

A detailed line drawing map of a residential neighborhood, likely in South Africa. The map shows a grid of streets and building footprints. Key street names include "PHUMLAZI" (vertical), "MOKOP" (diagonal), and "EXT 1", "EXT 2", "EXT 3", "EXT 4" (horizontal). Other labels include "MAYABA" and "DASSA STREET".

SIX

TESTIMONIOS

**Bearing
Testimony:**
The stories of
six ordinary
lives

Nomelikhaya **Lukwi**

Nontebeko **Tom**

Gertrude **Sukele**

Ndoda **Siwa**

Johnson **Mountain**

Rachel

six testimonios

“I’m still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets.” - Rigoberta Menchú

Foreword - <i>Dr Janet Gunn</i>	page 2
One - <i>Gillian Meyer</i>	page 5
Two - <i>Jonathan Davis</i>	page 8
Three - <i>Janis Human</i>	page 15
Four - <i>Gavin Montgomery</i>	page 21
Five - <i>Collen Msibi</i>	page 25
Six - <i>Nicole Norval</i>	page 29

Foreword

7 here is the idea of the story-taker, the necessary collaborator in the act of telling, the one who listens, shapes the narrative by assuming that there is something to be told; who takes the story, not as appropriation, but as part of a deal, so that the outcome - an entity, a story - might be placed there, in the space between the listener and the teller. The presence of the story-taker wards off the question "So what?".

Carolyn Steedman,
Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History

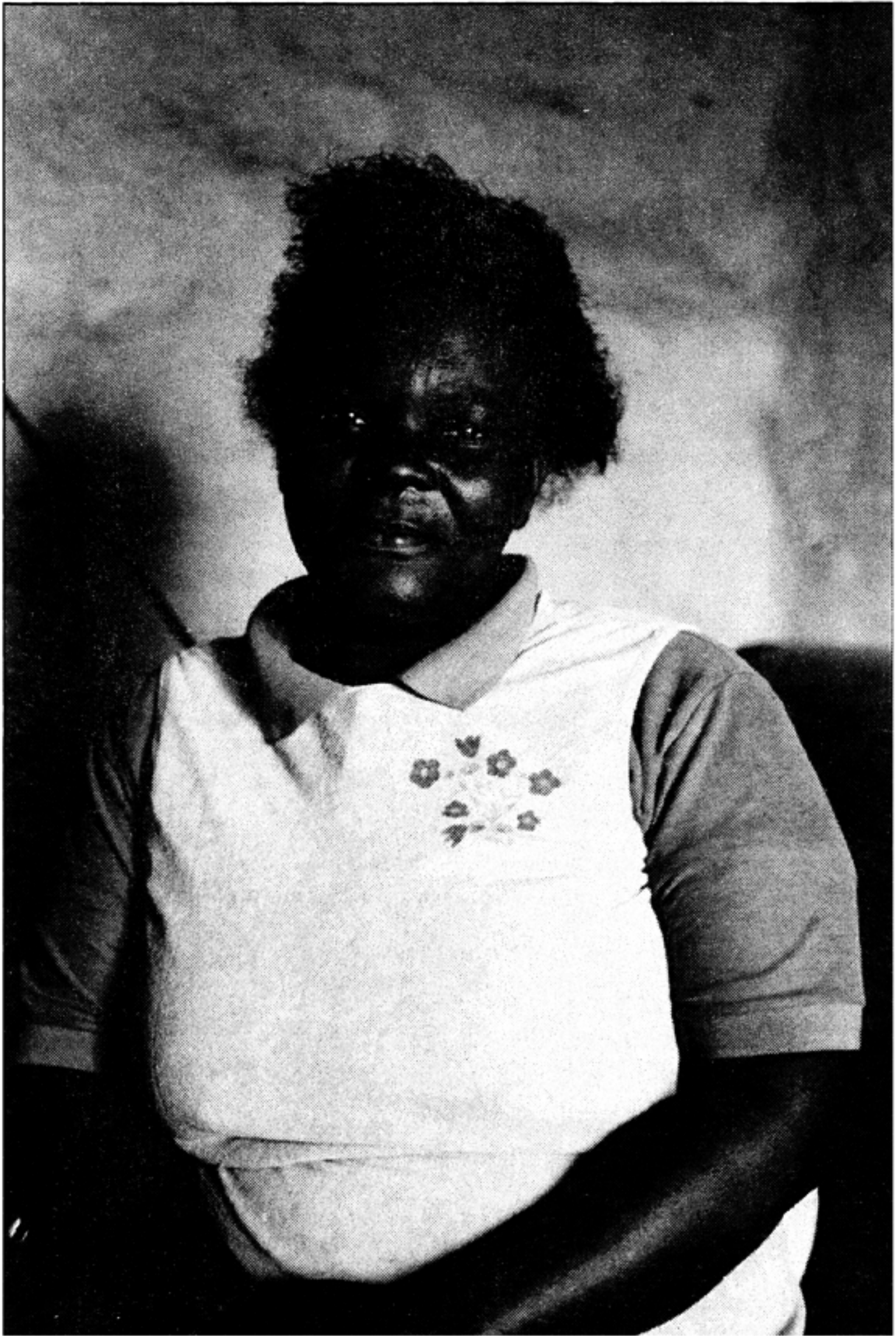
Out of my own interest in the testimonio as a contemporary Latin American form of autobiographical practice, I decided to assign Rigoberta Menchù's life-story as the primary text in the second half of a course on literary journalism and non-fiction prose. A Quiché Indian woman, Menchù was awarded the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her involvement in the Guatemalan human rights struggle. Her first-person life-story was produced in collaboration with a Venezuelan anthropologist not so much as an oral history as a work of intermediation, even "complicity," between two women from the "third" and "first" worlds, respectively.

I am especially interested in the use to which the testimony could be put in a South Africa that hopes to reconfigure the space of public discourse, making way for breaking the silence of and giving voice to oppressed persons. A discourse that combines both the legal and the religious, testimony can serve to validate personal experience as a source of truth that stands in contrast (and, at times, in contradiction) to the impersonal and often violent truth of the State. What Ndebele calls "personal testimony," a new form of South African literature that enters the "nooks and crannies" of experience that remained unexplored in protest literature, is

fundamentally, as is the Latin American testimonio, a literature of survival.

Since first-person testimony will become a primary instrument of "truth and reconciliation" in the commission being proposed on a Chilean model by the Ministry of Justice, I decided that a course featuring the testimonio could be both useful and timely for students of journalism in the New South Africa. A form of non-fiction prose, the testimony, like the examples of literary journalism we looked at in the first part of the course, calls for the self-reflexive positioning of the intermedia-tor who elicits and facilitates the telling of the story. Unlike the more distanced (and distancing) writing of a Tom Wolfe or a Joan Didion, however, the testimony's mode of "double voicing" operates as a form of solidarity journalism.

The following testimonies of residents of Grahamstown's black township are accompanied by the reports of students who inscribed the verbal accounts of their informants. Sometimes painful exercises in reflexivity, the students' reports about their interview experience communicate different degrees of frustration and embarrassment at what two of them describe as "prying." Frustration was the inevitable result of a first and only-time interview that, as it turned out, was conducted in



the non-private setting of Ndoda Siwa's living room into whose crowded space (4x3x2 meters) twelve people had to fit. Crossed signals ended up in the non-appearance of the three translators the students had counted on. Collen, a Zulu-speaking honours student, was able to step into the breach, but the situation was awkward. As Janis remarks in her account, "our interviewees were understandably wary of opening up in a room full of strangers, as well as unfamiliar neighbours."

More frustration resulted from the language barrier which meant that, reliant on the approximate translation of a colleague, the students had no sense of direct access to their informants. Far from being the fullsome life-story of a Rigoberta Menchù, one of the students remarked that what managed to come across the barrier - experienced at times as a barricade - was no more than "a few disconnected moments" in the life of his interviewee. The lack of agency that same student found so painful in the hard life of the man he was questioning was compounded by the lack of agency Gavin himself experienced in what he calls the "translational relationship."

In a kind of testimony of his own, Gavin goes on to confess the anger triggered by the powerlessness he experienced in Mr Siwe's living-room, a powerlessness operating at different levels in most of the students' accounts of their township visit. In addition to discomfort with the language barrier and the fear of trespassing the line between public and private (a line as much culturally and politically constructed as the space it supposedly divides), the students were at times as unsettled by what they brought with them as by what they found. Nicole, for instance, was made acutely aware of her own "otherness" as she identified herself (uneasily) as "a liberal, democrat, private-school child." Despite the fact she, like Gillian, had known her informant for several years and that Rachel could speak English, the economic and cultural distance between Nicole and Rachel could not be ignored. Paradoxically, it could have been that very distance which made Rachel's words come across to Nicole with such "clarity and vitality." "Her comments about bringing up children," Nicole remarks, were "a nutshell" of much longer conversations Nicole had had over the years with her father. "Would that he had been so concise!" she adds.

