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Even Flowers Bloom on Unmarked Graves: Stories of Disappeared South Africans

Willa Goldberg

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Even Flowers Bloom on Unmarked Graves: Stories of Disappeared South Africans

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South Africa: Social and Political Transformation
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Abstract

This ISP is a departure from the usual format. After gathering information from the MPTT, experiencing an exhumation, and interviewing relatives of two disappeared individuals – I endeavored to write a fictional four part story inspired by the previously mentioned activities. Although much of my project is heavily based on factual information, I utilized a creative license to create a story that also explores my journey as an observer, participant, and interviewer.

As previously mentioned the main methodology utilized was interviews. Other methodologies employed included observation, participation, and information gathered from secondary sources (for example, the MPTT’s files on missing individuals). My work may be fictional, but while writing it, it was essential to respectfully and accurately represent all the individuals who are discussed and from whom information was gathered.

My ISP journey has been a very organic one. At the beginning of the process I believed that my final product would read more like a narrative. As I began interviewing family members of the disappeared it became very clear to me that owing to the time constraint of my project and the fact that many of the people whom I wanted to interview were deceased or missing, a narrative format was not feasible. I then decided that instead of telling a narrative, I would create a piece of fiction shaped by what I have encountered during my ISP process.
Introduction

It all began with one simple thought: people are more than a number. The amount of people who went missing during apartheid is a collection of individuals; each individual has a family and a story. And, if South Africa and the world only remember the numbers, than the individual loses his/her identity. The individual becomes another causality to the wider scope of devastation. It is with this in mind that I first began trying to find out more about two people who went missing. Through interviews with surviving members of each missing person’s family I hoped to gain a better insight into who these people were – their interests, dreams, personality.

As I began looking into these two individuals, I discovered two things that would shape my project and require me to set a different end goal. First, in the case of many missing people the amount of family and friends who are still alive to share the stories of their relative is shrinking rapidly. Secondly, language and time (or rather the lack of proficiency in a common language and the lack of time) were two huge factors I would have to face. These limitations required me to change the format of my paper from a narrative to a fictional piece respectively and accurately based on my experiences during my ISP process.

After accepting the change of format for my ISP, my objectives became clear. It was essential that I create a piece that would effectively marry my personal experience (expectations, realities, and impressions) to the realities of those whom I interviewed and the individuals I investigated. This required that I wrote respectfully and accurately as possible but at the same time told my piece in a creative way that was representative of my own experience.
The body of my paper is divided into three sections: Part 1: Exhumation of a Truck Driver, Part II: Abstract of an MK Man, Part III: Portrait of a Rebellious Teacher. The first section, Exhumation of a Truck Driver, deals with my experience at an exhumation. This section is mainly comprised of a metaphor that I envisioned while attending the exhumation; it also focuses on my expectations, the realities that became apparent, and the lasting impression I had.

In the second section, Abstract of an MK Man, I present the story of an individual whom I still know very little about. This section examines the reality that some stories will never be wholly known. My third and final section, Portrait of a Rebellious Teacher, is the story of an individual in advance of his time. Although the information obtained for this story was gathered from only one relative in one interview, the story is an excellent example of how even through a collection of stories, the character of an individual can be revealed.

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1 Stands for: Umkhonto weSizwe (or “Spear of the Nation” in English), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC) that was launched on the 16th of December 1961 and is active still today.
Literature Review

Introduction

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in the aftermath of apartheid, attempted to address the atrocities committed between March 1, 1960 and May 10, 1994. By the end of the TRC’s service, many people remained missing. The Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT), empowered by the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) in 2005, is responsible for carrying on the TRC’s legacy and searching for the disappeared. The efforts of the MPTT continue even though some of the disappeared went missing over half a century ago. As the years pass, families of the missing still hope to find closure and their relatives’ remains. The pain of the families and the state of the disappeared is not just a South African phenomenon. Nepal and Argentina are both countries in which their governments have perpetrated the forced disappearance of citizens deemed subversive. In the Nepal and South African context not much about the missing has been written, but quite a lot of literature has been written pertaining to the missing of Argentina. Although the literature written on Argentina’s missing is in many ways expansive and offers a basis for literature on the missing worldwide, it can never fully speak to the South African context. It can however, provide examples of topics relating to the missing in South Africa that should be written about. With this in mind, literature written on victims of politicide (the premeditated killing or murder of any person or people by a government because of their politics or for political purposes), must be fully explored, and the discovery and acknowledgement of gaps within such literature must also be noted (Juhl & Olsen, 2006).
Rhetoric of the Perpetrators

Rhetoric is the way language is used. Language as its own entity is without bias, but people mold and employ rhetoric to accomplish certain goals. The government of Argentina, which perpetrated forced disappearances, used rhetoric to create a lexicon of words forever associated with Argentina’s Dirty War (Feitlowitz, 2011). An example of one word, which applies to both the South African and Argentinian context, is the word “disappeared.” Disappeared had not previously been used as a transitive verb, but the necessity to describe those taken by the government called for the use of the word “disappeared” in a new way (Feitlowitz, 2011). During the Dirty War, words took on new connotative definitions. Previously harmless phrases became associated with the ruling regime and remain associated today. Examples of words that had different connotative meanings within the South African context include: ‘passbook’, ‘homeland’, ‘non-white’, and ‘coloured’. Further exploration of the use of rhetoric by governments that committed politicide would be interesting and informative to literature relating to politicide. Research about the use of rhetoric in South African would be particularly interesting because of the number of languages widely spoken.

Institutionalizing the Disappeared

Although the institutionalization of the mentally ill during apartheid may not seem to relate to literature on missing people, it is without a doubt related because the government used institutions for the mentally ill as places to disappear people. That being said, the number of people who were not mentally ill but were still institutionalized is much smaller than previously believed. Furthermore, the conditions in institutions for those deemed “non-whites” during apartheid were as a whole much better than previously assumed. There are notable incidents where human rights abuses were perpetrated against the disappeared while institutionalized, but
the largest human rights abuse perpetrated by institutions for the mentally ill would be the lack of facilities for “non-whites” who actually suffered from mental illness (Jones, 2012). In proportion to the population the number of white males institutionalized is much larger than that of the women and people of other races institutionalized. In 1997, the TRC held a mental health sector workshop where the physiological damage of apartheid was discussed. Also, reports about the current mental health system from patient accounts to caregiver accounts were submitted and abuses perpetrated by the system were discussed. White males, which were the most valued by the apartheid government, were given preference in entrance to mental institution. Despite this, the issues within mental institutions affected people of all races – the white males were not necessarily given preferential treatment. It can be argued, that in some ways the oppressed population benefited, since those who were not white and mentally ill were not always offered the opportunity to receive help through a mental institution, such individuals were able to avoid the inadequacies and abuses within the mental health institutions (Jones, 2012). It is important to note, of course, that the case of mental institutions and their minimal involvement in disappearances within the South African context does not necessarily apply to other cases of politicide. In other countries, mental institutions were much more often utilized to silence opponents of the government.

**Finding & Exhuming the Disappeared**

The largest body of work pertaining to the disappeared of any country can be found in literature about finding and exhuming those who were disappeared. In South Africa, Argentina, and Nepal the desires of many family members are similar. Families want to find their loved ones, dead or alive. Reasons include the desire for closure, giving the missing a proper burial, the family being able to qualify for reparations, and official recognition of the families’ and the
missing person’s sacrifice (Aronson, 2011). In many ways, the necessity of finding the dead is rooted in recognition. In an article published in *Newsweek* Madelenie Fullard, who was head of the MPTT when the article was written, is quoted as saying, “Partly it’s trying to say, these people lived and mattered…It’s about recovering memory and gathering information” (Gurney, 2008). The TRC reports sometimes conflict with MPTT’s findings, and although this can be troublesome in relation to amnesty granted on the condition of honesty, it is very important in many cases for the family of the missing person to have as much information as possible about what fate their loved one suffered. As explained in Jay D. Aronson’s 2011 article, *The Strengths and Limitations of South Africa’s Search for Apartheid-Era Missing Persons*:

> Recent social science research on missing persons situations around the world suggests that the successful resolution of a disappearance case requires more than recovering, identifying and handing over mortal remains to families.

Many South African families whose loved ones were lesser known or not associated with the African National Congress (ANC) didn’t receive burials that the families found adequate. Their loved ones weren’t celebrated and notable individuals didn’t necessarily attend their funerals (Juhl & Olsen, 2006). In many ways, recognition is an essential part of healing for the families of the missing.

