doesn’t know anything. She’s nothing. Get rid of her.”

Motsumi’s shoulders slack. “Get your shit and leave. It’s over.”

[Bridge]

Not a one-hit wonder. Twenty million followers on every social media account of the prolific animator and rapper, Motsumi.

In the visual album, twenty-eight-year-old Motsumi has been producing and creatively directing stellar hits for various popular artists. Fans are hungry for his latest work, which he gave a glimpse of on his social media pages. This industry juggernaut has released the name of his upcoming song, “Phallic Gun,” featuring popular rappers like GBV-Son, Me2 Thug and Ami Next, slated to be the hottest tune this summer. Some reviewers were disturbed, declaring that the song glorifies violence. In the video, the male protagonist leers, says in his lilting voice, “The song is a satire, a metaphor on how media and society normalize violence against women for pleasure and profit, which is why we brought in Sewela, who’s basically killing it in the industry. To get this support from a hitmaker like her really lends the music video a feminist twist as she becomes this empowering femme fatale freeing all these trapped women.”

Fans have noted that Motsumi, the male protagonist, bears a striking resemblance to the *Peeling Time* singer’s ex-fiancé, Atasa-one Ewetse, the famous actor of *The Innocent Devil*, who’s been in

hot water for his unorthodox ways of attaining superstardom; his spokespeople declined to comment on this piece. The “Whores & Nuns” singer heavily made references to the dark side of his hedonistic lifestyle. Particularly intriguing to fans are Sewela’s notable songs, “Motsumi’s Doppelgängers” and “Placenta of Evil,” which exemplify the singer’s unresolved emotions. That, despite the bitter breakup, Sewela still feels contaminated and bewitched by Atasaone, possessed by him, something she can’t exorcise given her self-destructive habits. Fans applauded the quality of makeup and wardrobe used in the visual album *Peeling Time*, but noted that if you really looked carefully at Motsumi’s facial expression, it’s actually Sewela, imprisoned within her ex-fiancé—*that’s messed up, she’s clearly not over him, nigga still has a hold over her, their on-and-off relationship is drowning her, sis needs help, someone save her*. Worried fans tweeted consoling words, praying the singer won’t give in to her suicide attempts, given her myriad relapses and rehab trips . . .

[Verse 9: Anonymous Girls]

♪♪ “Bars of this Song” ♪♪

A man twerks in the center. Strikes out his leg. Twirls. Spins. *Viral, now we viruses. They twisted my thoughts into the ligature of the chorus. Harness your thoughts.*

The structure of this song is phallic-tone. *We revolve behind the bars of this song, flames of lyrics tousling our hides.* The structure of this song is decibel-wide and tall, a synchro-cinema.

No matter where you hide, the barbed wires, the tall walls, the thick craniums, they will find you, get in. Her voice, a screaming saxophone turns to dusk, dissipates . . .

End credits, and the dancing women return to the quiet fold of the music. There was nowhere else to go, until the song was played again, as it’d charted number one for nine weeks. The streaming service didn’t allow them to trespass into other song-boundaries,

which offered far more freedom than this bullshit sexist song. They were fucking trapped. All they could do was sit in the gardens, waiting . . . wondering if they'd ever leave these song-boundaries.

The song below theirs sang of empowerment, had women naked, brazen by the force of their boobs, warriors of their sex. It was intoxicating.

"If we can't leave back into our physical bodies," says one woman covered in some milky liquid, "that's the island of song I want to flee to."

"What's the song-island called?" asks a bone-skinned woman.

"Whores and Nuns," replies one. "You can be a nun, a whore, it's all good. And that's what I want to be, a nun-whore. So tired of these straitjacket labels. It's liberating, and it belongs to that Motswana musician, Sewela, right?"

Cue in, Sewela. Knives for braids. Skin a smattering of brown. Hooves for feet. The women stare at her, astonished.

Sewela surveys this musical prison. "Why's she crying?"

A woman with gold-sequined skin whispers, "Oh, she found out that her family switched off her life support, it was getting too expensive for them. Now she has no body to return to, that's if we ever get out of this hellhole, oppressing rap song."

"Well, we're going to change that," Sewela says.

"Do you know who did this to us?" they ask, heads spinning.