Gillian chose to place Rose's testimony within a less personal framework by introducing it as one example of the general plight of thousands of domestic workers whose treatment, like Menchù's at the hands of her

Guatemalan mistress, falls short of that given the family dog. "She used to hug the dog," Menchù said. Within Gillian's more analytic framework, she nonetheless makes clear her admiration for women like Rose who will "triumph and survive".

In contrast to his fellow-students, Collen could feel more comfortable since, himself a native of a township outside Durban, he could identify with and, in turn, could facilitate a more detailed story from Mr Mountain, whose Xhosa he could substantially understand more directly. That Collen kept most of "himself" out of the self-reflexive part of the report might suggest a relationship of transparency rather than the translational relationship that swallowed up all "sense of personal direction" for Gavin.

The unease coming across in the students' reflexive accounts offers clear evidence of how intently they tried to listen. Without such serious listening at the other end, testimony could not exist as testimony. That active listening, albeit frustrating and often painful, represents yet another kind of testimony of survival. Graphic evidence of just how serious was the effort to "take in" the experience of their respective subjects are Jonathan's photographic studies of the township interviewees. Jonathan seems to have been inspired by the Walker Evans photographs that are an integral part - far more than mere illustrations - of James Agee's monumental portrayal of 1930s sharecroppers in the American South (*Let Us Praise Famous Men*, 1936) an example of literary journalism on which Jonathan gave a report in the first half of the course. Jonathan's photographs, like those of Walker Evans, both record and respond to the power of survival to which their subjects' stories quietly testify.

A young lawyer at a recent Cape Town planning conference for the imminent setting up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission said that the commissioner's job was "to do nothing but listen for the first six months." A good deal was heard by six students in that one morning of interviewing, about limits in themselves as much as about possibilities in others. "I could never pretend to know what it is like living in a shack made of wattles and clay," Janis writes, "but...hearing of the hardships that is (Gertrude Sukule's) life has convinced me of the need for these stories to be heard". □

*Janet Varner Gunn, PhD.
Senior Fulbright Lecturer
Rhodes University, 1994*

**THE TESTIMONIO OF Rosie Nomelikhaya Lukwi
BY Gillian Meyer**

Oh



Rosie

I have concentrated my work around the plight of the domestic worker as I think this is an aspect of oppression that is often neglected due to the nature of the work and the low status of women in general.

In *L. Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984) Rigoberta goes to work as a maid when she is only 13 years old. I would like to begin by quoting her: "I learned to dust, wash and iron very quickly. I found ironing the hardest because I'd never used an iron before. I remember how the washing and ironing used to pile up. The landowner had three children and they changed their clothes several times a day. All the clothes they left lying around had to be washed again, and ironed again, and then hung up in the right place. The mistress used to watch me all the time and was very nasty to me. She treated me like...I don't know what...not like a dog because she treated the dog well. She used to hug the dog. So I thought: "She doesn't even compare me with the dog."(p94).

According to COSATU, domestic workers have always been left at the bottom of the labour pile. Under the Basic Conditions of Employment Act many domestic workers are even relegated to the status of casual labourers with no rights at all.

A study (from *Agenda* No 21 1994) was done in the greater Grahamstown area which has an unemployment rate of 80-85%. This has led to large labour reserves, which cannot gain employment in the formal sectors, being channeled into domestic labour.

In the study, the lowest hourly wage was 82 cents and the highest was R4.50. An extreme example of this exploitation is a domestic worker who works 14 hours a day (often without a lunch break), 7 days a week, for R300 a month.

This type of exploitation is often due to the fact that employers regard domestic labour as a simple task. One employer who owned a block of flats said that his two domestic workers' duties were minimal. These duties included cleaning 11 flats each as well as washing and ironing the employer's and his mother's laundry for an additional R2.50 per week.

The domestic workers were also permitted to do the tenants' laundry during their work hours to supplement their income.

Employers are also aware of the availability of surplus domestic labour and are able to pay workers less than

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their real value. Many employers are also receiving below inflationary increases themselves and are thus unwilling to increase their domestic labourer's wages. One employer said: "I don't agree with this whole business of forcing people to pay salaries they can't afford".

The study showed that the amount of time permitted for sick leave was left largely unspecified. Most domestic workers either made up the day they were off sick or went unpaid. A common practice when a worker is ill is that a replacement is provided by

the employee. A member of her family performs her duties until she is well enough to return to work. This is done to keep the job opportunity within the family.

This is often also the case when the domestic worker is pregnant. One worker said she had decided to work up until the expected date of birth as she had arranged for her mother to work in her place whilst she was on maternity leave and so she wanted to work for as long as possible to reduce her mother's work load.

The point of the testimonio is to give a voice to the oppressed and I do not think there is a more oppressed group than the women of Africa. But I also do not think there is a group more likely to triumph and survive.

My interview was with Rosie Nomelikhaya Lukwi and my aim was to give her a voice so as to give all women like her a voice.

Rosie is able to speak English so I did not use an interpreter. I think this is helpful in that it enables the interviewer to ask more probing questions and also means there is one less barrier to communication.

I have known Rosie for about four years and so we already had a relationship before the interview. This is also helpful as a trust has been established. I think the ideal situation would be that used in the creation of *L. Rigoberta Menchu* where the subject is able to stay with the interviewer for a period and a relationship can be established.

The testimonio holds a lot of promise for South Africa especially as it is a way of giving the oppressed a voice. So many people in SA are alienated from the usual, formal modes of literature due to education and cultural barriers. The testimonio empowers the oppressed within a community and makes their plight known.

Fraser's Camp is just outside Grahamstown. It is a farming area where a lot of people are staying. I was born there in 1954; my father worked in the fields, mostly oranges and pineapples. There is no clinic or hospital at Fraser's Camp, Grahamstown is the closest. That's where we took my mother when she was sick. She died having a baby, the baby died too.

I was six or seven, I had just started school, that's how I remember. I loved the school but my father he had to work and cook and everything. My granny she lived with us but she was too old to do it all the time; that's why me I leave school. I have my brother's, four and my sister, one but I am the oldest so I must leave the school and find work, there is no money.

Nomelikhaya means "look after my house". That's what I did. I looked after my brothers and sister and father and I went to do the washing in the coloured houses. I was 10 then.

We moved to Grahamstown in 1973. A lot of people were moving then, to find work off the farms. My father he got the job with the municipality. At first I just stayed by the house but then I found work in town, in the houses.

I married Gordon in 1984, this year it's 10 years. He has his standard 10 but he's still doing security at the Monument, there is no work anywhere. My brother he went to Port Elizabeth to find work but he had to sleep on the streets. I was very worried, I went there to look for him, he could find no work. He's back in Grahamstown now but he's only got part-time work.

My sister she is very sick, she has fits. She is not married but she has four children. That is too much money. She sells vegetables on the streets. Her one child he died last

year, his tummy just ran and ran and he died.

I have one child. My son he is in school now, he says he wants to be a soldier or a policeman when he grows up. I think this is just because he is young. Little boys like guns. He has six birds, he loves his birds, he is always feeding them but now he has only five. The neighbour's dogs they ate one; he was very upset, he cried and cried. I would rather have chickens then I can use the eggs. I can eat the eggs every day.

My own house I make very nicely. I have spent such a lot of my time making other people's houses nice, I know what I want but the money it is always not enough. Some of the other people that live in the township, they don't care how their house looks, the garden it is just mud and full of rubbish. My garden it is very good, there are always flowers and it is always clean. Inside I have a lot of furniture from our old home in Fraser's Camp, it is old but it is strong and I look after it.

My name it means "look after my house" and that is what I love to do but I must spend so much time in other people's houses and the money it is not so much. I don't know what I will do when I am old, I hope my son he will look after me.

I always wanted to be a teacher but I only got standard two. I am too scared now to go back to school, lots of people they go to school at night but I think I am too old now. I am still working in the houses, I think that's what I will always be doing.

I think now in South Africa we need change. I want very much there be change. I think then I will get more money, if you have money you can buy anything, if I got money I look like a teacher.

