Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013

‘I do not live in the past, the past lives in me.’

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.

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

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

Marcelle Freiman, ‘Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013’.
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

Marcelle Freiman, ‘Country of my Birth – lines written 27 June 2013’. 
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