The Argentinian situation is slightly different. In Argentina children of those deemed enemies of the government were often taken from families and placed in the care of government or military officials. There has been a movement by the Grandmothers and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to reclaim the stolen children. Unlike in South Africa, the probability of finding the disappeared alive is much more likely. This brings up another host of issues, especially for the children who must grapple with questions of identity (Arditti, 1999). The Argentinian situation also differs because of the way the government dealt with the perpetrators. Perpetrators often
found themselves in courtrooms and facing prison sentences, rather than amnesty. On the flip side, many perpetrators were given blanket amnesty and retained their positions in the military, government, and other areas of power. Argentina’s way of dealing with their past came before South Africa’s and was a reference point for when South Africa formed the TRC (Crenzel, 2011). Also, many victims of Argentina’s Dirty War weren’t necessarily politically aligned, and so, although families wanted some form of recognition their desires were shaped differently than families in South Africa.

**The Power of Memory**

Remembering the disappeared is largely left to the families of the disappeared. The power of memory can in many ways metaphorically bring the disappeared back to life. Although many of the disappeared have never been formally recognized, the continuation of the family to memorialize their loved one lives on (Herwitz, 2005). Many families remain persistent, and frequently contact the MPTT with hope that their loved ones remains might still be found.

It is the power of memory and the “never again” attitude that fuels the desire to be vigilant to not repeat politicide or any other form of genocide. It is also the power of memory that would feasibly allow for the stories of the disappeared to be told and recorded. The families of the disappeared are also responsible for keeping the memory alive for those who never were able to meet the disappeared. In many cases children of the disappeared have never met their parents because of the danger associated with knowing of the disappeared.

In the case of Argentina the power of memory can lead to families being reunited, in the case of the Grandmothers and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Arditti, 1999). This is the best-case scenario and understandably is not often the outcome in the South African context.
The Pain of Memory

For many, remembering can often be a burden. The burden has been examined in many countries, one of which is Nepal. Ambiguous loss is a phenomenon described as when a loved one’s status of dead or alive is unknown, which is often the case for families whose loved one remains missing. Sufferers struggle to define themselves: widow or wife, widower or husband, etc. As part of this, one’s self-autonomy can often be lost (Robins, 2010).

In the South African context family members often have trouble moving on with their lives. Many times the disappeared were the breadwinners of the family so the families can also not financially move on (Aronson, 2011). Waiting on the MPTT to turn over the remains of those who are found can also be an agonizing process. The bureaucracies related to the South African Police (SAP) from exhuming the remains to turning over the remains to the MPTT, to having the remains examined in Pretoria, to getting a proper death certificate, and finally to the reburial – the whole process is often bogged down by unforeseen bumps along the way. Another problem with memory is its understandable failings. As time continues to pass, the disappeared can become an idolized and blurry depiction of who they once were. And, also as time passes the amount of people who can keep alive the memory begins to dwindle; in some cases all those who could remember have already died without the disappeared person’s story ever being told or recorded.

Rhetoric of the Survivors

Finding creative writing related to the missing and those who survived isn’t an easy task. Currently, the only literature written in a creative manner related to South Africa’s victims concentrates on well-known names. Heroes – a word that by definition categorizes those not recognized as other. The ordinary men, women, and children are memorialized as part of a
number, not as individuals. As previously described, even if the bones of the missing are returned and reburied, unless the name of the victim is well known recognition is nearly never given.

In Argentina one book of creative work regarding the missing stands out. Marguerite Randall, in her book “As if the empty chair: poems for the disappeared,” writes about those still missing and those left behind in Argentina. The creative work stands out from the many academic journals describing the atrocities and aftermath because it displays deeply human emotions (Randall, 2011). One excerpt from Randall’s (2011) poem, “Someone Lives” reads:

If I can say I remember
I do remember,
And the suddenly-vanished
-decades ago or yesterday-
move into light once more.
It is the precious task
their dead fingers
imprint upon my own.

It does not have the strictness of academic writing or the formality of just the facts. Although the Argentinian context is different from South Africa’s, many of the poems within Randall’s work can also speak to the emotions of those in South Africa. The poems reflect on the issues of self-identity, survivor’s guilt, ambiguous loss, and many more, all very relevant to the South African context. Its departure from the usual description of politicide is more of an absence in South African literature.

In South Africa the heroes have spoken, the apartheid regime has spoken, but those who bore the brunt of abuses during apartheid – the ordinary men, women, and children – remain without a voice. Their voice is not one that can be heard through statistics or the writing of academics; they must simply be allowed to tell their story.
Conclusion

The amount of literature available that speaks about the disappeared across the world is mostly published through academic journals and statistics. Creative work describing the stories of the disappeared remains a loss explored discursive mode. The disappeared are not confined to one country – Argentina, Nepal, or South Africa – they are part of a worldwide phenomenon. Perpetrated by the government, politicide has occurred across time and the globe. With every new politicide the words ring out again – never again. But, never again is never that. The amount of literature regarding politicide is small, and in many ways this lack of publication leads to a lack of awareness and in turn, a lack of future prevention. Academic writing is important; facts and figures are a necessary part of reporting the events and what follows. That being said, academic writing very rarely speaks to the heart – to the humanity of individuals. It is from this belief that I draw the conclusion that creative writing serves an important function in the telling of atrocities, particularly in the case of South Africa. For a new future to dawn, the past must first be reconciled and told in full.
Methodology

My research period began on April 8, 2013 and concluded on the 26th of the same month. Between those times I attended an exhumation on April 9, collected research at the MPTT’s office April 10 and 15, interviewed one individual April 11, and interviewed a second individual April 17. I collected information for my study in several different ways besides interviewing; I gathered information from secondary sources, observed, and participated when appropriate. In large part my project is based on the two previously listed interviews, one with the cousin of a person who was killed during apartheid and whose body has not yet been recovered, and the other interview is with the sister of a person who was disappeared during apartheid.

The people I interviewed, as well as the missing people whom I endeavored to learn more about, were very different from one another. In the case of the cousin I interviewed language was a barrier (the cousin was a native isiZulu speaker and had trouble fully articulating himself in English). The missing person we discussed was a part of the MK and known to be deceased, and his disappearance/death was never reported to the TRC. In the case of the sister I interviewed, language really did not present a problem. Although the missing person had attempted to join the MK earlier in life he never became part of the MK. Additionally the second missing person was much older when he went missing, and his death has never been confirmed. Also, he was reported as disappeared to the TRC. In both interviews I used very similar strategies. Both interviews were conducted one-on-one, with the first one being in the MPTT office in Durban and the second one being in a room at a museum in Pietermaritzburg. I did not have a set amount of questions, rather I asked my interviewees to describe their relative and to relate stories about their relatives.
Interviews became my main methodology because this was the most effective way to learn personal stories about the people who had been disappeared during apartheid. As previously stated I also used gathering secondary source information as a methodology. The MPTT allowed me to view files of missing people and gain insight into straight facts such as the date of birth, familial connections, political party connections, and the like. Within the files I often found newspaper clippings, another secondary source, which allowed me to have a broader account of the missing individual. In many ways the weaknesses of interviewing and gathering secondary information are obvious: both methods are not without bias.

As far as observation and participation methodologies are concerned, both became necessary parts of my project’s formation. When I attended an exhumation the majority of the information I gathered was through observation and a little bit through participation. While occasionally working at the MPTT with Debora Quin, participation was another key methodology used. Drawbacks of these methodologies are also clear. Although I learned a lot from observing, my observations were greatly shaped by how I perceive things as a white, non-religious, female American. On the flip side, when I participated my perceptions were reshaped, and I was forced to view things from a different perspective.

It is my belief that my methodology was effective given the goals of my ISP. Although the amount of interviews I had was limited, I learned more than enough information to fuel the stories I created. My research provided me with a deeper understanding of the toll of apartheid on the everyday citizen, and I believe that because of this research I have been able to contribute to the still growing field of creative work about those who went missing during apartheid in South Africa.
Limitations of the Study

There were many limitations that I encountered during my study. First off and most notably, time was a huge limitation. I found that during my study many possible interviewees were deceased or lived too far away for me plausibly to meet with them. This problem will increase as time goes by and more and more of the people who lived during apartheid die. Additionally, the people whom I wanted to interview worked or maintained a house and only had a limited amount of time to speak with me. For these reasons I was only able to interview one relative out each of the two families I had wanted to speak with.

Another notable limitation was the lack of information I was able to find to back-up information told to me during interviews. This required me to be almost completely dependent on the memory of the relatives I interviewed to understand the missing individuals. I was unable to find such information because much of it had been destroyed or simply not recorded because the two individuals I was investigating weren’t famous.

Language was another huge limitation I encountered. The first person I interviewed was a native isiZulu speaker, and he had trouble fully articulating his thoughts in English. Additionally, I wasn’t able to find the answers to some of my questions because the language barrier didn’t allow me to fully explain my question. The second person I interviewed was extremely proficient and articulate in English, that being said, if I had been proficient in isiZulu I’m sure I would have been able to learn even more.