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THE TESTIMONIO OF

Nontobeko Tom

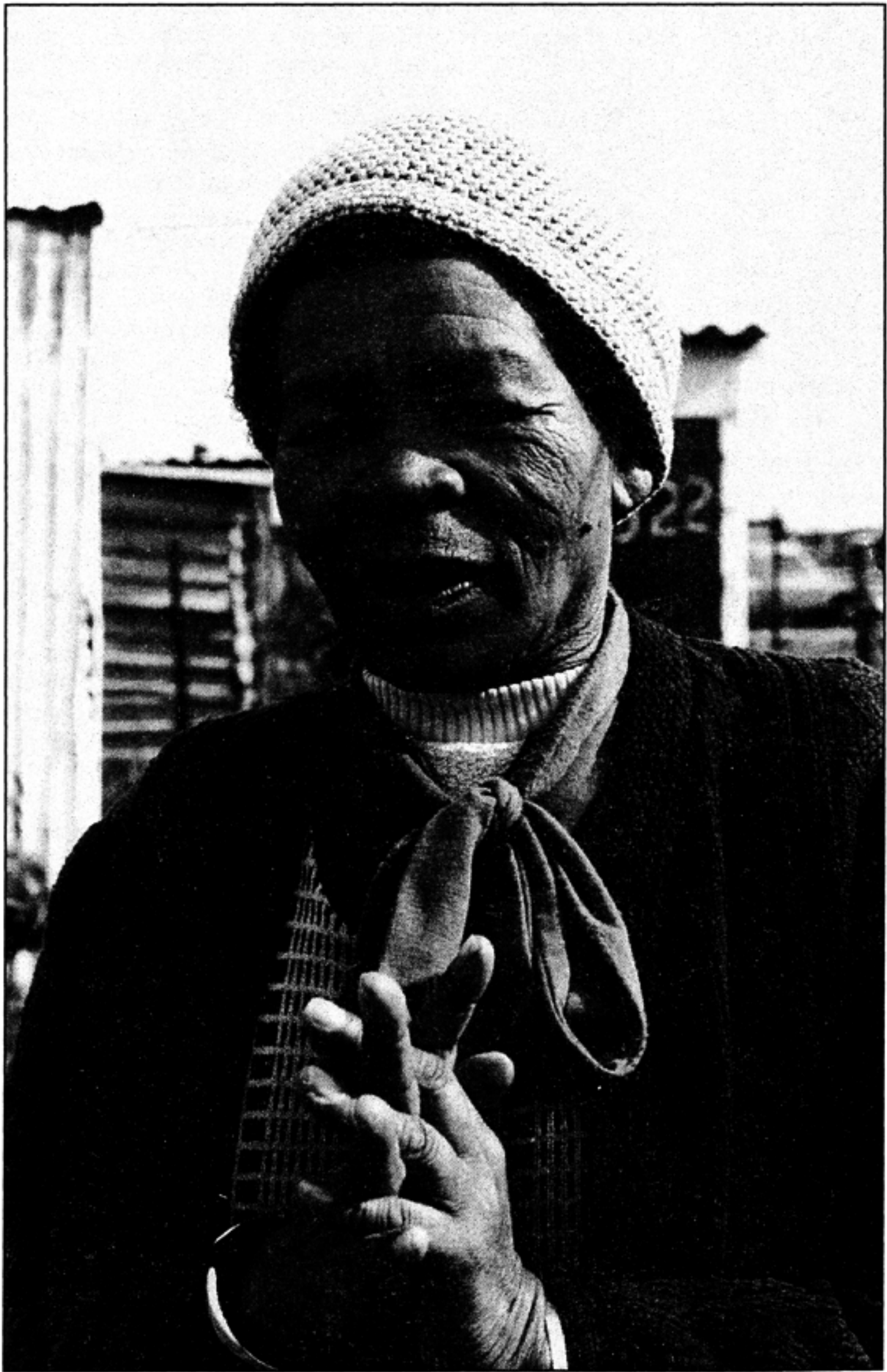
B Y J O N A T H A N D A V I S

*M*y name is Violet Tom. My other name is Nontobeko. I was born here in Grahamstown, at K Street No 13. K-street is in the township, in Rhini. When we are born we are born into a family. When we grow up we are supposed to get married. That's why I came here, because I was supposed to go out and have my own family.

I was 38 years old when I got married and had my own house and family. I had a child. I was divorced so I went back to my family. I was 54 years old when I divorced my husband.

Divorce is common here around Grahamstown. I went back to stay with my parents. When I was staying with my parents both of them passed away. Then I was supposed, again, to go out and try to have my own family. I came here just to find a place to stay, not to have a family. I came here around '91. Now I'm still staying here and I'm staying alone. I'm finding it difficult.

I expected there would be someone who would



Nontobeko Violet Tom lives in a tin two-room shack in an area on the edges of Grahamstown called Zone 7. The house is set squarely in its yard facing the road. Similar shacks stretch in all directions as far as can be seen. The yard contains a washing-line and an outside latrine beside the house. A spiral spiked dried pod hangs on the right hand side of the front door. Along one fence Mrs Tom has planted a flower bed to attract birds to the yard. During the school term Mrs Tom shares the shack with her granddaughter, who is attending school in Grahamstown. Otherwise she lives alone. Mrs Tom spends time with a neighbour, Mrs Sukele. Together they make hats and mats out of plastic carrier bags for a self-help scheme.☞

build a house for me here, but when I came here there was no-one. I'm finding it difficult because the living conditions are not good around here, because I don't have money because I'm a pensioner.

I have a child, a girl. She was married in the 1960s, around there. She's around 40 now. She lives in Middeldrif. Her name is Ivy. She is married to a man called Ganya.

I cannot stay with my child because she has six children and many other grandchildren. It would be very difficult for me. It is not Xhosa custom for us to go and stay with our married daughters.

I can't remember anything about Grahamstown in my youth. All I remember is that I was working around Grahamstown. I was working as a domestic worker at Rhodes University, for about seven years. It was very difficult. I was responsible for 26 rooms in Rhodes University. Me alone. I remember going up and down the stairs with linen. But the woman in charge there was good. Gertrude Sukule. It was good working for her. She was not too strict. [Laughter]

After seven years I went to work for Professor Katani, who was also at Rhodes University. I don't know if he is still alive. I worked for Professor Katani for 15 years.

I went to Port Elizabeth, then after I got sick I came back to Grahamstown. I went to see my brother who's married in Port Elizabeth. When I was staying with my brother I was also working as a domestic worker in Port Elizabeth. When I got sick I came back here to Grahamstown.

I came back to stay with my sister named Cele. They contacted my

child in Middeldrif to come and fetch me. So my children came down to fetch me and took me to Middeldrif.

When I was in Middeldrif I was in the hospital. I stayed in the hospital for one month. I went back home in the second month. When I got out of the hospital I came back to Grahamstown. Then I found this place where I'm staying now.

Oh, no, I didn't, I went back to my sister. After that I managed to find this place, so I came and lived here. That was in 1991.

I'm still not feeling very well. I go to the clinic for treatment.

There are not good living conditions here. My house is, well, when it rains the water comes in and there's a lot of wind here. When that happens I have to hire just anyone to fix the house, and pay with my pension money.

They promised the contractor would come and build houses for us,

but until today no contractor has come. We were promised by the Bantu Administration Board. Nothing has happened since then.

I wish my parents were alive because it was very nice being with them. Now its very difficult because they are not here. The living conditions are very hard now. Maybe if my parents were here it would be better for me.

Now life is very difficult. It was better a long time ago. We would even sleep outside. We would walk in the evening and there was no-one who would attack us. Now it is very difficult and it's getting worse.

Crime itself is a problem around here in Grahamstown. Because when you are in your house, alone, people can see you are alone and then they can come and do something to you.

It was better a long time ago. We would even sleep outside. We would walk in the evening and there was no-one who would attack us.





That did not happen in the old days, now it's a big problem.

I'm worried about my life. If I could get medical treatment and medicines, then I could get better. That's my aspiration.

Every day we do these plastic hats and mats and things. We are trying this to get money or anything we can get back for our work. We do this, then we go to the clinic where someone comes to take the hats somewhere else. What's his name?

His name is Eric; who comes to collect those things. He is working at Gadra. Others do the garden work, trench farming, around here.

Sometimes we get about R10 for a hat. Sometimes R8. The plastic bags come from the shops, we get them when we go. Sometimes Eric brings them for us too.

It is very difficult. Our living conditions are very bad, my house needs to be fixed.

GRAHAMSTOWN
AUGUST 1994

The circumstances of the interview with Mrs Tom were very unfavourable for extracting any testimonio she might have made.

The interview encounter was the first meeting between Mrs Tom and myself, so it was unrealistic to expect her to be forthcoming with any deeply personal observations. The interview took place in front of her friends and neighbours, also making it difficult for her to be as candid as she might have been.

To give Mrs Tom the best opportunity to express herself, the interview was done in Xhosa, through an

interpreter. The version above is taken from this translation, and so is by no means a verbatim rendering of Violet's language. They are rather summaries of her responses to each question.