Sewela shrugs. "I have something that belongs to them. They attacked me. They gonna come back for me."

"Shit," pipes one, "funny ain't it? We had to clean and cook and slave out there. Now we doing it again. We cooking bars, cleaning stripper poles with our bodies. Shit never changes. Culture still the same."

"What's that you got there?" A woman without eyes points at something in Sewela's hands.

Sewela stares at the plastic-covered item she's gripping. "Thought it'd be safer to analyze it here. The bastard's name is Motsumi." She crouches, exposes it on the gold floor. She has a bit of Motsumi's

trauma, this placenta of evil. It looks like wet tar expelling smoke. She probes it, sticks her finger in it, to find the root of him, but it begins to burn her. Clearly it must burn Motsumi or he's that far gone to not realize how dangerous his trauma is to him even. But it can't kill her in here. Her eyes roll back as the trauma's essence travels into her being and her mind and the memory of its root cause plays out in her mind: *Motsumi's trauma didn't know what it was sometimes but a foggy agglomeration of all those bad times from Motsumi's childhood, sticky dark memories of the beatings, the starvation, the abuse he suffered that stuck into the core of who he became and what he believed in: that wrongdoing is normal, that killing or kidnapping is fine, that women are playthings for his picking. He was abused, now the habit is overkill, overflowing in his brain, his heart out into his actions to people who don't deserve his wrath and pain. His trauma looks on at Motsumi, pleased by this habitual feeding. The more crimes Motsumi commits, the more satiated it becomes. Motsumi is a sick motherfucker, but if he were to ever resolve his issues, to really heal, his trauma will die. And his trauma can't have that happening. No fucking way will it die. So the women must die.*

"Not in this story. Not on my watch," Sewela whispers with the fervor of anger, and the women gather around her as she clenches her hands into fists and speaks: "No woman dies. No more. His trauma does not justify getting away with murdering our women. If it's death he wants, it's his death that he'll get. *He must die.*"

"I'mma dagger them with that stripper pole," says one woman.

"It'll only kill their avatars. Not them," another responds.

"Then I'll kill myself."

Sewela says, "Violence and sex raises the ratings, so really your death will be ineffectual to yourself or the cause. They'll get another you, and another you. See that gold statue there?" She points to a fountain, goddess-like, stripped, spurting water. "Some chick thought death would revolutionize everything, free you guys. But, look what they did with her body, apparently that's a money-

making shot. And the way she did it, now they hemming more of you in, hoping you get as creative as her to die.” Sewela exhales smoked anger. “You know, it’s really hard to be creative, that’s a gift not everyone has, a gift some will pirate.”

The sequined woman slumps forward. “Bliksem. Fuck. How you gonna start a revolution imprisoned in a song?” She kneels forward. “And I thought the real world out there was worse. ’Least you could wear what you want, have a sense of control in your own house, deal with shitty governmental laws once in a while. I had a home, you know. Built it with my savings. Sacrificed living to own something. Only lived in it for a few months before they took me. It’s true what they say, I guess. Live, you never know when you’re going to die. I never lived . . . at all. Lost it just like that.” Snaps her fingers. “If I’d known. All that work . . . all that work . . .” She starts to cry, bleeding her pain into the chorus of the song . . .

[Verse 10: Sewela]

♪♪ “Armageddon” ♪♪

She woke up from the dream-song. Stood up. The news report on her Plasma caught her eyes: “In a span of five days, across Botswana, at least thirty-five women in Gaborone, Modipane, Palapye, Kanye, and other districts have been found comatose with no underlying symptoms. At least five subjects have been pulled off their machines. Given this rising phenomenon, doctors are studying the remaining subjects to halt this endemic. The subjects have no connecting features—ranging from young to old, various jobs, varying body sizes and ethnicities—except that they are all women. Gender-based-violence organizations claim women are being targeted, but toxicology reports, rape kits and forensic investigations indicate no foul play, signs of physical abuse nor drugs. The women simply go to bed and never wake up.”

Sewela’s jaw stretches into shock. One hundred and twenty-nine women in two months. Women trapped in songs.