The culture gap between myself and the people I interviewed was probably the most noticeable limitation. Although I have researched South Africa’s history, culture, and politics nothing can truly compare to living through it. I have tried very hard to understand what I can, but it would be arrogant and mistaken not to note that my own bias should be accounted for.
Body of Work

Part I: Exhumation of a Truck Driver

If I can say I remember
I do remember,
And the suddenly-vanished
-decades ago or yesterday-
move into light once more.
It is the precious task
their dead fingers
imprint upon my own.
- Cecile Pineda, Someone Lives

It was already hot in the early morning sun. A gate gave way to a large graveyard, and a snaking dirt road appeared between the rows of stones. After following the winding road, the car had finally found its resting place on an overgrown patch of land unlike the surrounding area. The rest of the graveyard was sporadically maintained with sloping hills and a variety of tombstones. The perimeter was marked by a metal fence that had, at some point in time, become intertwined with vegetation so that now the outside road was barely visible. Where the car had come to rest was devoid of stones, tall grass and wildflowers ruled the field. A bright white canopy had been set up, and between that and the car an orange tent had been erected.

The sound of a lawn mower purred in the distance, and a car parked nearby growled to life as Zulu songs poured out of the speakers. It was hardly a somber affair. A ladder was visible sticking out of the previously unmarked grave, and two forensic specialists stood in the grave and passed buckets of dirt up to be dumped along the side. A low chatter was audible between most of the people present. The TV and news reporters talked among themselves and occasionally peered at the grave to assess the progress and exchange words with the specialists. Others in attendance included MK representatives, who looked nearly ready to expire in their
heavy uniforms. The flags they held hung limply as the representatives walked back and forth between the orange and white tents. The family was the only group of people who remained still in their chairs underneath the orange tent. Occasionally they spoke to the approaching reporters, but otherwise they were silent even when the specialists caught their attention and told them what progress was being made. The uncles, cousins, and brothers were dressed similarly in plain t-shirts, an occasional polo, and faded jeans. Dark work boots adorned their feet. They seemed more likely to be attending a braai than an exhumation. The women relatives, who were under the white tent and sat in white folding chairs, were the only ones dressed in attire that fit the stereotype of the proceedings. The mother wore a traditional black dress with white designs and a headscarf that matched. Her shiny black shoes had a thin layer of dust settling on them, and next to her stood another woman dressed in a smart black dress. They waited to be called over when the bones were unearthed and talked freely to anyone who engaged them. As the day drew on the orange tent was shifted so as to continue shading the specialists, and finally it was announced that the bones had been found.

The TV and newspaper reporters crowded near the orange tent, prevented from getting closer only by a thin red and white striped ribbon. The women came over from the white tent and the spectators parted to allow them graveside access. A single line of guilt couldn’t be found on the faces of the reporters as the video cameras rolled and the digital cameras clicked. The silence was broken by sound checks from the reporters and the shuffling of feet as the MK representatives assembled on the side of the grave directly across from the clicking cameras. It was like a play before the curtain rose – everyone clamoring to their spots and peering at the audience, a mound of bones. It lacked the dignity of a funeral, but the surrounding family members and comrades didn’t seem to mind. As everyone drew even closer to the edge of the
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grave, paying special attention to the precarious dirt piled along the side, a crushed skull was visible.

Two video cameras, three digital cameras, and at least 20 pairs of eyes focused and refocused. The mother was lead away weeping, a silent sniffling sound, as the specialists announced that the bones belonged to one individual who had sustained many injuries at the time of death. As others gasped at the cruelty of the perpetrators, she – the mother – trudged across the trampled grass, and with each footfall butterflies billowed up from the ground and fluttered lazily into the air. They trailed along like a macabre procession all the way back to the white tent. And – no doubt discouraged by the lack of flowers surrounding the white tent – they flew back towards the orange one. Dipping and diving to the flowers that grew along their flight path, the black butterfly with bright orange webbings and the white one that was translucent in the sunlight and imprinted with a design similar to lace, as well as several other butterflies (which were nearly impossible to count because as soon as one disappeared into an open bloom another one ascended above the blades of grass) remained near to the gapping hole the two specialists still stood in.

They, the butterflies, had been there all day, and their ancestors had been there before them, waiting for years. Memory served of a time when the whole area had been a field without a single stone or manicured rectangle disturbing the flow of tall grass and flowers. The land had been fertile before boxes of bones took root instead of trees. The first rows had begun appearing and eventually a fence that declared this the land of the dead. Vegetation had sprouted along the metal runs and between the limestone markers, slowly claiming the field again. The butterflies had been there then like they were now. They marked the seasons of the land, and they remembered when the largest amount of people found themselves folded into the Earth’s dark
blanket. They accompanied the processions that unfurled during the day; the circus dressed in black speaking to deaf ears. They also knew of the night time visitors, who came with bodies instead of bouquets and shovels in lieu of wreathes, who scraped up the Earth without hesitation and threw remains in a hole with a sigh of relief. Covered the black of a plastic bag with the brown of Earth and paused after the act for a cigarette or drink as though they had just finished greeting their old lover (which indeed they had, her name was death). And, as their feet left the site and rain washed atop the ground, trickling past the six-foot deep hole, life took root. Even flowers bloom on unmarked graves. Cars had parked and feet had trampled, while only the butterflies remembered who lay beneath.

The butterflies had waited until the men had left, waited for the soul that came to surface above the ground. The tendrils of life rose like colorless smoke effervescent and shimmering under the light of the moon and stars. It wafted above the blades of grass rolling and unfurling like wings. The butterflies approached silent as ghosts and offered up their backs. Like hands the soul imprinted its shape onto the delicate structures that fanned from the butterflies’ abdomens. Brighter than the stars the wings glowed and intricate patterns shaped the story of the soul. The lines dimmed and the shimmer died down, but the next day sunlight illuminated the fluidity of the changing latticework. From the backs of the first butterflies the soul was passed down and continued to rest upon the wings of generation after generation. They remembered what had been imprinted on their ancestor’s backs and they waited patiently on the field of flowers and grass.

The specialists signaled, and a wooden box full of plastic bags was brought to the side of the grave. As the majority of people were lead to the white tent, the bones were carefully separated and placed in labeled bags. Skull fragments in, zip it close, as the voices droned on from the white tent. They travelled down the skeleton until everything had been sectioned off
and sealed in plastic. The voices continued in isiZulu as the specialists – two women in neat uniforms with neat buns and neat white gloves, all of which were coated in a think layer of dirt – climbed from the grave on a rusting ladder. They brushed off what dirt they could, consolidated their exhumation kits, and packed all the labeled bags back into the brown wooden box. And they waited as the butterflies drew closer – one still lingering by the white tent, beckoning the living to finish speaking of the dead. The voices halted, the crowd dispersed, and the family came to place their hands on the box that contained all that remains of their loved one.

But, his journey isn’t yet over. The investigators collected the box, intent on officially identifying the cause of death. The butterflies followed the box bearer to the car that would transport the bones. Though they were tired and could not rest, their wings already felt lighter as the soul awoke. He was a truck driver. He had a family. He had a name. He had been waiting so many years for his soul’s final journey home.

And when we asked his mother what she felt she said, “relief.”
Part II: Abstract of an MK Man

Setting: A crisp white gallery. Nothing can be seen beyond the white walls and florescent lights. The ground is sealed cement. One painting hangs on the wall. The frame is raw wood, and the canvas displays a picture made of quick, colorful brush marks. In front of the painting stand two individuals standing side by side. No one else is present in the gallery.

Writer: It’s just an abstract.

(the woman shifts her gaze from the man to her right to the picture on the wall)

MK Man: What do you mean?

(the man turns to look at the woman to his left, he’s clearly outraged)

W: Well, when you look at it you have to turn your head or squint your eyes – use your imagination. There’s an image there, but it’s hardly obvious to the casual observer.

/she says it nonchalantly and shrugs/

M: But I’m a person. How can you call me an abstract of myself?

/his tone makes the woman turn away from the picture and look directly at him/

W: You see, it’s just that-

/she looks taken aback, breathes deeply and explains/

M: No! I have hopes and dreams. I was full-fledged body and bones, and I lived. Oh, did I ever live; a life you couldn’t even begin to understand. You, a white woman, a foreigner, you don’t even speak my native tongue, and you call me an abstract?

/he walks from the portrait and sits on a bench far away from the picture/

W: It’s not that simple.

/she takes a seat next to him and crosses and uncrosses her legs nervously/
M: Well, it hardly ever is. How would you feel, being called an abstract, a mangled interpretation of your previous visage?

(he gets close to her face as he nearly shouts the last words)

W: I don’t know. Disappointed maybe.

(she turns away from him so that her back is to his face)

M: Good.

(she turns back, his tone is different – defeated)

W: I’m not saying you’re an abstract though. I understand that you’re a who, not a what, that you’re made up of stories and intersecting lines, not just facts cut like angles. I believe that you have depth, that you’re composed of emotion deep enough to engrave your memory into stone. But I don’t have enough-

M: Enough what?

(he cuts her off, but again his voice is soft)

W: Time. Knowledge. Resources. Power. All I have are facts, a few personal characteristics, and my own imagination. I can only provide a rough sketch, an abstract.