I tried to ask very broad questions, hoping that Mrs Tom would take the opportunity to speak freely about herself. She did this to a limited extent, but I think the information given was shaped mainly by the questions I asked.

Still, the emphasis placed on some things is important, especially Mrs Tom's dissatisfaction with her housing. After the interview I asked Mrs Tom if she would show me her house. She said: "Yes, if you want to see a shack" and laughed.

If a successful testimonio were to be produced under the circumstances we encountered in Zone 7, I think the following should be noted.

The interview should be conducted in private at the interviewee's home. A good deal of time should be set aside for the interview.

The person being interviewed should understand the concept of the testimonio. This would allow her to shape her response rather than being prompted by questions.

Ideally the interviewer should speak the interviewed person's language. If a translator is used it should be someone the interviewed person is comfortable speaking through.

The interview should try to establish a comfortable relationship with the person to be interviewed before the interview session by spending time with them in their usual surroundings. Several meetings should be planned. □

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Their days are interspersed with church activities and visits to the clinic.

Mrs Tom mentions she has been sick for many years. From what she says, and her cough, I would suspect she suffers from TB.

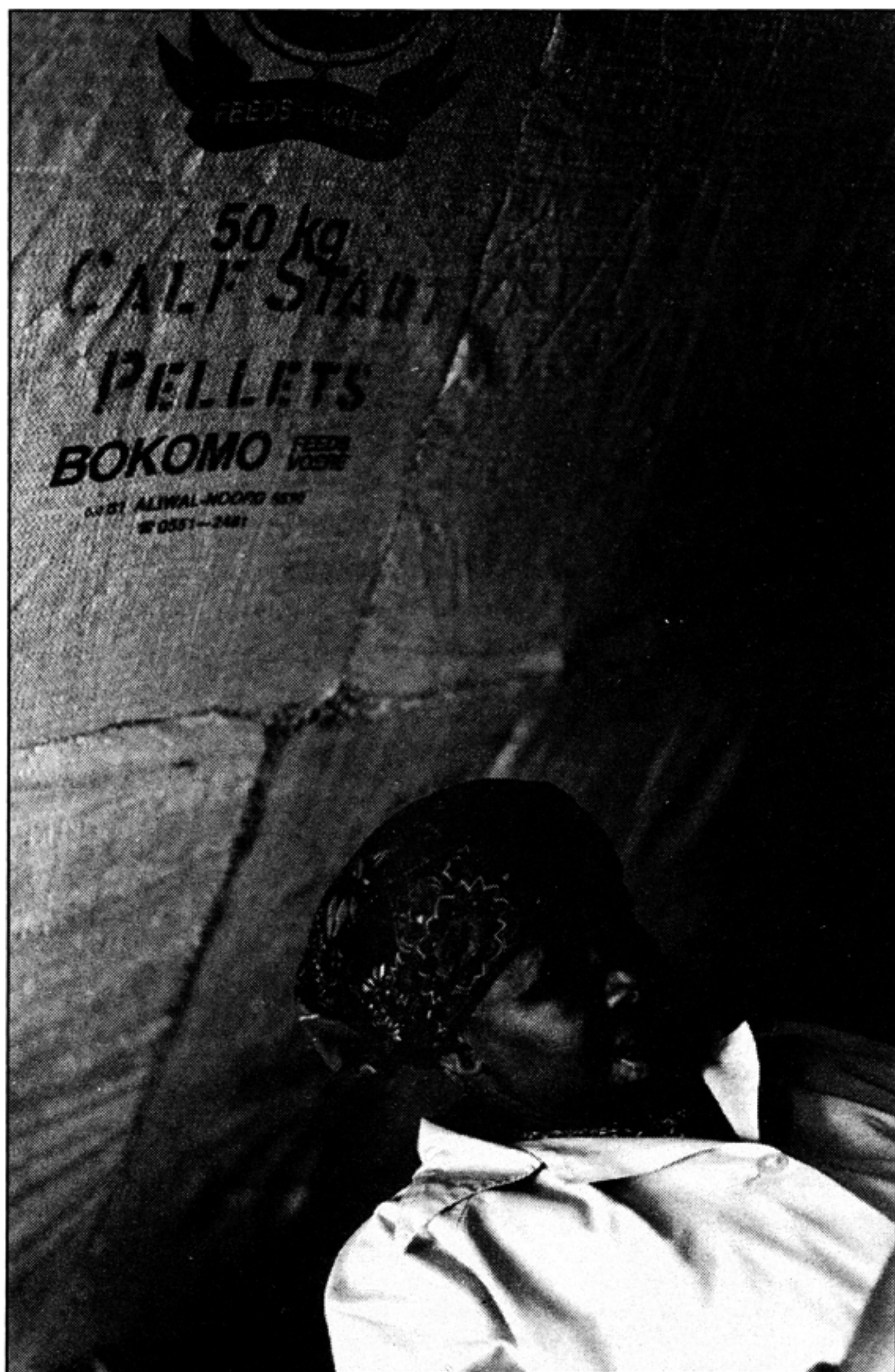
The front room is dominated by a dresser. On the dresser are glasses, mirrors and other objects.

There are also two porcelain zebras which Mrs Tom received as a gift from her aunt. On one wall is mounted the electricity board provided by the city council. In a corner an old iron rests in the

flame of a gas stove. The back room is closed off with a curtain.

On the right of this door is a low stool. Above this is a frame with lettering made of bits of mirror.

Mrs Tom translates the words as reading "let there be peace in the home".



gertrude sukule

speaks

Interviewed by Janis Human

m *y name is Gertrude Sukule. I was born in 1930 at Salem on a little farm there, in the Albany District. I am now 64 years old. My father was working on a farm there, belonging to a Mr Atwell. He was a labourer and my mother was working as a domestic worker. She was working in the kitchen, doing all the things - cleaning the house, washing and ironing, all sorts of work.*

We had to help with work around the house - smearing the floors with cowdung, collecting fire wood from the bushes, and carrying water from the river. We also had to help our parents with the farm work - we were hoeing the fields, ploughing.

We were most fortunately attending school there. All the children, up to Standard 6, because it was sort of a mission. And our masters then were Europeans; they were Christians under the Methodist church. It was Native Higher Mission then, now it is Nyalusa High School. At school we were playing netball, boys were playing rugby.

There are many people in the township who can not read and write. Last year, there was an adult literacy school. But there was no attendancy, so it was closed. The people are leading a difficult life. They have to earn money to buy food - how can they still go to school at night?

My mother passed away in 1943, while I was doing Standard 6. And my father passed away 1955. I was already married then - I got married 1952.

I had three brothers - one passed away, and the other is living at Motsepe. My father's first born is still alive: he is still staying at Salem, but he is very old. He was born in 1912, but he is still fit. He was here last Saturday. I cannot say what I do to entertain him when he visits, because I have no money. He has more money than me. I am starving here.

I got married in 1952. My husband was a Minister of Religion, but I divorced him in 1981, when we were living in the Transkei. But he passed away last year. He was staying with another woman.

My life was bitter. I don't want to go back on all that. I qualified as a teacher in 1948. I taught for three years and then got married. I went up to take nursing, and when I was in the final year, my husband did not want me to

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continue. Then I came back to teach again. That is till I went to Transkei - there I taught for six years.

Then we divorced - everything happened. That was the end of it. I came back home.

Now I am 64 years old. After the divorce, I did not work. I was just doing small jobs. I came home in 1987. I did some small jobs then. I can not say what.

I had two children. My first born was a son, and the second was a daughter. Most unfortunately, my son was stabbed to death in 1979 - he was a police.

And my daughter? I don't know where she is. She got lost at King William's Town, on the 15th of May, 1985. She was born in 1968. I cannot say that she was searching for a job when she got lost, because I was there with her. She was waiting for a vacancy. She went to town, and she did not come back. So I do not know what happened to her. I tried all means - I was searching for her high and low, every single day.

That is why I am living alone, all by myself in that shack.

I have one grandson, but he is staying with the mother here in Grahamstown. He is in Standard 10 at Nombulelo High School. He has not decided what he is doing next year. I cannot decide for him.

He visits over the weekend, but he is a spoilt one. He is always saying: "Makhulu, look at my tackies. They are old. I need money for new ones". But I don't have money to give him. But I want him to come and stay with me next year.

That is why I want to extend my shack - for when he moves here. I moved into this shack in 1991. I had to get somebody to build it for me and pay him. The person who builds the shack is the one who makes the price. For the first part I paid R80, and for the second, R65.

For now I am alone. I don't want to move in with a friend, because that causes other problems.

Houses on the farm, then, I can say that they were better than this. My father had three houses. The one was just a rondavel. The second had two rooms, and the other was just a big flat.

