

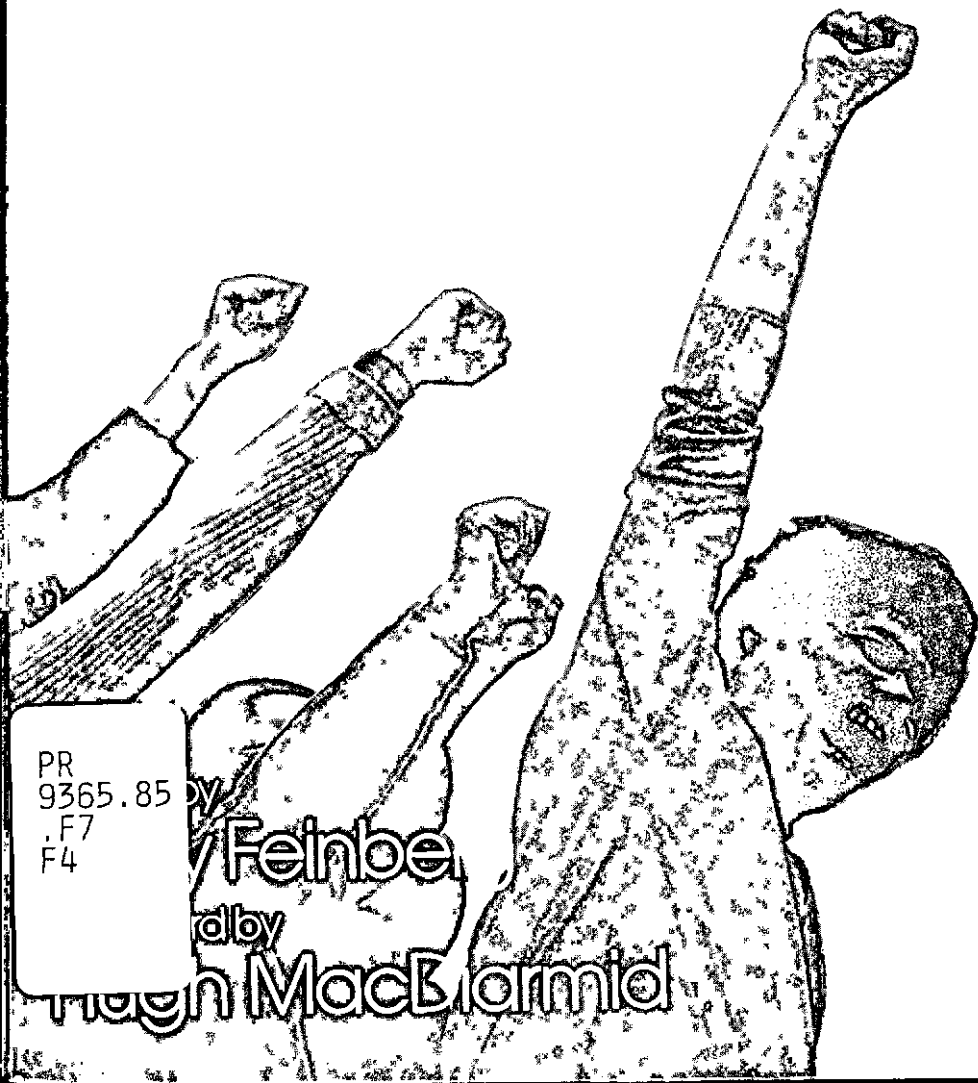
HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE



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# Voices to the People

## South African Freedom Poems



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by  
Feinberg

ed by

Ruagh MacBriaridh

# Poets to the People

South African Freedom Poems

Edited by Barry Feinberg

Foreword by Hugh MacDiarmid

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# A. N. C. Kumalo

## *OX HOOVES TROD HEAVILY*

Ox hooves trod heavily  
upon our tongues  
flattened  
our childhood days  
our childhood gaze  
ground our generation  
into the white ants' nest  
but could not resist  
Africa's sun  
filtering through the crust  
nibbling at the mind  
could not flatten  
indefinite  
the curvature of earth  
the oval shape  
the globe.