She's been manicuring her fear. She's safe, she could pretend it's over. But another one like him will come again and it will be over then. How can she turn a blind eye to their suffering? Has to stop this. Braces herself. *I could die*, she thinks, realizes. *I could die saving them*. Weeps as if she's already at her funeral, one too many times. Her thoughts reckon: *What's the difference? We've been killed and killed over by this culture. Metaphorical, emotionally, infantilized—the genocide of our identity, our being for their ideals. We're already dead. We die here, we die there—the dichotomy, the difference is we die into a new birth of reorder. No one will come at us again. This is the only power. Dying is not an end. Life cannot be destroyed, it changes form—whether by death or transmutation—we transcend. This is our power.*

Okay. She steels herself. I can do this.

A clock ticks. She sits at her kitchen table. On a porcelain plate, the placenta of evil. She has to consume it. Taps her fingers, drums the courage. Shuts her eyes, throws the chunk into her mouth, pinches her nose, chews to not taste.

Reality subsides . . .

[Verse 11: Sewela]

♪♪ “Whores & Nuns” (DJ Don remix) ♪♪

A gospel cry wakes her up on the floor of an anthem, a religious choir's fabled tones. Walls and ceilings peel back, folding around a hallway and its red-tinged yonic interior. Monochrome lights and diegetic sounds pulse in her ears as she walks about. One corner, a white woman wears a melanin coat, getting rates for it, certified gold—that appropriating song. She turns toward her. No. She stops herself. She's not here to remedy that. First, the women like her: dethroned, destroyed, cauterized, utilized by men for their silly hubris. Surveys the transparent doors. The hallway's flanked with various rooms of songs climbing the charts:

gqom, rock, kwaito, rap, RnB, kwassa kwassa—cadent beats at their doors.

A man in hot pants follows her, twerking. Then a door, the one she's here for. Behind it, Motsumi's baritone voice builds builds builds, dissipates into violin hands. Her fingers clasp around its doorknob. This is the one room that will lead to the music video he designed, where she'll kill him. The door creaks open, and through that slit, the devilish light of a song spears her chest. She falls backward, skewered in the chest by sexist stanzas—*this my bitch, this my pussy, pussy got money*. The rap, a martial beat, is delivered quickly to her face, jarring her vision, pounding her flesh. Sewela tries to stand, but she's weighed down by the human-sized cross of the stanza protruding from her chest. Her fingers grasp it, to pull it out, but it burns. *Don't be rude. Don't touch the cross.*

Motsumi slips through the door, squats, breath upon her face. "They used to make women better in the old days," he says. "They knew their place. What makes you so special to think you stand above the rest? The system? To be treated different?"

She's never had an answer for this before, but the anger, the injustice throttles through her mouth. "Because we're not in the old days, you fucking fossil." Her scream rises, hits five octaves. She rams her gun-heel into his mouth and pulls the trigger, exploding him with lyric and tune. The little shit hobbles away, slippery with blood, closing the door behind him.

Sewela lifts herself into a stand with this misogynistic stake, and moves around the realm with his phallic protrusion, stalking her predator. She coughs out blood as the mass of women parade in thongs and bras and wimples, shaking their booties, knees knocking out the gwarra gwarra moves. She's prepared herself well: her body the weapon, the gun shoes, the shooting boobs, the knife-braids ready to slay, the venom in her spit, her burning melanin, gathering smoke. Finally, Sewela bangs through the door, entering the room labeled:

[Verse 12: Sewela]

♪♪ “Phallic Gun” (Remix Ft. GBV,
Me2 Thug & Ami Next) ♪♪

The architecture of this song is concrete-bound. The shriveled cries of women, a choir. The structure of this song is bone-made as they hum,

*I tried to make my thighs bleed,
squander myself on the floor with his demons.
Tried to kill myself in this room.
Only it wasn't any room: his voice was my jail cell.
The rooms were skin-thin.*

The warehouse room, dark fog. Twenty monochrome women's silhouettes stand still as statues, each a slogan of sex and flapping wads of money, chloroformed by masculinity. They wear their skins like expensive fashion labels. Sewela pauses in the doorway, cranes her neck. Sees no one but the statues. *How'd he disappear so fast?* she thinks. Her mouth opens to whisper, “Hello,” but she's seen enough horror movies to shut that up quickly. She can't be stupid at a time like this. She steps forward, her gun-feet clapping against the concrete floor. The women spin, triggered by her steps. In swift synchronized movements, they bend backward, arching their backs; fifty steel swords of dancing poles rise from the concrete ground, like jail-cell bars, spear through their spines to the ceiling. *Skrr-skrr-scream, more blood, more money, yeah, woo!*