For money, I live on my old-age pension - that is all. My brother is old, he cannot support me. I also make plastic hats and mats, which I sell to GADRA. In the mornings I do my housework, cleaning up, doing washing. And then I make some plastic hats, just to keep me busy.

You now that I suffer from heart problems, nephritis and stress. You know what stress is? I am a patient, I visit the clinic. I don't eat well, porridge and samp, porridge and samp.

It is difficult living in this shack. It is so cold. And when it rains, everything is wet. There is nobody who feels safe in this place, because everything is upset. People are just cruel. They are thieves, robbers, everything. They stole my toilet doors, twice. I was given the first one, and the second one I bought.

How do I survive all this? Well, I pray and hope that there is a better life after this. I am a churchgoer, you know. Even today I am going to church, the Methodist church. Every night I read my Bible. I also read the gospel books. I have many books. Most of them belonged to my son, but I don't read them, only the gospel books. They belonged to my husband.

The church is very important to me. In the church, sometimes I am giving Bible lessons, I preach, I do everything for the women's group. I don't sing in the choir anymore, I am too old. But I was a good singer before. Yes, I pray and hope for the life after this. □

Afterword

We arrived at Mr Ndodo Siwa's house at 9 o'clock on that Wednesday morning - Gavin, Collen, Jonathan and I, four of Janet Gunn's New Journalism students out on an assignment to gather the testimonios of some of the residents of the squatter camp sprawling just outside Grahamstown.

We had arranged the interviews with Irene Walker, the coordinator of the Umthati Garden Project, and were to meet some willing participants, together with about three translators, at Mr Siwa's house. As it happened, none of the people who had gathered in Mr Siwa's well-furnished sitting-room volunteered to do the translating. Fortunately, Collen, who is Zulu-speaking, could take over this role quite comfortably.

This, however, placed enormous pressure on both the interviewers and the participants. While we were now more limited by the number of questions we could ask, and the amount of time we could use for questioning, our interviewees were understandably wary of opening up in a room full of strangers and unfamiliar neighbours.

This was the biggest obstacle of the exercise: I feel that a one-to-one interview with only myself, Gertrude, and a translator, with a much longer space of time in which to conduct the inter-

view, would have been far more productive.

I was immediately drawn to Gertrude Sukule. A dark, heavy-set woman, her face was creased with the lines of a difficult life, and yet there was also something very deep and proud in her manner. She could speak English fluently, and often offered a more solid translation of the occasional complex Xhosa phrases used by her companions.

I asked her the most basic questions in that interview situation. Though I kept reminding her that she was free to reply in Xhosa, she persisted in answering in English. This, of course, made it easier for me to think of follow-up questions as she was busy answering.

There were many times that I felt extremely awkward about prying into her life, for there were many experiences that she felt uncomfortable elaborating on. Her job experiences after her divorce, for example: "I do not want to go back," she said. In such instances, I refrained from continuing that line of questioning.

Another way in which Gertrude handled the interview was to laugh after relating some particularly harrowing stage of her life, like after telling me about her divorce; yet it was a laugh that was half a sob, and I believe that this reaction was one of her ways of coping with the pain.

I was determined to speak to her alone, and asked her whether she would show me her house after the formal interview. "A shack. Would you like to see a shack?" she asked. It is interesting to note that she never referred to her abode as a "home" or even a "house", and frequently reminded me that she did not live in a house, she lived in a shack.

As we walked towards this shack down a muddy, littered road, I noted that she was much more relaxed, much more animated in her descriptions.

We arrived at a tiny, luminous green construction of clay and wattles, with an unfinished extension protruding on the left. It was the first time I had been inside a shack, and I was immediately struck by the coldness of the place. Cracks in the walls, in the windows, caused a stinging cold wind to persistently cut through the small space that stood cluttered with four chairs, a table, a sofa, two cupboards and a bed.

Gertrude also had a large case filled with books - it was the strangest experience to find a musty copy of *The Wind in the Willows* in a corner of a rickety shack that barely looked inhabitable from the outside. She insisted on reading me a verse from one of her gospel books, and showed me the new red jacket and skirt she was planning to wear to church that afternoon (this was made cheaply by another of the township residents).

Our object in this whole exercise was to attempt to discover how ordinary people, who live in

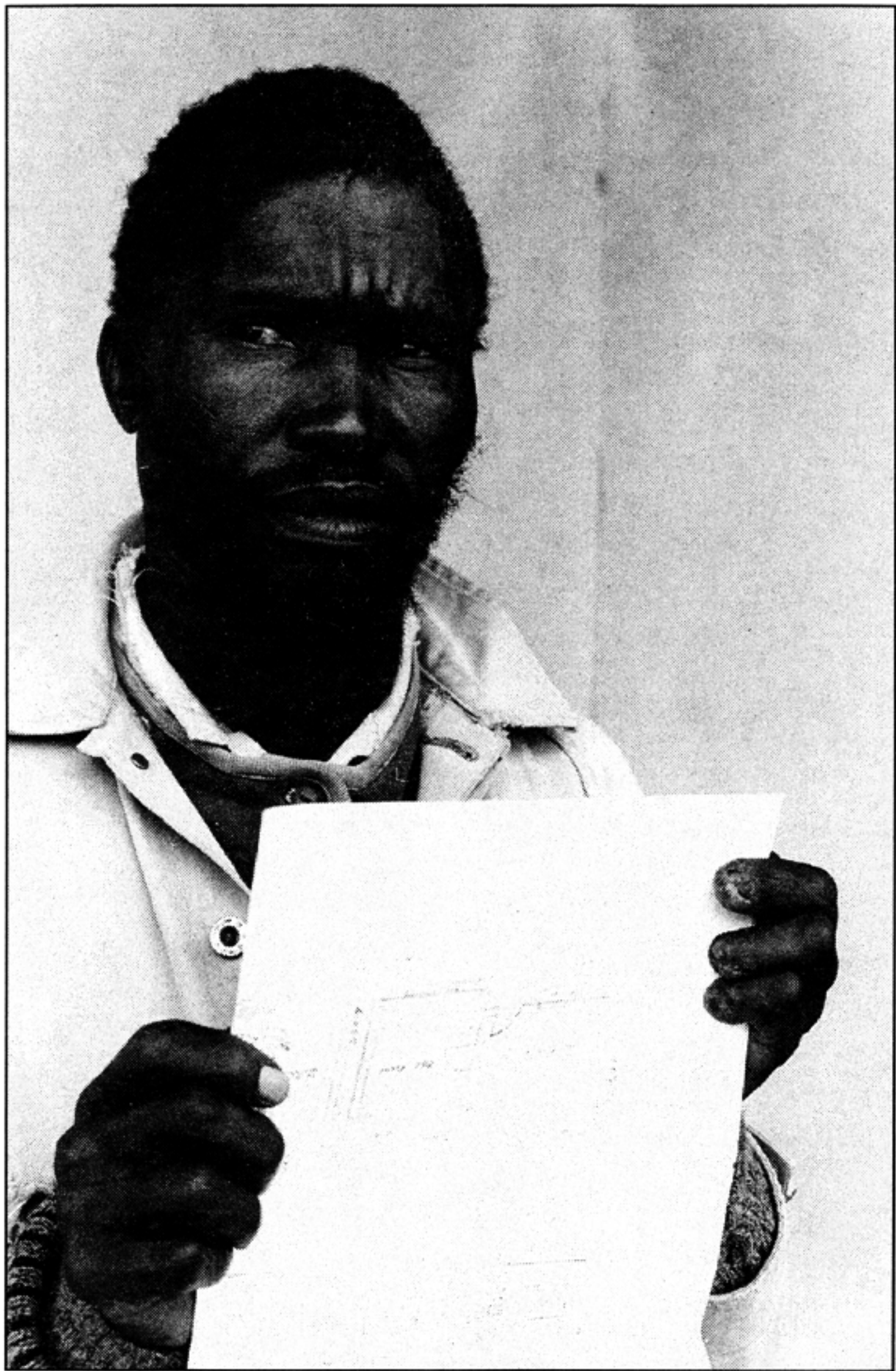
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extraordinarily difficult circumstances, find ways of surviving this harsh life. From my conversation with Gertrude at her kitchen-table that morning, it was quite clear that, besides the church, it was her hopes and aspirations for her grandson that gave her own life that much more direction and purpose. He frequently came up in her talk, and many things she did were motivated by the fact that she wanted him to come and stay with her the following year.

In transcribing my talk with Gertrude, I have attempted to use her own words and modes of expression to relate her story as far as possible; I only made changes to the grammar in those instances where I felt that her own usage would confuse the reader. My only input was in the reorganization of the material gathered, and, of course, in the type of questions I asked.