## *THE LONG DROP*

Look down  
from a headlong-height  
into a long drop  
and know how Babla<sup>1</sup> died.

The long drop  
a helpless fall  
they said he jumped.

'That one?  
He left by the window',  
they casually boast  
grinning into pain.

<sup>1</sup> *Babla Saloojee*

A man does not fall  
like stone  
there is blinding light  
at the centre of an explosion.

Transfixed  
the murderers stand  
above the abyss.

### *A POEM OF VENGEANCE*

Mini,  
Big strong smiling Mini  
and Khayinga and Mkaba<sup>1</sup> who loved life  
no less, have been robbed  
of their most precious possession,  
life.

Our comrades fell  
in Verwoerd's Pretoria  
bitten in the neck  
by the hangman's knot.

Have you seen life slipping away?  
I once saw my mother die  
on the sharp sand at Sharpeville.

I hear Babla my brother cry  
and his body hitting concrete  
one hundred feet down  
from the interrogator's window.

Have you seen the face  
of a man being beaten up?  
In prison  
when you hear the noise  
your heart-beats race.

<sup>1</sup> Three trade union leaders, members of the ANC,  
hanged November 1964

But worst of all  
is the sigh  
or shriek  
or cough  
or nothing  
just escaping air  
as life slips away.

How did Mini and my brothers die  
in that secret hanging place?  
You may ask – please let me tell you –  
I know.

Singing? Yes – but how they sing!  
Big firm Mini  
not smiling on this day  
a smile at the lips perhaps  
but the eyes grim  
always grim  
when facing the enemy.

Heads high they walk  
strong united together  
singing Mini's own song<sup>1</sup>  
'Naants' indod' emnyama Verwoerd'  
– Watch out Verwoerd the black man will get you –  
'Watch out Verwoerd'  
the people have taken up this song  
'Watch out Verwoerd'  
the world sings with Mini.

And meeting Death  
in their front-line trench  
the three heroes shout  
into the grey teeth of the enemy  
'We shall be avenged'  
and the people take up the shout  
'Our heroes shall be avenged.'

It is vengeance we want  
as the last precious gasps  
escape into the Pretoria air.

<sup>1</sup> *Vuyusile Mini was the composer of many freedom songs*



*BEFORE INTERROGATION?*

(An Epitaph to Ahmed Timol and Others)

Their triumph when landing him  
was like hooking a fish.  
Four days later they told his father  
go pray in the mosque  
your son is dead  
he has fallen from a window  
we have lain him out on a slab.

Saloojee plunged from this spot  
in 1964, they grinned at Timol  
showing him the seven storey drop  
like you he would not talk.

Smirking and winking  
enjoying the sport  
they led him three flights up;  
do you like the view  
are you ready to talk?  
you're a prize catch  
do you prefer the honour  
of a bigger splash?

Playing him out  
at the end of a line  
he refused to break  
under the striking rod;  
patience ran out  
in a sjambok rage  
they flung him to ground  
with a head-wheeling crash  
that covered the marks of the gaff.

They spoke of the leap  
like an Olympic feat;  
we never use force  
it was a matter of course  
some hang themselves  
some slip on soap  
this one chose to jump.

The police mouthpiece  
addressed the press  
the seventeenth account of sudden death:  
'We threaten no one  
We assault no one  
We assume that no one  
would want to escape  
no one  
no one  
no one.'

And flicking his tongue  
he wrote an epitaph for all the dead:  
'We know Communists  
when violence is planned  
commit suicide  
rather than mention  
their comrades names.  
They are taught to jump out  
before interrogation.'

#### *ASSURANCE FROM THE JUSTICE MINISTER*

Justice Minister Vorster<sup>1</sup>  
with a thread of smile  
between ghostly lips  
says he visits his prisons  
regularly  
— like a doctor at the patient's bed —  
and has nothing to hide.  
Journalists and MP's are welcome  
to tour.  
They may touch the pulse  
squint at the mercury  
talk no doubt to the *healthiest*  
generally spend an hour where men spend their lives  
and publish anything.  
Libel actions, perjury charges and  
charges for offences  
under the Prisons' Act  
need not worry them.