(she puts one leg over the bench so that she looks him straight in the eyes)

M: Why, why don’t you know me?

(his voice sounds hurt)

W: Many of your comrades are dead or scattered. Maybe they would talk or maybe time has eaten like moths at their memories. Your family is also in the same state, and you had left them for sometime already before you died. Your blood lives on, but your children were unable to know you. We
still have not found your bones, and you’re one of many whose story is
unknown.

*(she says it matter of fact, but not cruel)*

*M:* They died for freedom, and it was unsafe for my family, even my children, to truly know me.
It was a different time. Who are you to try and speak of me? You do not even know if I would
rather have stayed anonymous.

*(he, defensively, challenging her with his eyes)*

*W:* You’re right, I don’t know. I’m hardly qualified. But, I wanted to try and learn your
story and tell it to others.

*(hesitantly, but with the last sentence her voice grows stronger)*

*M:* To think, my story taking shape in your voice. The absurdity is nearly laughable. What could
you know?

*W:* I know that your friends called you Tunkie.

*(softly with special care to pronounce ‘Tunkie’)*

*M:* But that’s not the name my mother gave me.

*W:* I know that you were killed on either the 13th or 14th of January, 1985.

*M:* You don’t even know the day?

*W:* No one seems to. I mean, they still don’t have your bones. The firefight was too hectic
to stop and gather the dead.

*(she explains slowly, aware of what little she knows)*

*M:* Yes, of course.

*(listening intently)*

*W:* I met your cousin. And he told me that you were like a brother to him.
M: We grew up together.

W: He told me you were a gentleman, that you were disciplined and often keep quiet.

(slowly, thinking aloud)

M: A model soldier.

W: Oh yes, he said you loved working out and that you were always really fit.

M: Short but fit.

W: Absolutely, he said that too. You liked playing soccer too, right?

M: It’s a great game. I also did Zulu dancing every chance I got.

W: Even in the rural areas on your missions, you danced. And he talked about how although you didn’t talk much, when you laughed you really laughed.

M: I was a happy man-

W: -with three children.

(cautiously)

M: Yes, three, but I only knew two. I was in the MK. I had to be careful. I never met the third child.

W: He said you never got to have your family, your wife and children, nicely. Your boy and two girls had to be protected.

M: I had to protect them. I had to give them a future.

W: You did, a land without apartheid.

M: He was my best friend, my cousin. He was the closest-

W: -he was your comrade.
End Scene: As the light fades the woman reaches towards the man’s hand. The portrait, out of sight from where they’re sitting begins changing. It folds in on itself and the colors shift and reform. A young black man is shaped. He’s short, but not slight. His hair is cut close and he wears traditional Zulu clothes fit for dancing. A smile has spread across his face, and in the distance a young woman with two girls and one boy is visible. All the lights of the gallery are gone except for one trained on the painting. The portrait begins shifting and reshaping again, but before an image forms the final light goes out.
Part III: Portrait of a Rebellious Teacher

*Keys and Thieves*

I was the troublemaker  
out of the five children  
my single mother raised

when I was 10  
I took the keys  
from the wardrobe

so that my friend  
could use the keys  
for his mother’s wardrobe

where she kept the money  
from her illegal alcohol business

the mama called the police  
who took me and gave me strokes

I was so mad at my mother  
“Ma, how could you betray me like that?  
You didn’t protect me.”

and my good, Christian mother said  
“I don’t protect street thieves.”

*One Day Reader*

he consumed books  
like sweets from  
a spaza shop

he consumed knowledge  
so fast  
it set his teachers on edge

& they’d tell him  
you can take over  
the class

it was hardly a wonder
that he’d come to one day
run his own

_Trouble Here_

he arrived
to get his teacher’s cause
came out fighting
after his first meeting
with older students
who thought
they could get away
with mistreating,
with beating, him

sent his torn jersey
back to his mother
who said
there’s going to be trouble here

but he was so defiant,
determined, & undeterred
that he stayed
to become a teacher

_Political Affiliation_

sister
I wasn’t going to tell you
anything

I didn’t want you to get
involved
I didn’t want you to know

so that when they came
around
asking about me

who they had arrested

they would see
that you shouldn’t be
arrested
21 Minutes

we wanted to be soldiers
but they caught us
near the border
and
they brought us
to the courthouse

it only took 21 minutes
they called it
the shortest terror trial
in 1977

5 Star

after 9 months
in solitary confinement
I was broken
and they sent me
to Fort Napier Institution

do you think
they made this system
to break us systematically?

I remember
I called it 5 star
in a letter to my aunt
each star burned into me

one for protecting
my family

one for honoring
my comrades

one for mending
my body

one for recovering
my mind

& the last one
for imagining
a 5 star future
Freedom’s Poison

when I was discharged
it was early & I was “lucky”

but
I was still imprisoned
in my mind

and
I could not share
a single memory

because each and every one
was a shuttering, shivering snake
full of poison
I never dared release

Lost in Translation

I read the entire bible
when I was in prison
& if filled me up
with questions

I remember
the word for corner & sinning
in isiZulu
is very similar

a preacher warned me against corners
to preserve my heavenly soul

I thought
all this translation
leads to reinterpretations

and I highly doubt
the original text
was concerned
with the ungodliness of corners

Traditional Identity

I would have liked to read
the Qur’an
& other religious texts

I would have liked
if my people hadn’t been
so easily turned from
traditional beliefs
to Christianity
without questioning

meanwhile the Indians
retained their religion
& prospered
in realization
of their identity

*Matric*

I never passed
the matric
it would have been
a hollow victory
in times like mine

*Rebellious Teacher*

because of my sister’s connections
I soon found myself
employed
a teacher & a convicted terrorist

I was thankful
but I refused to compromise myself

I demanded religious studies
be a study of all religions

I had my students
learn pride in their classroom

polished floors
desks pushed aside
so we could communicate
& I could educate

I refused to take off time
to attend the service
of a fellow teacher
who I never knew in life

because I refused
to allow the children
to suffer
a day of absent teachers

if ever I die
don’t dare create this circus

on the day I die
in my commemoration

ask the teachers to give
the students
an extra one & a half hours
of education

Stop All This Nonsense

when my sister
ran her programs

the one where
the university students
linked with the
secondary school students

I was so angry
at the teachers’ behavior
when the white
university students
came through

everyone stood at attention, respectful

but when my sister
put time into organizing
they brushed her aside

& I know it made her uncomfortable
but it made me uncomfortable

that these black teachers
perpetuated
white over black
The Importance of Certificates

an American man
wanted to interview
my sister
about her truancy
intervention program

he said he was a professor
but all he had was a suit
no certificate, to show

next time you come
you must bring your certificate
I told him

and then I’ll believe you

because if I came to America
saying I was a professor
no one would believe

This One

after a fight with
the school principal
I left my job
and began selling
vegetables & sweets
on the streets

I didn’t have a license
so they tried to arrest me
but I refused to walk into the van
-take me if you want me-

when reinforcements came
the senior police officer recognized me
from prison & said

Just leave him.
You never win with this one.

The Other Circus

my nephew was arrested
was trying to be political
that would have required him to be, bright

when he was released the morning brought police

who were always so dramatic with their cars & dogs the whole circus

my nephew had given my sister’s name for his guardian -the fool

so I said you are looking for me not my sister

they eventually took me which was good

because with all those dogs around my sister she would have collapsed

and by the time they arrived at the court she would have been dead

**Running in Place**

don’t join marathons plant a garden not this pointless non-productive, activity what’s the point? running, running, running & then at the end you have nothing to show

**Sons**

my first son I didn’t know and the second one was a big question mark
I tried to do the right thing
but the mother told me to leave
because another man took responsibility
and I looked too much like my son

a year after I disappeared
my first son disappeared
he was 14

*Blame*

my sister
blames herself
for my disappearance

she got me the job
where I was never seen from again

Easter Weekend
I’d taken off to visit family

she says
she always will live to regret it

how could I blame my blood
who loved me and stood by me

I am the one full of regrets
I am the one who is sorry
I am the one that disappeared

*If I Die*

I would talk to my neighbor
a very religious man
who loved watching boxing
I quizzed him about the Bible
& asked how he could reconcile
a love for violence & God

he said, it’s only a sport
which still didn’t make sense

either way,
one day when they were over
watching boxing
I told them
if I happen to die
you guys, come here to watch TV,
continue as normal

I don’t see the fuss about death
because it’s part of life
it’s an eventuality
it’s going to happen to all us

just come here & watch TV
I’m giving you permission

*Weeping*

the song weeping
by Vusi Mahlasela
brings my sister to tears
I so loved that song
and I so loved my sister
Conclusions

Although my project is first and foremost a research project, it also came to reflect the ability of creative writing to illustrate information in an accurate, respectful, and deeply effective way. The outcome of my project is a three part creative piece written in the form of a short story, dramatic script, and free verse poetry. How I chose to present my research is unorthodox, but the presentation allowed me to experience the complexities of reconciling my own perceptions and observations, working with stories that will never be fully told, and representing a human being through a collection of memories.