My interview with Gertrude Sukule, a 64 year-old woman living on her own in a squatter camp on the outskirts of Grahamstown, has proved a very illuminating experience for me. I could never pretend to know what it is like living in a shack made of wattles and clay, but talking to her, hearing of the hardships that is her life, has convinced me of the need for these stories to be heard. The testimonio as a literary form is certainly a powerful vehicle in allowing the more privileged sections of the population a glance into the cruel realities of those who continue to suffer under the heritage of apartheid. □





T H E T E S T I M O N I O O F

NDODA SIWA

I interviewed Ndoda Siwa in his home in Manasko township. His house was spotless, unbelievably clean. Every surface gleamed and the only dirt visible was the sand we had brought in on our feet.

We sat in his sitting room, four metres long, three metres broad and two metres high. The room is roofed with corrugated vibacrete panels, without a ceiling. In the north wall, a steel window. In the west, the front door and the door to the only bedroom - 2,5 metres by 3,5 metres. In the south, a curtained doorway leading into the large room he has added at the back of his house. The sitting room is furnished with a wooden frame lounge suite covered in maroon cloth, consisting of two chairs, a couch and a rocking chair. There is a dresser in the southern corner of the eastern wall, with a few curios on it and a poster of Nelson Mandela tucked away behind it. Alongside the same wall, a Tempest sound system on a table, and next to that a small table with a pot-plant on it. There is an ANC

B Y G A V I N M O N T G O M E R Y

flag posted in the pot, and another just above it on the North wall. Parallel to the south wall, Mr Siwa's television set. Among the curios on the dresser, a pair of beer mugs from Grens school, which Mr Siwa had bought in instalments from a travelling salesman and a First Aid certificate from the Red Cross with his wife, Evelyns name on it. On the wall, above the sound system are an electricity meter and switchboard. A light flashed on the meter.

Mr Siwa was born on a cattle farm in Fort Brown, which lies about 20km north of Grahamstown, in 1946. He has two sisters and a brother. His brother and eldest sister are both married, his sister still lives on the farm. His parents are both dead.

Mr Siwa is a stocky, bearded, well-muscled man Xhosa man. His body bears clear evidence of hard manual labour though his face is unlined and his hair is still dark. The fingers of his right hand are all missing from the first joint and he has severe burn marks on his chest and stomach, the result of a childhood accident. He crawled into a firebreak when still an infant on the farm.

In his life he has travelled as far as Port Elizabeth, 130km to the south-west, and Fort Beaufort, 70km east. He has never left the Eastern Cape, largely because apartheid legislation prevented him from doing so. He never received a formal education because there were no schools in the region he grew up in. He cannot read or write and is completely innumerate. He says his only education comes from experience and interaction with other people. He understands his language and culture and can grasp some concepts in English and Afrikaans.

He started working on the farm at an early age and continued to do so well into adulthood. He cannot remember when he married his wife Evelyn in a traditional wedding, but he followed tribal custom and payed Lobola for her. They have three children; Xolani, 17, in Standard Seven, Sandile, 15, and Mbongani, 13, both in Standard Six. The children all go to Nembulile High school at a cost of R32 a year.

After he left his parents on the farm Ndoda moved to

Grahamstown. He worked as a gardener for Professor Potgieter of Rhodes University for three years, earning enough money to buy his house. Since then he hasn't held a permanent job.

At the age of 26 he went through the customary Xhosa initiation into manhood. He and a number of other 'boys' went and lived in the bush for a month. The community cooked food for them and occasionally left them a sheep to slaughter and barbecue. After the month was over they were circumcised by a traditional healer, or tribal functionary, who is trained in the operation, and became 'men'.

Evelyn Siwa is also unemployed. She does volunteer work at a community soup kitchen, cooking food and keeping the register.

No one in the family has work and Mr Siwa states openly that his primary problem is money. He, his wife, their three children and his sister's son all live in his three roomed home. His nephew lives with him by choice, apparently a completely normal arrangement with Mr Siwa taking responsibility for the boy's welfare. One of his hopes for the future is that the government of national unity will provide his nephew with a tertiary education so that he can become a social worker.

The Siwas' converted to Christianity at the height of the violence in the Eastern Cape and remarried in the Dutch Reform Church. Mr Siwa says he adopted Christianity because he felt it would protect him from the violence and chaos surrounding him. Mr Siwa also joined the ANC when Nelson Mandela was released from prison in the hope that Dr Mandela would bring an end to the exploitation of black labour that he had suffered under.

Mr Siwa hopes for reform in the future but has no immediate expectations. His primary concerns are economic; housing, jobs and a better standard of living for himself and his family. He adds that, while the government of national unity had promised housing, this was for people who, unlike himself, have some earning capacity. He hopes that the future would bring some hope for people like himself. □

In his life he has travelled as far as Port Elizabeth, 130 km to the south-west, and Fort Beaufort, 70km east. He has never left the Eastern Cape, largely because apartheid legislation prevented him from doing so.

The main problem encountered in our interview was the apparently insurmountable language barrier. I don't speak Xhosa and, equally, Mr Siwa does not speak English.

Our 'transaction' was mediated by our translator, Collen Mbisi - a fellow student. The translation interrupted the process, prevented disclosure. By its very nature it established a sequence of question and response, rather than allowing Mr Siwa to openly express himself.

The testimonial deteriorated into an interview, reflecting only the questions asked. I, as the questioner, was obliged to interpolate Mr Siwa's story and to impose my own understanding and prejudice.

Similarly, Collen's particular brand of 'activist's' politicised language became intrusive - I sincerely doubt that Mr Siwa used the term "Government of National Unity", although he was clearly politicised.

I also feel some doubts about his use of the term "exploitation" - not that I'm suggesting that Collen was grasping, or being deliberately misleading, but his 'person' became intrusive in our discussion. He interpreted my questions, and Mr Siwa's responses in terms of his own understanding.

Consequently both Mr Siwa and I were reduced to the third person, we lost all agency, all the innuendo and hidden commentary was swept away in this process of rendering language. I felt as if I could have interviewed him over a long period of time and still not approached his 'truth' but merely succeeded in listing a number of moments or incidents in his life.

It was frustrating, infuriating in fact. I found the barrier between us to be insurmountable, and I also

found the few attitudes that I could discern offensive. I have always been hot-headed, a red-headed "rush in where angels fear to tread" type person regardless of consequence.

Mr Siwa is completely aware of his situation, recognises that he has been exploited and abused and is totally aware that his future is, ef-

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fectively, one of poverty and degradation and yet he seems resigned to it, although he has hopes for his children. He appears to be at peace with his situation, almost complacent, which I found both humiliating and infuriating. I loathe his lack of agency. Of course some of that is 'translational' and situational but in his life I am sure I would react vigorously.

As a life story this testimony is incomplete, a few incidents or moments in a man's life . As an exam-

ple of the complete failure of the process, however, it is spectacularly successful. In 40 minutes I was exposed to a fairly high volume of information, even if that information was piecemeal - particularly considering the language barrier.

Mr Siwa had an agenda, he was strongly aware of the potential of exposure and he was actively trying to communicate. He had prepared for the interview, he had personal documentation; the plans for his house, his wedding certificate, his children's birth certificate.

Even though the process was incredibly intrusive, with eight people crowding into his house and publicly asking him personal questions, even though he was clearly tired and had work to do, he was good-natured and cooperative. I was dedicated, he was dedicated, and yet what came out of the discussion was garbage.

Despite goodwill and mutual intent we failed to communicate. Obviously language was a barrier, colour was probably a barrier, our personal agendas were probably barriers, and class was almost certainly a barrier. That would imply, generically, that all testimonio is doomed by insurmountable interpersonal barriers. That the process is inevitably going to fail because, in essence, "east is east and west is west". Racism and ethnocentrism is confirmed by the inability to bridge the gap between us.

I found my inability to refute that elemental difference the most frustrating aspect of all. We could not communicate, simply because we spoke different languages. Even if I could speak Xhosa and he could speak English, we'd still be speaking different languages because the category connection simply does not exist. We are too completely alien to communicate. □



johnson mountain

his • story

Interviewed by Collen Msibi

m *y name is Johnson Mountain. The eldest child of Mr. and Mrs. William Noneven Mountain. I was born on 19 August 1945, in the Albany district on the farm called Willow Klein, named after its owner, Mr Willow Klein. That is where my parents spent half of their life, working as farm labourers. Their job was nothing more than ploughing and selling the vegetables.*

*My hope
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new
government
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jobs for
people
like us*

It was a very exploitative job considering they were earning one rand forty per month. But they never realised that, because their mouths were kept shut with a free dish of meal everyday.

