

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013

*'I do not live in the past, the past lives in me.'*¹

1.

Today Nelson Mandela is ailing

in a Pretoria hospital

in the land I fled in 1977

anxious as a *Duiker*.

How did I love (hate) a country

where I knew so much silence?

In blank surfaces of days

did not hear

his voice

his fugitive life, the Boksburg strikes

(where my grandparents lived) of May 1961

his words that rang across

the courtroom of his truth

in 1962

were Treason in the *Sunday Times*

whispers

overheard at home – of 'Rivonia'

names splintered the night

my father at the table with a whisky: something

about Braam Fischer – Dad knew of his arrest.

¹ Based on words by Olga Horak, Sydney Jewish Museum.

Marcelle Freiman. 'Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013'.

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

I was thirteen in 1964
skinny, growing
knew nothing
of the people's words
from rooftops, stations, sidings
factories
my ears were stoppered:
then whispers would turn to more –
bold teacher taught high-school girls our history
while censors rained fear on us –

seven years later in 1971 at nineteen, truth would out
white protests, students:

the blue-uniformed policeman
brown leather holster revolvered
me in revolving door
between action and
fear –
snatched from
my hands the Roneo leaflets
black ink still damp
stains on my fingers.

But we marched our placards down Commissioner Street
law student boyfriend protective: 'If the cops come, run'
and we ran –
then
heard of leaders, writers, slipped in showers they said
in John Vorster Square

or fell from windows

brothers, students arrested at university gates

were released on the Vice-Chancellor's plea, police

promises not to record 'crimes' of protest

were betrayed

we later discovered –

and all white boys had to do their time, army conscripts

at eighteen to fight for

on behalf of

apartheid

2.

All those intractable years 1963 to 1982

Mandela in prison

the white dust of Robben Island's

quarries

in his lungs

he knew he was right

held to what was

right:

the country made him wrong

the years took his freedom, he lived on

black prisoner's meagre diet, with hard labour.

The country took so many

held them servile,

cut back and low

like young trees –

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myth of Bantu Education, the Pass Laws

refusing residence

land

family –

until the people could not count

what was stolen

each day toiling down

mines, in factories –

(Can childhood draw blame?)

I had no language

for the lost –

we lived in white houses of difference

and if my father could bribe the

Pass Office

bureaucrat

for Albert our gardener from Mozambique

to stay

to work

make our garden grow with flowers

spread topsoil on our green lawn and

not be deported, despite having no Pass –

a drop in an ocean

his kindness –

my father

worked the system

and kept it quiet – the whispered names

the safe houses of the 1960s

for friends in banished parties
African National Congress, South African Communist Party –

nobody talking:
the stories have gone with my father
to Johannesburg's West Park Cemetery.

A country of tawny winter grass
and dust blowing from mine dumps
dry eucalyptus trees along
a road
where ragged workers
tramped after fourteen-hour days

where difference meant gunshots in
the backs of schoolchildren
in Soweto June 1976
and more strikes that stopped everything
so much (hope and) fear, it tasted bitter –

and the men who spoke truth
still sat on bunks in prison cells
made plans for their future country
wrote on scraps of paper.

3.

I am born of a country of misery, its
scales tipped wildly
for too many years –

from its ashes and punctured oil-drum heaters

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from fingerless gloves in Highveld
 winter frost at dawn
from languages I never learned
 my brain bleached with difference –

to the hills of Xhosaland in the Transkei
 from which ascended this bird of hope
 and then forgiveness
(how could this happen?)
 his presence
 a burning star in a country gone wrong
 where ash and plastic still litter township streets
 Diepsloot, Alexandria –
 the harshness goes on, he is loved:

no electricity in concrete rooms
candles flicker in the night.

Marcelle Freiman