Through working with the MPTT and interviewing family members I have realized several important things. The amount of people missing remains overwhelming, and as the years past the probability of finding people (dead or alive) who went missing continues to shrink. Additionally, as the years past the ability of researchers to communicate with families of the missing greatly deteriorates. Family members are growing old, and if they are still alive often times their memories have faded. Because of these reasons it is absolutely imperative that researchers take the initiative to record the stories of the missing before this is no longer an option. Also, the MPTT, like many government agencies, is severely underfunded. Outside donors interested in exploring and conserving history should consider donating to this agency so that the MPTT can continue doing its very important job – finding truth. People should also consider volunteering their time to the MPTT or consider pursuing the job of an investigator at the MPTT. The work they do is an essential part of South Africa’s post-apartheid healing process, and the families the MPTT serve deserve closure.

The process of creating this work and my own personal reflections regarding it has, for me, further emphasized the need for creative work to be written addressing important events like
the politicide of apartheid. There is a dearth of creative works addressing those who went missing during apartheid; the amount of literature that even discusses the MPTT or the missing/disappeared is extremely limited. It is essential, therefore, that writers engage with the stories of everyday men and women who contributed to the ending of apartheid, those voices not as foregrounded as those belong to the more familiar struggle icons. Researchers should endeavor to learn about the stories of the past before all those who can remember are dead. Furthermore, creative writing such as poetry, prose, short story writing, drama in the indigenous languages of South Africa should continue to be developed on this and other subjects that concern South Africa.
Endnotes

1 All information contained within the Body of Work (Part I, II, and III) is based on two interviews with two separate individuals. Although a creative license was taken with the information collected, the work based on the interviews represents an accurate and respectful interpretation of the interviews’ findings. Both interviews are listed in the bibliography. The second interview is transcribed in full in the appendix, and notes from the first interview are also included in the index. A full transcript of the first interview can be made available upon request.
Bibliography

Primary Resources


Secondary Resources


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Appendices

Appendix A: Picture from Exhumation
Appendix B: Interview 1 Notes

Interview detained at Robben’s Island

6 Dec. ’85 – 12 Dec ‘90

Age: 55

Relationship to disappeared

• like a brother
• joined ANC, worked at hotel
• met Otto, talked about ANC, worked underground
• trained with cousin
• went to Mozambique, came back to fight
• operated in two separate rural areas
• was told cousin was dead, confirmed
• gentleman, disciplined, keep quiet
• likes working out “short but fit”, doesn’t talk much “yes” “no” kind of guy
• laughs, this person is happy
• comrade, best friend
• 3 children, stayed short for 2 children, never saw 3rd (1 boy, 2 girls), can’t stay with wife nicely
• played soccer, Zulu dancing
Appendix C: Interview 2 Transcript

Willa Goldberg: I’m going to start recording. So, basically what I want to ask is anything you can remember about your brother. Just, how he was, um, stories that you remember, because you’re pretty close in age, correct?

Interview M: I beg your pardon.

W: You were pretty close in age.

M: Yeah, we were pretty close, he comes after me 46 or 47, yeah.

W: So, so what was he like?

M: Where do I start? (laughter)

M: You know with him, I found him to be different you know and uh, fortunately for me I really enjoyed his company a lot, and some other people didn’t you know, they didn’t understand him. And the way he was thinking. It was just, at the time, maybe now, if he was around now, he would fit in. Maybe. My son always says, hey my uncle was just too advanced for the conditions in South Africa at the time, you know eh?

W: Mhmm.

M: He, I don’t think he was ever a very ambitious person though he had all the potential of an academically doing much much better, but I think because of the nature of his life, you know, lifestyle, he just wasn’t very ambitious. So he just started um teaching you know.

W: Mhmm.

M: I remember when he went for. [pause] I don’t remember when he was still long because, eh, I left to, I went to a boarding school when I was about 12 years and then in passing, we never stayed together for a long time, you know we just meet for student holidays. But I remember vividly when he went for a um he you know in south Africa you pass your, at the time it was JC now it’s grade,

W: Mhmm.

M: What is JC now?

W: Maybe 8th grade or 12th?

M: No no, you’d pass the JC and then go for either metric or for teachers um, diploma
W: Okay.

M: Yeah so he went for his teacher’s uh, teacher’s diploma in, no, it wasn’t a diploma it was called a cause, it was called a teacher’s, a higher primary teacher’s cause so he went to dlemi, and my mother hired a car to take him there. When you arrive there, you know, the students, the older students

W: Mhmm.

M: They mistreat you, you know.

W: Yeah.

M: And the way he was a fighter, he just fought immediately when he

[laughter]

M: They said, I don’t know what they said, and then he just started fighting them you know

W: Mhmm.

M: And by the time they the people who had taken, taken him to school, he came back with his jersey already torn, and my mother said, “oh, there’s going to be trouble here”

[laughter]

M: And my mother said, “You know, I wonder if he’s going to stay, stay right through for this course because he’s so defiant,” you know.

W: Mhmm.

M: And, eh, [pause] he used to like reading a lot. He was quite far advanced even in the class. I am told he used to give a little bit of, eh, uneasiness with the teacher. Especially in the history, in the history class, I heard that um, he would, the teacher would start teaching and then he would then say mchali you can take over

[laughter]

M: So, so that was him, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: Sometimes I always feel I should have recorded his story because he had so many stories that he was doing or caused so much that we never thought that he’d complete it. Miraculously he completed the teacher’s cause and then after that [clears throat] he didn’t go for teaching he went and worked…eh….he did teach…and uh, when was he arrested?
W: In ’77.

M: ’77, and he was, he taught and then he went for eh I can’t, I can’t remember what company it was but it was construction. [pause] (Sigh) I must sort my facts.

W: It’s okay.

M: He wasn’t arrested, was it in ’76 when he was arrested?

W: Yeah, I think he was arrested in ’76 and then they went to trial in ’77.

M: Yeah. [pause] He was arrested…We never knew his ah, political, you know, movement, because of everything. Later on when he talked to me he said, “I wasn’t going to tell you anything. I, because I didn’t want you to get involved, I didn’t want you to know anything so that if when I’m arrested the police when they started questioning you they would just see that, that they’re just talking to someone who really doesn’t know anything, so I wasn’t aware. But I knew that he was very close to Harry Wild.

W: To what?

M: Harry Wild from Pietermaritzburg. Anyway, let me just jump…

W: No problem

M: …to uh, jump to the time when he was arrested and eh he broke down, you know…

W: Mhmm.

M: And, eh, he was taken as eh in Fort Napier. At the time I was not around I was in Newcastle. So, um, I would come down to, when they would, during the time of the case I’d come down for the case and eh, go back to Newcastle. And the when he came out to the, to the hospital my mother is the one who was the [can’t understand] doing all the visits, you know, but whenever I’d visit him he’d be very withdrawn, he just didn’t want to talk anything. He was very withdrawn until eh when he was discharged. On his discharge, I thought, “no, gosh I’m going to hear lots stories here,” and he was very, very withdrawn, you know, he wasn’t talking. I got very worried and then I went to the te- the. At the time I come from, from Newcastle and I was waiting there in Pietermaritzburg so I new that he was eh qualified as a teacher and I knew that it was really a risk to take him at that time everyone was so scared of eh employing someone who had been involved in politics but there was one good, eh, school inspector, so I went to him and eh explained to him the situation and he was first immediately just loved him, you know, and eh he loved the way I presented him to him. And then he said, you know, what I can do for you is to look for a school were the teacher is eh, the school principal is eh liberal, you know minded, you know, and eh, at that time I was working as a social worker working for IPRO and IPRO, you know what IPRO stands for?
W: I don’t.

M: It stands for, it was an institutional prevention and rehabilitation of criminal offenders. At that time I was running eh project where, where I was trying to address this problem of truancy in schools. So, I, could find what made students run away from schools. So there was this one particular school where I was very well received, you know, and eh then I. We had a very healthy relationship with, with the school principal and I explained to him this situation, and he said, look I’ll take him. So. [pause] Trouble started.

[laughter]

M: Trouble started again. He was there and eh he wanted to, you know, he had his own ideas about teaching, you know. This um I think was it a subject called religious studies or whatever, I, I can’t remember what it was called.

W: Mhmm.