<sup>1</sup> J. B. Vorster held this position until  
he became Prime Minister

All the Act says  
is that you may not publish  
untrue stories.  
That way you end up  
like the three Afrikaans warders  
who spoke to the press:  
one under house arrest  
the other two in lock-up:

The Justice Minister is fond  
of that type of assurance.

*CITY OF LONDON PROFIT MAN*

(a jingle for the overseas investors in Apartheid)

City gent  
  money gent  
    profit man  
      louse  
stuffing your guts  
                  with goose and grouse  
golf and gin  
                  and dividends received  
On what else does your belly feed?  
FAT BUG!

From this pin-striped gent  
                                  we understand  
black labour blows its nose in hand;  
And what of his civilizing spree?  
grabbing grub off every tree!  
SWOLLEN BUG!

When infant dies of broken tummy  
ain't  
  kiddies  
    dying  
      bloody  
      funny?

Has City gent his fill?

No!

The profit man is gorging still!

BLOATED BUG!

City gent

money gent

profit man

louse

pewking

in his summer-house

be-gloved be-jewelled

tie-fidgeting breed

BEWARE!

We'll put

an end

to greed . . .

POP!

*RED OUR COLOUR*

Let's have poems

blood-red in colour

ringing like damn bells.

Poems

that tear at the oppressors face

and smash his grip.

Poems that awaken man:

Life not death

Hope not despair

Dawn not dusk

New not old

Struggle not submission.

Poet

let the people know

that dreams can become

reality.

Talk of freedom  
and let the plutocrat  
decorate his parlour walls  
with the perfumed scrawls of dilettantes.

Talk of freedom  
and touch people's eyes  
with the knowledge of the power  
of multitudes  
that twists prison bars like grass  
and flattens granite walls like putty.

Poet  
find the people  
help forge the key  
before the decade  
                          eats the decade  
  eats the decade.

# Cosmo Pieterse

## *ANNEALED MICROPOLIS*

Our karroo now has midwinter as its heart:

This sky of wintertime's cloudless –  
Earth dry  
Over its grey  
Vastness  
Hunger drives  
Gaunt flocks like  
Darkened  
Clouds of storm to graze.  
The waterpipes and taps  
And the land's pulse are locked  
In ice.

Summer brings lightning sudden thunder storms:  
annulling and healing cold drought, in November.

## *SONG (We Sing)*

We sing our sons who have died red  
Crossing the sky where barbed wire passes  
Bullets of white paper, nails of grey lead  
And we sing the moon in its dying phases.

We sing the moon, nine blue moons of being  
We sing the moons of barren blood  
Blood of our daughters, waters fleeing  
From bodiless eyes, that have stared and dried.

The seed of the land we sing, the flowers  
Of manhood, of labour, of spring:  
We sing the deaths that we welcome as ours  
And the birth from the dust that is green we sing.

## *GUERRILLA*

I sometimes feel a cold love burning  
Along the shuddering length of all my spine;  
It's when I think of you with some kind of yearning,  
Mother, stepmotherland, who drops your litter with  
a bitter spurning  
And then I know, quite quietly and sure, just how  
Before the land will take new seed, even before  
we forge a single plough,  
We'll have to feel one sharp emotion deep, resolve  
one deed:  
That we must march over the length of all your  
life, transgressing your whole body with harsh  
boots upon our feet.

## *MIDSUMMER SLEEP AND ZIMBABWE BATTLEFIELD*

Listening grey with seed-spill  
It is high time a low spirit  
Fell and crawled where the weeds fell  
Lie low-crept like some slinking ferret  
Spying out the land well  
Sunk into the soil till  
The earth with ears inherit  
Can broadcast and all tell  
Where the first who stir it  
Still made fertile drill  
By mark time their green cell  
We shall mark it, disinter it  
When morning is lustrousness on the pearl shell  
Now pour it.