I started schooling at the age of seven, in 1952. There were no schools in the farm. We used an old church built by the missionaries as our school. The name of the church was St. Mathews church. It consisted of the church hall, which housed standard one, two and five. Then there was a detached little building accommodating standard threes and fours. All these buildings had wooden floors with loose boards.

When I was in standard three, I came to realize that my parents were not rich as I had thought before. So, I took a decision to help supplement what they were earning. But remember, I was a very young to look for a job. Fortunately, I landed a job on the farm as an egg collector and chicken feeder. It was very hard job considering my age, because it meant waking up at five o'clock in the morning. I started off for the farm to collect eggs and feed the chickens. In the afternoon I had to go back to the farm for the same duties. The worst part of it was that when I walked I couldn't use shoes, because I didn't have any. Winter mornings were most trying when the air penetrated the cracks round the edges of my feet.

For my mother it meant waking up at four o'clock in the mornings to make fire in a brazier. She had to make breakfast tea for the family, which we often had with mealie-meal. My class teacher knew that I was late everyday, so he would prepare a cane before I could even arrive at school. Looking back to those years of my life, as much of it as I can remember. I cannot help thinking

that it was time wasted. I had nobody to shape it into a definite pattern.

When I was in standard four, that was in 1957, Mr. Willow Klein sold his farm to a businessman from Cape Town. By the time he sold it, he had already bought a house and vegetable site in the town of Grahamstown. Things were difficult for my parents, because it meant losing a place to stay. But by God's will they retained their jobs.

In September 1957, we moved to the new place in Grahamstown. But things were still difficult for us, because we didn't have a place to stay in Grahamstown. Mr. Willow Klein had said very clearly that retaining a job did not mean a place to stay. So, my father had to look for a place within two days of our arrival. Fortunately, he found a one room place in I street at Fingo Township. It was a room with a bed, table and four chairs. We used it as a bedroom, sitting room and kitchen. Things were better for me because the Andrew Manake Primary school was next to my home.

In 1959, when I was supposed to go to standard seven, I didn't. My father told me I had to go to the bush for circumcision. I was glad to hear the news, because I was beginning to detest school since I was punished everyday for not having the books. In February 1958, I went to the bush together with other boys. Life was very bad without my parents for the whole month. Not to mention bad food that we were eating. I'm not saying that at home we were eating nice food. But a dish of porridge and vegetables, was better than the porridge and sour milk that we ate in the bush. In the last two weeks, I was circumcised. Then we stayed for another week to allow a healing process to take place. On the second of

March, we went back home. They slaughtered a goat to welcome us home. That was our Xhosa tradition. Even today its still like that.

When I came back it was clear that, I had to go and look for a job because the academic year had already started. I landed a job at the bottle store in town. I worked there as a cashier for many years.

In 1965, I decided to become independent of my parents. But before doing that I thought it would be better if I got married before moving out. In March 1965 I married my long time girlfriend, Elvina. When getting married, I took a traditional route. I paid a brideprice of two-hundred rands and a cow. I worked very hard in collecting that sum of money. With pride I proceeded to claim my bride.

At that time there were few people in the township. They did not seem to be interested in one another. But they spoke with the voice of unity. They behaved as a community. A common enemy being poverty. There were few shops in the area. There was only one street linking us with the town. There were few cars. The means of transport were bicycle and horses. We were lucky at home because my father had a bicycle, which he used when selling vegetables.

At the end of 1965 I went to look for a place to stay with my wife. It was easy because I had many friends at that time. I found a two room house without a proper floor and ceiling. We lived on a sandy floor. We paid 50 cents a month for a rent. In 1969, my first child was born. I named her Pamela. She is now doing standard ten at Port Elizabeth. My parents were still working for Mr. Willow Klein. My wife was a domestic worker. In

1971, our second child was born. His name is Patrick. Our third child followed in 1974. Her name is Patricia. They are both doing standard eight today.

In 1976 I got very sick. The bottle store owner took me to the Fort England Hospital where I recieved medical treatment. I was too ill to continue working and the doctor recommended me for a pension. I was afraid of losing my job, which I did. But what still worries me is that even today I don't know what was the cause of my illness. Thereafter, my life depended completely on my wife who was still working as a domestic worker.

At the end of 1976 my parents moved to Port Elizabeth, where they are staying even today. For me, it was clear that I had to look for another job, because my pension fund was not enough to look after my family.

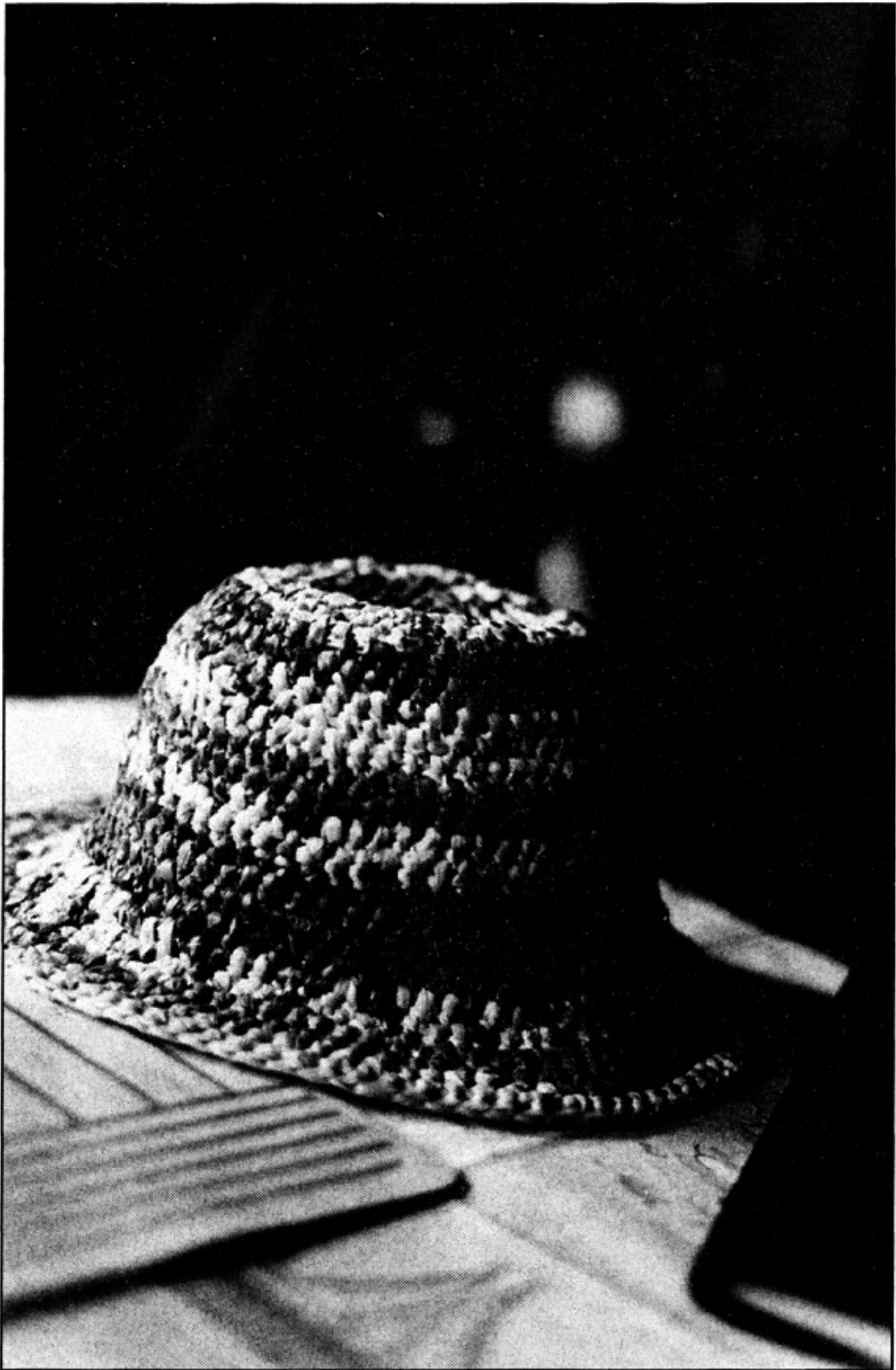
In June 1977, I landed a job at Matebele Funeral Service in Grahamstown. I dressed corpses before they were taken by their relatives. With that job I managed to supplement my pension fund. I worked for that funeral service until 1991 when I decided to look for a place where I could build a house for my family. At the end of 1991, things became worse, because my wife lost her job. Our fourth child, Siyaxoliswa, was born, and I had already abandoned my job. Despite that I managed to build this three roomed house. Even today I live there with my family. But life is so difficult. We are struggling because no one in my family has a job. We are all dependent on the pension which I receive every month.