M: And he had a big argument at the staff, the staff meeting about religious, religious studies. He said what is taught is not religious education it was Christianity, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: So they must really look at all the religions. Oh! It was a new concept for teachers they just didn’t understand this you see. Said, no, no, no it’s because this is, we feel very comfortable you must broaden your, your base you know so the children can be broad-minded. Oh it was an issue, a big, big issue, you know. And eh and I think he wa- [laughter] wanted to intro-, you know the schools, the, the classrooms are quite dirty, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: And he had his own way of keeping the class, eh, tidy. He would buy, he would make me eh prepare some floor polish, you know, using eh, what’s this, using eh [can’t understand word] metal handle and (makes scrubbing motion on table) eh perfume and then take all the eh, eh all the rags to school ask children to clean up the floor polish here and in the class and then he would say, no desks. Desks are an obstruction. He’d just put them there (motions to the side). Just sit around here so there’s communication. Oh! You only use desks when you are writing, as long as you are still talking there’s just eh, you know, sit. In the secular world, that was not accepted. And then, I just keep on remembering, other things that he used to do. Oh! There was this tendency of, eh, I don’t know, a union or what…

W: Mhmm.

M: But eh, whenever there was a death of a teacher in one school, maybe on a Thursday. All the teachers of the district, you know, would go to that school for a, some kind of service, you know. He was very, very much against that, you know. He challenged them about it. He said, he said,
no, no, no, this is not the time. At that time he had, eh, my other brother, my older brother bought him a coumbie.

W: Mhmm.

M: To use so he could make some pocket money on the side. So it was a big issue at that time. He had transport, and he was refusing to carry the teachers to whatever, whatever. His argument was that before we even start being united at death, let us be united when we’re still alive. Let’s start making and forming these relationships. He said, he would say, I’m, I have no problem with you guys if you are asking me to take, to take you to another school where we’re having a meeting and talk about the teaching methods, talk about how we’re going to improve our, all the um, teaching in our schools, you know. As long as you attend the funeral on Saturday on our own time, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: That was, [laughter] that didn’t go down well with the teachers [laughter]. And then he said, to put you at ease, I’ve got, I’m making this request, if I die I don’t want all the circus, you know? What you should do, because the school closes at 2, on that day, the day I die, in my commemoration, in [can’t understand word] of my death, I would ask that the teachers give, all teachers in the school, give about one and half hours extra. And then they’ll say we’re doing this in honor of him. Don’t come to my funeral! You know, there won’t be any, there won’t be any funeral, don’t even bother. But just do that. Until I am buried forever, it’s happening you know but, the day you hear that I’m dead just give, give eh one and a half hour to the stu-, to the school. Ehm, what else did he do at school? Do you want to ask me, ask me.

W: [Laughter] So do you. Whenever, do you think think that whenever he went back to teaching that’s what really helped him heal, from his time whenever he was, um, incarcerated?

M: It frustrated him, even more frustrated.

W: Oh.

M: He was more frustrated, more, very, very frustrated about how things were done. At that time, I was eh [clears throat]. I was working with the school, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: And I’d formed, eh, eh working relationship with eh, with some partnership with the university, the drama department. There was a very good as a way of encouraging the school, eh school children to remain in school.

W: Mhmm.

M: One of my tru-truancy prevention programs. So I linked up with the university and we, we introduced the children to drama. And it was a very elaborate, eh, eh, program. You know,
project. Where, I don’t want to go into detail but, it can take another hour trying to explain what it was. But one aspect of the project was that the students who were in second year eh, at university, they would link up with the school, with the school, and work out a pro-, a program where we were going to work right through the year with the children. In that way the children are getting exposure to the university and number two, they were having an opportunity of speaking to a white person, something which doesn’t happen very easily, you know, and they again they were, these students were rubbing something good, yeah sure, and eh. So, some of, some of the, hmm, programs would happen at school and some other programs would happen at the university at, while I was working at that time there was a coumbie, which I would, I would use to take the children to the university to those programs. And then those and some other times the student would come to, to school. And then, what my brother noticed that when I was going there to the school just to visit, to you know to in preparation for the project because the students would be there all the time. So I was, was some kind of coordinator. So when I went to school all by myself, you know, I’d have a problem trying to put together the whole program. Going from class to class. But his observation was that whenever I came with a group of white students, everybody would move around them with some excitement, the only time when they show some kind of respect is when there, there are white people, white, white students around them, white lecturers around. And he would challenge them for that, you know?

W: Yeah.

M: And that made me feel very uncomfortable. You know he was fighting on my behalf but at the same time he made me feel like you know, destroying our relationship. I can, I can handle it. He said, no the top problem with you, you want to handle it all day, you want to be oppressed? No, you, you even allow yourself to be oppressed, by, by your own people, you know. You must liberate these teachers. All they need is liberation. I’m trying to liberate their minds you know. They, they aren’t aware of what they are doing, they aren’t even aware of what they’re doing, you know? And then at that time I was working with a group that was interested in environmental, you know, issues. It was something, which was quite foreign at that time. People just had no interest in it. And eh, I was start eh, incorporating it to the programs which I was doing at school, like, just making children interested in keeping the environment around the school clean, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: And then I would eh go to the municipality and ask for, ask for black refuse bags then and organize it in the afternoons. Students go around cleaning. He said, stop. All. This. Nonsense. This, this is nonsense. [laughter] I said why is it, why do you say this is nonsense because what happens is when you go around with these children doing this and the newspaper people come and take photographs, whatever. But really, in fact if you are against this whole pollution thing, you should be going straight up to the municipality and addressing them, you know? And make them responsible for all this. Don’t me the, uh, poor children take, take responsibility for the, you know?

W: Mhmm.
M: That was him. And then things would just collapse and I would say, but Buhle, you have to start something. He’d said, no, no, no you, why do you want to work with soft tackies, these are children, soft tackies, just talk to the authorities if you want to address this, go address the authorities themselves. Yeah. [Pause] And then he had a problem even at home I liked to have my lawn nice. And he said, gosh, what is all this? We. Need. Food. [laughter] We. Need. Food. Hiya! Why are you cutting grass? Who’s going to eat this grass? Take this space, and, you know, use all this space for vegetables, for whatever. And I said, this is easy for you to talk, just do it yourself then. [laughter] And then I was, I was just phoning my son now and when you were here, I was asking him, tell me of other stories about him, he said, don’t you remember ma when I was, when he was still young, eh, he said, I wanted to, I was wanting to be eh do what to join the marathon, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: And then he said, you are not going to join any marathon. You are going to work in the garden here and that’s the exercise you’re going to get. [laugher] If you want exercise if the reason is for you to get, for physical fitness start by doing something which is, which is productive, you know. What’s the point of running, running, running and then at the end you haven’t eh there’s nothing to show for your running.

W: Mhmm.

M: Start here, and then once you’ve started here and then you feel that you are fit and then you can go and run. But start by running here.

W: He seems very logical. Like he, he really wanted, there had to be something to come from what you’d do.

M: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then there was a time when we were staying with my, my nephew, um had come for what? He had, was he doing metric, or what? But he wasn’t very bright, you know? So he was staying with us. I can’t remember why he had to stay with us exactly, but he got very much involved in political activity, in these activities. You know, when people go out and demonstrations and what not and what not and then one day he was arrested. [Pause] And, as a [can’t understand word]. And, when he was arrested, uh, I think he refused his age. I think he said he was 18 or something like that so he would be, I think he was 21 at that time or 20. But he said he was 18. And then, eh, he was released and he gave my name as, um, the guardian. And then at that, during that time the police were very, very dramatic about coming to arrest somebody, about coming to collect somebody, so on this particular day they came eh very early in the morning. I don’t know how many vans, police vans were there, police cars, police dogs, what not came, and they were looking for me. And then, he said, no you can’t, and he, he was the one who was addressing them you know, he asked what for. And then told him that, that told him that its consequential that my nephew da, da, da, da. And then he said no, my nephew had given my name, and he said no, he made a mistake, he should have given my name. He said, no, no I’m not going to talk to you I’m going to talk to her. He said, no you’re going to talk to me, I’m that man here. [laughter] And then he had a big argument with them telling them that this one you want to take away from here, he’s our breadwinner, and I’m not working. If you take,
take away he’s going to loose a day at work and then at the end, at the end of the month we will suffer, you know? Da, da, da. [laughter] And then eventually they took him you know, they just gave up, and they took him. And then he, I don’t know he was going to, my nephew was going to, to appear in court that day. And then he came back with him and the case was going to go on another day. And then he said the reason why he was fighting so much was he knew that I was going to collapse. [laughter]

W: You were going to what, collapse? [laughter]

M: In the police van, you know. With all the dogs around me.

W: Yeah.

M: He said, I know you are not going to be able to be brave enough. By the time you arrive at the court, you’d be dead. [laughter] Or admitted to the hospital. So this is why I was fighting for you. And then, there was a mini-trial in the house. And this guy came, and asked, came and said, okay he said he was 18 years old. The first thing I’m going to ask you is how old are you. He said 18. When were you born? [laughter] You can see, we are going to the courts. [laughter] So it was a very interesting trial, you know? And eh, when did you, when did you pass the matric? You know, he was just asking all those questions. And he said, you see, if you are going to tell lies you must be logical [laughter] and at least try to be sharp.

W: Uh-huh. So, sorry. Was your nephew your, um, other brother’s son?

M: I beg your pardon.