*IN MAN LIES ALL HIS REVOLUTION*

*(for B. F.—who may have died near the Zimbabwe River)*

February

Each young man dead  
in your youth  
every new year  
every

February briefly refracts our climates and seasons  
for your skull covers various  
dimensions different  
hemisphere comradely  
for comeliness

is the flagrant bed  
of the mourning sheets  
the yellow  
seeds

fallow in the ripe brain  
but by the feather-arrow  
forensically  
logistically

done to death  
bullet

showering you from your  
splintered head

brothering the flower

we wear  
brother

we swear

LIFE

Basil.



# Mongane Wally Serote

## *CITY JOHANNESBURG*

This way I salute you:  
My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket  
Or into my inner jacket pocket  
For my pass,<sup>1</sup> my life,  
Jo'burg City.  
My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets  
For my thin, ever lean wallet,  
While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger,  
Jo'burg City.  
My stomach also devours coppers and papers  
Don't you know?  
Jo'burg City, I salute you;  
When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,  
I leave behind me, my love.  
My comic houses and people, my dongas<sup>2</sup> and my  
ever whirling dust,  
My death,  
That's so related to me as a wink to the eye.  
Jo'burg City  
I travel on your black and white and roboted<sup>3</sup> roads,  
Through your thick iron breath that you inhale,  
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.  
Jo'burg City  
That is the time when I come to you,  
When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,  
That is the time when I leave you,  
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the  
falling darkness

<sup>1</sup> Pass = identification document which Africans are forced to carry at all times. Failure to produce a pass on demand means certain imprisonment

<sup>2</sup> Dongas = ditches

<sup>3</sup> Robots = traffic lights

On your cement trees.  
And as I go back, to my love,  
My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,  
Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,  
I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness  
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,  
And everything about you says it,  
That, that is all you need of me.  
Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,  
Listen when I tell you,  
There is no fun, nothing, in it,  
When you leave the women and men with such frozen  
expressions,  
Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,  
Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,  
Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.

#### *WHAT'S IN THIS BLACK 'SHIT'*

It is not the steaming little rot  
In the toilet bucket,  
It is the upheaval of the bowels  
Bleeding and coming out through the mouth  
And swallowed back,  
Rolling in the mouth,  
Feeling its taste and wondering what's next like it.

Now I'm talking about this;  
'Shit' you hear an old woman say,  
Right there, squeezed in her little match-box<sup>1</sup>  
With her fatness and gigantic life experience,  
Which makes her a child,  
'Cause the next day she's right there,  
Right there serving tea to the woman  
Who's lying in bed at 10 a.m. sick with wealth,  
Which she's prepared to give her life for  
'Rather than you marry my son or daughter.'

<sup>1</sup> *Match-box = tiny outhouse in the yard  
of a white residence where black servants  
live.*

This 'Shit' can take the form of action;  
My younger sister under the full weight of my father,  
And her face colliding with his steel hand,  
"Cause she spilled sugar that I work so hard for'  
He says, not feeling satisfied with the damage his hands  
Do to my yelling little sister.

I'm learning to pronounce this 'Shit' well,  
Since the other day,  
At the pass office,  
When I went to get employment,  
The officer there endorsed me to Middleburg,  
So I said, hard and with all my might, 'Shit!'  
I felt a little better;  
But what's good, is, I said it in his face,  
A thing my father wouldn't dare do.  
That's what's in this black 'Shit'.

### *THE GROWING*

No!  
This is not dying when the trees  
Leave their twigs  
To grow blindly long into windows like fingers into eyes.  
And leave us unable  
To wink or to blink or to actually close the eye,  
The mind –  
Twigs thrusting into windows and leaves falling on the  
sills,  
Are like thoughts uncontrolled and stuffing the heart.  
Yes,  
This is teaching about the growing of things:  
If you crowd me I'll retreat from you,  
If you still crowd me I'll think a bit,  
Not about crowding you but about your right to crowd  
me;  
If you still crowd me, I will not, but I will be thinking  
About crowding you.  
If my thoughts and hands reach out  
To prune the twigs and sweep the leaves,

There was a growth of thought here,  
Then words, then action.  
So if I say prune instead of cut,  
I'm teaching about the growing of things.