My hope is that the new government will provide jobs for people like us.□

AFTERWORD

Although it was our first meeting, and the interview took place in front of his neighbours, Mr Mountain came up with deeply personal matters. The interview was conducted in his language, Xhosa, making it easy for him to tell almost everything. He was not shy about giving personal details in that setting.

My questions were simple and short, but the answers were very long, and would even include things that were still to be asked about. Mr Mountain was more than kind to take me to his own house. Even though it was small and made of clay, he was very proud of it. He also gave me an opportunity to take pictures of the house and his family.



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he aim of bringing a child up; you want him to have a better life, because if he doesn't go to school, and stays in the location - he's going to do lots of wrong things, that are going to cause trouble for him, not only for you. One day you won't be here, then he'll have nobody to look after him. Like me now, my parents are all gone, but they taught me how to work at home and how to behave. Now I've got a job for a long time. That's what you want for your children."

Interviewed by Nicole Norval

“ In those days we were not allowed to see people who have passed away. They just tell you that she’s sleeping. But when you go to the funeral, you will see lots of people singing and going to church, then they say the person’s going to sleep now in the graveyard. We were not so clever, like these days. ”

I was born in Port Alfred in 1938. It’s my home place. I went to school there up to standard six, then I came to Grahamstown; standard seven, eight, nine. I didn’t finish matric., because the subject was going to be changed to Bantu Education, so my parents didn’t have money to let me go back again.

When I was born, my parents, they were in Port Alfred - I don’t know when they got there, because I never heard of any place except Port Alfred. They were born on farms, but they went to Port Alfred, then they stayed there.

When I was growing up, I used to stay with my Mummy and Daddy and Granny. And we used to go to church, Sunday school. So there was nothing difficult when I was growing up, because my parents were with me. I never went out to other places. I first went to other places when I came to standard seven here in Grahamstown.

For the first year, it was very difficult for me. It was the first time I was separated from my parents. They sent me here because the schools there used to finish at standard six. That’s why I came here to do standard seven in 1955. Otherwise I didn’t have problems. I’ve only got problems now that my parents are all passed away. I don’t remember when, unless I see those files. It was a long time ago - first my mother, then my father, then my brother.

That’s when I only have a difficult time, because I’ve had to look after all my little sisters and my brother’s little babies. My brother also passed away, but my sisters are at home in Port Alfred; they are working. I had only one brother and three sisters, two younger and the other one has her own home. She’s married, and I’m the first-born.

My grandma had only two boys, no girls. My father’s big brother also passed away. Now we just have relatives. I’ve got my three sisters, and oh, they’ve got children.

My grandmother passed away when I was still very young, but I can still remember what happened. She was very sick, and in those days we were not allowed to see people who have passed away. They just tell you that she’s sleeping. But when you go to the funeral, you will see lots of people singing and going to church, then they say the person’s going to sleep now in the graveyard. We were not so clever, like these days.

And then I can still remember that my brother had a big brother [uncle], then they had to call him and tell him that my grandmother was very sick. Then my father’s big brother did come - it was hardly fifteen minutes when we were told that Granny can’t talk anymore, she’s sleeping.

I got married. My husband was born in Grahamstown and he went to school here. We stay at Xolani, Jantjie

Rachel is older than I expected. I first met her almost four years ago, and was introduced to her as my residence’s ‘Mother’. She works in the kitchen at our dining hall, and works in one of the hall’s residences, cleaning it on a daily basis.

For a typical South-African ‘black-white’ relationship, we’ve become closer than the norm, although I don’t see her as often as I used to. This friendship made the interview easier than I anticipated and even enjoyable.

I think she trusts me even though she was very worried about her identity being revealed in ‘papers’ and she tailored her responses somewhat - probably to what she believes a liberal, democrat, private-school child like me wants to hear. At the same time, the exercise was a

Extension. He was working at a garage, the petrol depot. But it's moved now from Grahamstown. He's not working; he is fifty-seven. We have two children, they are old. The boy was born in 1960; he is working out of Grahamstown on a farm. It's a new reserve next to that place where you gamble, the Fish River. They are looking after animals and he enjoys it, because he's been there maybe it's two or three years now. Before that he was at school, then he left school - he wanted to work.

I also have a girl in standard seven, in a coloured school. At the moment, she likes school. She comes home and does some tidying, and I tell her to cook something. She must learn to work like me. I don't know what she wants to do when she's finished. In these days, you are even frightened to ask a child, because when you want your child to go to school, he's going to disappoint you and not want to go. I just pray to God that she must just go to school and that she mustn't hear me pray about it.

The aim of bringing a child up; you want him to have a better life, because if he doesn't go to school, and stays in the location - he's going to do lots of wrong things, that are going to cause trouble for him, not only for you. One day you won't be here, then he'll have nobody to look after him. Like me now, my parents are all gone, but they taught me how to work at home and

how to behave. Now I've got a job for a long time. That's what you want for your children.

Women aren't allowed to leave home, unless they are married. They stay at home. In these days, they do go and stay with their boyfriends, because they rule themselves now. It's not good, because that man one day, can see another girlfriend and find you useless. Maybe you've worked together, instead of working for your own parents, or working for your own self and your children. Respect for your parents is very good. But if they're not here, that's when the kids do what they like.

I started working in 1967, but before '67, I was a nanny - looking after little kids here in Grahamstown. In '67 I started working for Rhodes. It's nice - it's been very nice. I've had lots of friends going, coming, going, coming. So I enjoy working - in the rooms more than working in the kitchen, because in the rooms it's so quiet. I've been enjoying it - I've got no problems.

We've got a union, but I don't know if they look after me, because I haven't had any problems that put me together with it - so I can know that they are all right.

My students, they are okay. They're friendly and I'm friendly to them. When they change or go away, I do have a funny feeling, but when other ones come, you get used to those. But

“ If somebody passes away, maybe in the area, lots of people do go there. Not just family, but just anybody who knows that person. It's political when it's somebody who's a member, for that organization. It's not for everybody. ”

valuable one; it sensitized me to certain feelings I've never stopped to acknowledge and I believe Rachel, like most people, enjoyed telling her story.

A longer information-gathering session, or additional sessions, would have been beneficial. I was never bored for an instant and if I had prepared more topics, I could have carried on for hours. As it was, I prepared a few general topics to cover and just improvised as I pursued certain areas.

I am very concerned about prying into other people's personal lives. I felt Rachel's hesitation about her husband's unemployment and about her children. I think there's more about her

when they're leaving, they're just like part of your family because you see them everyday. When it's a holiday and nobody's here, you feel very funny - like all your children have gone away. Lots of children.

I don't go to church now like when I was with my parents, because now I get tired and don't go, I just sit. Sunday I need a very good rest because Monday is a busy day. But that Sunday I should go, because when I was little I used to go every Sunday. Now my parents are not here, I just get lazy.

I go to the Methodist church - opposite us we've got one called St John's Methodist Church. The people who go to that church know everybody, because we've got a roll, and on Thursday, I should be at the Women's Day. It's like church, but you sing and you pray - sometimes only a few people get a chance. But when there's someone who's passed away, if she's a member of the Women's Day, you must go there and make a prayer.

In the location, if somebody passes away, maybe in the area, lots of people do go there. Not just family, but just anybody who knows that person. It's political when it's somebody who's a member, for that organization. It's not for everybody.

Now, it's still quiet, but when there's violence, it's not nice. Because we go to work early in the morning, so you don't know what's happened - sometimes you go home late at night and you don't know what's happening, especially for the kids. You'll tell them to stay at home - you'll find them and they've been playing all over. You are worried when you are at work, when there's riots; because you won't know what's happening.

The voting, it was nice, because we didn't know what voting means and it was the first time we've voted. We don't know if things are going to change. I, for myself, I don't know, because maybe somebody does understand and know. But still we hope that things in the world are going to change and everybody will feel okay. I'm happy.

My neighbours, I can say, must feel happy, although I don't know because you don't know what somebody thinks and since I'm working, I don't have enough time to go over to my neighbours just for sitting. I just work and stay in a house. I go to church, I go to funerals.

children than she's told me. However, I find her statements amazingly candid, fresh and full of basic truth and realism. Her comments about bringing up children is a nutshell of many discussions my father and I have had (would that he had been so concise!)

I wonder if people would offer their testimonios voluntarily - for example, if Rachel had seen an advert, would she have offered her story without being approached? I don't know, and it worries me. I don't like the idea of making someone feel they are obliged to do something they don't want to do. Nonetheless, I think the clarity and vitality of direct speech makes for easy and insightful reading, and I believe this type of exercise could develop into something of literary importance - if it has not already.