W: Who was, who was your nephews, like your nephew that you mentioned, whose son?

M: It was my older brothers son.

W: Okay, that’s what I thought.

M: It wasn’t his son. And then after, after leaving school. You can ask me questions if you want to, it seems like I’m just the one talking.

W: No, uh, you’re uh, you’re doing great just talking. I’m learning so much.

M: Okay, after, after leaving teaching.

W: Mhmm.

M: I can’t remember what was the, what, what it is that eh, makes him clash with the school principal because I got a phone call at work and then the school principal said, uh your brother has left. I said, left what? He just walked out on me. I don’t know what they were trying to clarify, but he just got fed up and said I’ve had it, I’m leaving you know. I said gosh, I don’t know what to do now. So after that, he said, he’s going to have, he’s going to do what other
people do if they’re out of work, I’m going to sell vegetables or sweets or whatever here in town. [laughter] So he, he’d stand there at the bus stop with a, with you know, a container full of chips. My brother there, and you know. And I’m told that one of the, at that time people had to have um, people had to have um license for selling you had to have a license. And then, one time he was arrested by the police [laughter]. For selling without any license, I’m told that when the police said okay get into this van mtshali, he just sat down. [laughter] Mhmm, he just sat down, he said, yeah, okay, take me to the van. I’m not going walk into the van myself, police van, you are the ones who are, want to arrest me. So they had to, he was tall and you know tough. And, then the police where, you know, your size, small [laughter]. It was a problem. And then there was a scene because everyone was now excited watching this drama where the police you know, wanted to arrest this person, and this person said, I’m ready for you be arrested, but take me, take me [laughter]. And then they, I understand they had to call for reinforcement, you know. So when the reinforcement came, and the police, senior police came, one, one, one of them knew him from the prison. And said, oh mtshali, it’s you again! Just leave him. [laughter] You never win with this one. [laughter]

W: So, I know that he had, he had um one son who disappeared a year after he did.

M: Mhmm.

W: Did he have like any kind of relationship with that son?

M: No. He never had any relationship. I’m the one who, who tried to develop a relationship but the mother was so far away, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: And I was also far away.

W: And, didn’t he have another son or ‘cause there, whenever I was looking through the information it had two sons, but a question mark. Did he, did he just have the one son?

M: The other one is a big question mark. [laughter] The other one is a big, big question mark. In fact in the family I’m the only one who knows about it. Whenever I, whenever I read the story about, I-I-I heard about the second one some few years back. The woman realized that, eh, my brother was no more interested in her so she, so she reported the pregnancy to another guy who took responsibility and after that my brother appeared and the girl said, no do not appear because you look so much like your child. [laughter] But you know, it’s just messy, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: So. But, at the same time, the woman wanted, wanted to ask me or the family to know about it. I said, you know, the only way that we can get involved in this is for us to have a DNA. Much as you say he looks like, as yes she has sent me the pictures of him, and they do look a lot alike, you know. He, he, you know, he, he looks closer to my son, you know, the way he looks. ‘Cause when she showed me the photos, hawu, he looked like my son, you know. And he’s tall too and
da, da, da, da. But now I said, it’s difficult for us to really. I said, not unless you take responsibility and tell, tell your son that this, this is the matter. I’m, I’m prepare you know? We, I’d be prepared with my brother to go for this test. But she’s so afraid, so I said, there’s no way I can help you. There’s just no way I can help you.

W: I understand.

M: What more?

W: Yeah. So many questions. He just sounds so interesting.

M: He was.

[laughter]

M: I remember, there was a time when I was working as the, one of the hospitals in Umsensa (spelled phonetically) and then I’d tell them about him. And everybody would say, oooh, I wish I could meet your brother. And others would say ohhh [can’t understand] because he’s so sharp, you know?

W: He sounds really progressive.

M: Hmm?

W: With what he, how he wanted to teach.

M: Yoh!

W: Yeah, that’s, that’s so progressive.

M: Mhmm.

W: Even now, teachers that teach like that still get in trouble.

M: Yeah.

W: But, it’s such a better way to teach.

M: Oh, I think I was more. There was a, when was it? Almost immediately after leaving, after leaving the hospital.

W: Mhmm.

M: My brother, my older brother, I’ve got four brothers. You know. This other brother, the third brother I come after him, he bought him a coumbie because at that time the coumbies were just starting to be some way of transport. And eh, it didn’t work. He, he, just didn’t work. It was then
when I approached the education department to take him back to school. Because what I wanted to do was encourage him to do him matric. And eh, so he could, because I was so fascinated by his brain, you know? Hawu gosh, he was so bright. He was so brilliant. You know, I remember when I was, what was I studying? And he would just read, and read, and read and just simplify things for me. Like anything, you know? It was just so simple. He was a great, great, great reader. He loved to read books. Um, oh there was a time when we were, before he even went back to teaching, when I was still pleading with him to go back to teaching, you know. I was worried because he was spending most of his time in bed, he was just sleeping. And then he told me that one of his friends said, no please go and to take your matric, you’ll pass because you’re so brilliant. You can, you can just go to one of the centers. I don’t know where the centers were. And write your, you can, you know you can write and pass your matric. They’re not even very particular about [cant understand]. You can even bring your books. And then he said, and then after that you can be proud of the certificate. And then he responds and says, no, no, no you’ll be proud because you would have studied eh copied from the book you know, you won’t be. It’s how they work at university, they use books, you wouldn’t be copying you’d be referring, you’d just be referring and he said no, he was not interested.

W: I know after um, he stopped teaching again he went on as a shop assistant eventually.

M: Yeah. This one I always live to regret because I’m the one who knew that uh, that uh gentlemen. I knew him because I used to work at [can’t understand], he was the, in the education department, he was. So I knew him and he had a shop out in [can’t understand] and then when I spoke to him about all these experiences he offered him a job then. Then, that was the end of his life. That’s where he disappeared.

W: So what did he do between the time that, did he just sell um the different treats on the street?

M: I beg your pardon.

W: Did he just sell the things on the street between

M: Yes.

W: um whenever he ended his teaching job and he went as a shop assistant?

M: He, he ended teaching and then he went to the streets shopping, eh selling from the streets as a street vendor and then from there he went to the shop in [can’t understand]. He was an assistant and he disappeared from there.

W: Mhmm, And I know you went off to boarding school, but before that do you have any memories of him whenever he was really young? [pause] It’s okay if you don’t, it’s a long…

M: Yeah, you know, the thing is, you know, I’ve got like I’ve said, there was five us in the family and um, he was the youngest. And then I got these three brothers and it’s me here, and this three brothers were always on the straight and you know were brought up by my mama as a single parent, and uh, I think they were very sensitive about always, you know, conforming to
what my mother was saying da, da, da. You know? They never created problems for my mother, you know. They were very, they were very exemplary, you know. Though they were not staying with us, they were at different places, but let me put it this way, when they come and when they were around home they, they would do everything nicely. And, my brother, he was just wild, street-wise, very street-wise. He was, he did everything that was done in the township, you know? I remember there was one incident, he must have been 10 years or so yeah, somewhere there he had a friend [laughter] he had a friend at his friends place there was, they were selling liquor you know, it was illegal you know. And then, all the money was kept in the house, you know, in the wardrobe or and then the friend said, apparently said to him, can you find the keys of your wardrobe at home so that you can open the [laughter] the wardrobe and help ourselves to my mums things. And apparently he got the keys and he gave them to the brother, and then, the mother wasn’t amused, you know, and reported the matter to the police. And then the police, at night, they came to my place and then I think he got some strokes you know. And when he came he was very angry with my mom, he said, ma how can you just betray me like that. He said, yaahe, ma you’re not behaving like a mother. [laughter] You should of at least protected him, I said I don’t protect street thieves. [laughter] [pause]

W: Is your mother still alive, or has she passed?

M: No, passed away.

W: So, when she was alive, what did, what did she think of him as he grew up, do you know, of your brother as he grew up. Like her thoughts about him getting in trouble and being very defiant and having different ways of thinking.

M: My mother was [pause] a very formable woman.

W: Mhmm.

M: And eh, at the same time a staunch Christian. And, and my brother wasn’t very much of a Christian, I don’t think so. He was very, very critical of things, you know. So, like maybe on, on a Sunday. We just pretend, pretend that we go to church and eh in the evenings we would have our prayers.

W: Mhmm.

M: You know, it was just routine. You just grew up like that. But he was the first one to, to, to, to be defiant, you know. And eh, he would question, he had lots of, he had many questions and I think when he was in jail he spent a lot of time reading the bible and the end, you know, he ended up having lots of questions about the whole thing. And the, conversations between my mother and my brother was all around, and my mother was, was being old she was very receptive of everything that was in the bible she, she accepted it without questioning it, you know?

W: Mhmm.
M: And he was questioning lots of things and my mother said that is not the way things are done, you know, this eh must, this is the holy bible, da da da da da da da, I mean that was the type of argument they would, they would have.