### *HELL, WELL, HEAVEN*

I do not know where I have been,  
But Brother,  
I know I'm coming.  
I do not know where I have been,  
But Brother,  
I know I heard the call.  
Hell! where I was I cried silently  
Yet I sat there until now.  
I do not know where I have been,  
But Brother,  
I know I'm coming:  
I come like a tide of water now,  
But Oh! there's sand beneath me!  
I do not know where I have been  
To feel so weak, Heavens! so weary.  
But Brother,  
Was that Mankunku's<sup>1</sup> horn?  
Hell! my soul aches like a body that has been beaten,  
Yet I endured till now.  
I do not know where I have been,  
But Brother,  
I know I'm coming.  
I do not know where I have been,  
But Brother I come like a storm over the veld,  
And Oh! there are stone walls before me!  
I do not know where I have been  
To have fear so strong like the whirlwind (will it be that  
brief?)  
But Brother,  
I know I'm coming.  
I do not know where I have been,  
But Brother,  
Was that Dumile's<sup>2</sup> figure?  
Hell, my mind throbs like a heart beat, there's no peace;

<sup>1</sup> a musician

<sup>2</sup> a sculptor

And my body of wounds – when will they be scars? –  
Yet I can still walk and work and still smile.  
I do not know where I have been  
But Brother,  
I know I'm coming.  
I do not know where I have been,  
But Brother,  
I have a voice like the lightning-thunder over the  
    mountains.  
But Oh! there are copper lightning conductors for me!  
I do not know where I have been  
To have despair so deep and deep and deep  
But Brother,  
I know I'm coming.  
I do not know where I have been  
But Brother.  
Was that Thoko's<sup>1</sup> voice?  
Hell, well, Heavens!  
<sup>1</sup> a singer

### MY BROTHERS IN THE STREETS

Oh you black boys,  
You thin shadows who emerge like a chill in the night,  
You whose heart-tearing footsteps sound in the night,  
My brothers in the streets,  
Who holiday in jails,  
Who rest in hospitals,  
Who smile at insults,  
Who fear the whites,  
Oh you black boys,  
You horde-waters that sweep over black pastures,  
You bloody bodies that dodge bullets,  
My brothers in the streets,  
Who booze and listen to records,  
Who've tasted rape of mothers and sisters,  
Who take alms from white hands,  
Who grab bread from black mouths,  
Oh you black boys,  
Who spill blood as easy as saying 'Voetsek'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Voetsek = bugger off

Listen!  
Come my black brothers in the streets,  
Listen,  
It's black women who are crying.

### *MOTIVATED TO DEATH*

We knew each other well.  
He was my brother;  
Now he's dead.  
The RSA<sup>1</sup> condemned him  
Not Alex<sup>2</sup> – where he died, where his killers exist.  
No!  
His crime? (Thanks, he's beyond this now).  
He had no pass. Didn't work, had nowhere to stay.  
His meals? He shared beer with friends.  
His death-bed, a muddy donga,  
His blankets, the dewy green grass,  
Yes; now it's over, he's silent and unconcerned.  
Quiet!  
Death the knife cut the flesh.  
Time the heat dried his blood.  
It was clear to him, alone in the donga,  
He was dying;  
That gash on his right hip bled  
His black miseries to the core of silence.  
Me I want to believe  
That they that kill by knife  
Shall so die.

Even in Alex?

<sup>1</sup> RSA = Republic of South Africa

<sup>2</sup> Alex = Alexandra, a black ghetto  
outside Johannesburg

*I WILL WAIT*

I have tasted, ever so often,  
Hunger like sand on my tongue  
And tears like flames have licked my eye-lids  
Blurring that which I want to see,  
I want to know.  
But Oh! often, now and then, everywhere where I have  
    been,  
Joy, as real as paths,  
Has spread within me like pleasant scenery,  
Has run beneath my flesh like rivers glitteringly silver;  
And now I know:  
Having been so flooded and so dry,  
I wait.