She turns, shocked by the voice. Too late. The voice ties around her body, contorting her into dance moves. She tries to fight the strain in her muscles. Closes her eyes to pinpoint the voice, find the coward. Around her, the women's screams rise into a choir's siren. Dark electro smoke billows through the room, suffocating Sewela of her thoughts. Motsumi's baritone voice scrapes the gqom beat into hip-hop, stretching her body into gruesome ges-

tures. Sewela didn't know she could dance on shoes made from guns. Here goes another bar, another round—*and we smoking it up.*

Motsumi appears. Confident now that she's hogtied by his voice. His fist punches the air as he continues rapping, walking with swagger toward her. She's split from herself before, she can do it again. The placenta of evil is just like any drug she's consumed. She must let it into her, overpower her. She seals her eyes shut again, pushes herself into the darkness within her and wades into the viscous waters of her inner being, which is turning hard, cold and sharp. She realizes she doesn't need to exist outside herself to be powerful. Her body *is* power. Inside her body, she jitters, a volcano ready to erupt. Her body, the thing she can't control, shakes under the conflicting forces of Sewela and Motsumi's voice. Finally, she catches on a tiny thread of power, pulls pulls pulls until it becomes a whole fabric of her body that he loses control of. The dancing pole—*boy you got me dancing, just for you, ooh.* She yanks the pole, spins it in her hands, throws it sharply as a javelin, a bull's-eye hit in Motsumi's forehead. He sprawls to the ground. Rebirths himself. Starts rapping: *Yeah, yeah, challenge accepted, woo! Skrr-skrr-scream! I'ma get her, I'ma get her—Armageddon (bitch).*

He won't die. He won't die *easily*. He smirks. She circles him. Surrounding them, the women swing and pirouette around these steel blades, slicing their thighs, as his rapper swag maneuvers them. *More blood, more money, girl gotta respect.* He opens his mouth again, but Sewela quickly grabs his tongue, yanks his voice from his larynx with scraping nails and on this composed film score, Sewela rides his song, paces his low tessitura. Desperate and hobbling about, Motsumi whips out his phallic gun. The pistons of her breast glare at him, and her voice, a siren, screams shayamaGETDOWN. The women quickly fall and she lets the bullets rip through Motsumi's body. *His* body, life-wan, falls to the floor, a loose fabric of skin and bones. *Repeat. Repeat. Repeat,*

the women chant, rising free from their concrete graves, recognizing this falling action from the song “Skin’s Prison.”

In the bleak dark of mind, Sewela rubs the texture of kwaito onto his last reggae heartbeats. She hacks at the limbs of generational trauma, gnaws it with her teeth, drinks the blood by the gallon, spews culture with her tongue. Deskins herself of law, lore, loin. She sits on the throne of his hide and bone without label, gender, premise. Peeling time, she’s going forward and backward simultaneously whilst he groans, and the film slackens, a stasis. She strikes him again, unspools time from the recording reel, throwing him into the prison of his actions.

I am monster, unlawful, new territory, new kingdom, a disruption. A monster here, god elsewhere . . .

She wears his taxidermized masculinity as a crown, chugs his death to the outro of her visual album, sits on the throne made from his bones and the leather of his skin—this powerful shot graces the front cover of magazines. She’s a powerhouse auteur of glitz, glam, gore for her studio album collection *Peeling Time*, seventeen songs long, featuring top hits “My Religion,” “Another One,” “P***y Love,” “Whores & Nuns” et al. Gold microphones surround Sewela, interviewers inquiring on the concepts behind her visual album as it plays on all screens:

[Post-Chorus: Sewela]

♪♪ “My Religion” (DJ Topo Club remix) ♪♪

The corpse of Motsumi’s voice hangs from the murdered legacy tree exhumed from the placenta of his evil. He is a proper man. The burning tree blazes in the dark. Thirty women watch, getting loose on the dance floor to the Klaxon of his voice flickering, spitting ash, burning, dying . . .