W: Well, do you remember some of the things that he questioned about Christianity in the bible?

M: I remember there was one story, you know, for you to understand the bible you must go and understand the original way it comes from. You know, the, the, the, original scripts he’d say, he would say there is so much translation until it looses its meaning, you know. You, this one, which I always remember you can only understand if you’re Zulu speaking, you know. So he, he would tell of a preacher who would people, just let me write it down, sorry, sorry, so you can understand.

W: Oh no, sure!

M: In, in, in English there’s a corner, corner, you know the corner word. Corner of the house, corner of the street, you know?

W: Mhmm.

M: And then in Zulu it’s, it’s, ikona, but it’s written like this. Where can I write it?

W: Oh, you can write it right here.

M: In Zulu it’s ikona, without an h [not ikhona], this ikhona it’s, it uh is an old verson of iknona but at the same time kona means sin, to sin. Ikona, kona, you see? So here it is, it’s written here [move away from sinning in isiZulu], move away from sinning.

W: Oh.

M: If it’s written like this (kona) but when this preacher reads he says [move away from the corner in isiZulu], move away from the corner.

W: Mhmm.

M: Can you see the difference?

W: Yeah.

M: And then he says here is the preacher he reads the bible he says instead of saying move away sinners move away from sinning, and because of the translations and all the the nonse-, he ends up saying move away from the corner. And then the whole sermon is about the corner. [laughter] He says, be careful of the corners. Corners are dangerous. In the corner of the house you found all the dead, when people clean they always forget to clean the corners, you know? In the corner, you find tootsies standing there at the corner of the street, you know? And the corner of the shop, you always find tootsies there, standing there. At the corner of whatever you find the
cockroaches in the house, everything all the dirt there. And then you’d see people you know, ah, and then you’d say ah and then you’d go out saying you’ve listened to a sermon, which is wrong. [laughter]

W: Yeah.

M: Which is totally wrong. It has no source, it has nothing. Don’t even know where it comes from, you know, so he would say for one to understand the bible you’d have to understand the original language it was written. It was now, we’d get the watered down translations. And then he’d say, I’d really like to read the bible in isolation, to read the Qur’an, to read the other holy books you know because there’s a lot to learn. And then he had an issue with us our traditions you know and we have accepted Christianity without questioning and he’d say, look at the Indians, the Indians stick to there religion and no body really bothers them about anything and look how prosperous they are. And here we are, we’re so confused we just don’t even know what we’re doing, you know. So that was the argument he gave.

W: So did he um believe in like traditional medicine and traditional, like the ancestors?

M: No, he, no he was just an academic. [laughter]

W: But yeah, he was…

M: He was just a free spirit you know, he was, he was looking at everything, what do you call a person like this?

W: Broad minded. I mean, he would just look at it and say, you know, that, that’s just as valuable as another religion.

M: Mhmm, yeah, yeah.

W: He sounds like a really cool person.

M: I beg your pardon?

W: He sounds like a really cool person. [pause] Well, I don’t know if I have any more questions at the moment but if you have any other thoughts or stories that you can think of…

Recording 2:

M: When I was working for IPRO I had an office out, there was an office in town and then they made an arrangements for me to have an office out in [somewhere, sounds like Italy], on this particular day I had a visitor, a professor from America who wanted to interview me, they were very interested in the [something] intervention program because it was an idea that I developed myself, there was a professor that was going to come to my office and then he had these questions, and I didn’t know he was going to come into my office before the professor the came I could sense there were going to be problems. And then he came and I said there are going to be
problems and he, before he even sat down I said, “Are you really a professor?” and he said, “yes,” and I said, “But what can you show me that you’re a professor?” I don’t know what he say I was just so embarrassed. I don’t know what the conversation led up to and afterwards I said to him, “if I was to go to America and tell people that I was a professor, dressed like you, I don’t think anyone would really believe that. No one would really believe me and so that’s why I have doubts about it. So next time when you come you must bring certificate.” [Laughs] I said, “Buhle, but why?” and I said, “This is you know, is car keys, is sloppy shoes and then I go to America and say I am a professor from South Africa and no one would believe me, so in this way I don’t believe you.” [Laughs]

W: That’s great.

M: I actually can remember these things

W: Were you able to check your email often? Are you able to check your email? If I email you these files? Just anything, just feel free to email me back about stories, or any thoughts you have about him.

M: Yeah, I know there’s a time when, my brother, the one who got off the cumbe, he used to stay in the, he had a, he ended up buying one of these nice houses. And we went to see physically and he was telling us how annoying it was for people to come and you know, have a look at the house. But we say the house is a house, if you say you are outside, and then you are inside in the sitting room then if you say you have four bedrooms, people want to see the bedrooms if you go to a bedroom what do you want to see, there’s a bed! And I used to understand his annoyance, and from people outside would just stop. [Pause] I’m sure my son has a lot of his spirit, because he loved him, he used to be fascinated by him.

W: Does your son live anywhere near here?

M: He lives in Joburg. Oh, he used to love him.

W: Is he going to be making any trips to Durban anytime soon? Probably not.

M: Once I told him, I tell him on Friday evenings, but I don’t know where abouts. I actually remember a couple of incidents with him.

W: How old is your son?

M: Thirty, thirty, he’s now thirty… he’s thirty eight. I know that is.

W: And what is his name, do you mind if I ask his name?

M: Yeah it’s Kwuma

W: And would you spell that?
M: Kwuma

W: Well if he does, if he comes anywhere near here or Durban, would you mind letting me know? Because I might be able to interview him.

M: Yeah but it’s not likely at all

W: I understand

M: Usually he just comes for a death

W: I would hope he doesn’t come soon then, if he comes for a death

M: I also phone around, I also phone my brother but I don’t think my brother’s real fascinated. Because this brother I come after him. We’re five, the older ones, and it’s the brother that comes before me. And my mother would say, “Yoo, when I was bringing these two I had nice time, and then I brought these last three.” And this other boy, this last one also had lots of questions. Yeah, we used to have a neighbor opposite us, who was staying opposite us, he would come, at the time they didn’t have television, you know, so they would always come to my house in the afternoon to watch sports, to watch boxing. This husband, this man, was very religious, he even started his own church, very deeply religious. And he used to enjoy his company because he would quiz them about Bible and things like that. And then he would ask them, I don’t understand your poems because, you get so excited about violence, how do you get so and doing this, what’s this other thing [motions like punching]

W: Boxing?

M: Yeah, you love violence and how do you reconcile the two, you know? And I can even see that when you give this I punch you, and he punch him, pow! Violence, you know. And then the son he say, you know, it’s a sport, but he say these two things don’t go together. He say, when I die, if I happen to die, and you guys come here to watch TV, continue. Just continue as normal because it can just be an interjection, oh, Buhle’s passed away and then you go on with your life. Because I don’t see why you fuss about death because it’s a part of our life, it’s an eventuality. It’s going to happen to all of us, and what’s all the fuss. And people come here, come and watch TV, I’m giving you permission.

W: So was your brother non-violence?

M: Meaningless violence, I mean there’s no reason for violence.

W: Were there any sports that your brother really liked?

M: I don’t remember.

W: Did he listen to any kind of music in particular?
M: Yoo, yes. Duhmah Amatrile, oh he loved them. There’s a song that always made me cry when I listened to it, because when he heard it for the first time he said, “This should be our national anthem.” And it really, it has become very very popular, I’ll tell you the song, but it’s sung by kwa-Zulu Natal artists. Ripping. The first time he draw my attention to that was in the 80s. This song is great, it should be taken as a national anthem. And then he also liked, it’s sung by the Beatles, ebony and ivory.

W: Ebony and ivory?

M: Who sung that song?

W: I don’t know but I can find out

M: That one, he liked it so much. But Jonah Matrise, he loved him. There’s another black singer too. But that one, the weeping one is sung by

W: Would you mind spelling that?

M: But at that time it wasn’t sung by him. I don’t know what it’s weeping what, but it’s got weeping. Oh, I remember one time; he would come home late and then listen to the radio or whatever. Maybe I just wake up at night for water and for what, and walk in on him busy in the refrigerator looking and taking this and that. And then here I come and he says, “You know what,” he blame me, “the problem with you is that you should be working for the intelligence, people doing things which they don’t want to be seen.” He was so unfortunate, because he was scanning, looking, with his plate, taking this and that. He had already taken his supper. And I was just tiptoeing, it was just a coincidence. But my mother says don’t argue with him about such things, when he says such things to you, you just don’t say anything. I used to laugh at these things, and other people would be offended.

W: No, I’ve gotten a lot of really good information.

M: See, unfortunately, the thing is if, unfortunately people who are of his age are no longer around. Most of his friends have passed away. But they would be able to tell many stories about things he was doing outside of the home.

W: Yeah, that’s the unfortunate thing about many of the disappeared, that their friends are no longer alive.

M: Yes, that is unfortunate.

[Interview ends]