



**when
bullets
begin
to flower**

**edited by
Margaret Dickinson**

POEMS
OF RESISTANCE
FROM
ANGOLA
MOZAMBIQUE
AND GUINÉ

When bullets begin to flower

SELECTED
AND TRANSLATED
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contract workers

Agostinho Neto

A long line of bearers
holds the road
with rapid steps
and their grieving forms
they sprinkle the roadside dust
with their sweat.

On their naked backs
they carry heavy burdens

And they go on
eyes distant
hearts fearful
arms strong
smiles deep as the deep waters.

Gaping mouths
divide them from their own

They go full of homesickness
and dread
— but they sing

Tired out
exhausted by work
— but they sing

Full of injustice
silent in their inmost souls
— and they sing

With cries of protest
submerged in the heart's tears
— and they sing

They go
lost in the distance
in the distance their sad songs are lost

Ah !
they sing !

western civilisation

Agostinho Neto

Sheets of tin nailed to posts
driven in the ground
make up the house.

Some rags complete
the intimate landscape.

The sun slanting through cracks
welcomes the owner

After twelve hours of slave
labour.

breaking rock
shifting rock
breaking rock
shifting rock
fair weather
wet weather
breaking rock
shifting rock

Old age comes early

a mat on dark nights
is enough when he dies
gratefully
of hunger.

african poetry

Agostinho Neto

Out on the horizon
there are fires
and the dark silhouettes of the beaters
with arms outstretched,
in the air, the green smell of burning palms.

African poetry

In the street

a line of Bailundu bearers
tremble under the weight of their load
in the room
a mulatto girl with meek eyes
colours her face with rice powder and rouge
a woman wriggles her hips under a garish cloth
on the bed
a man, sleepless, dreams
of buying knives and forks so he can eat at table
in the sky the glow
of fires

and the silhouette of black men dancing
with arms outstretched,
in the air, the hot music of marimbas

African poetry

and in the street the bearers
in the room the mulatto girl
on the bed the man, sleepless

The burnings consume
consume
the hot earth with horizons afire.

mussunda my friend

Agostinho Neto

I am here
Mussunda, my friend
I am here.
With you
With the sure victory of your joy
and understanding
 — o ió kalunga ua mu bangele
 o ió kalunga ua mu bangele-le-lé-lé....

Do you remember
The sadness of those days
we went
to buy mangos
and mourned
the Funda women's fate
our song of sorrows
our moments of despair
the clouds in our eyes
remember?

I am here
Mussunda, my friend

All life I owe to you
to that dedication, that same love

through which you tore me
from the snake's embrace

and to your strength
which transforms the lives of men

To you
my friend Mussunda, I owe all life to you.

And I am writing verses
which you cannot hear,
you understand my anguish?

I am here
my friend Mussunda
writing verses which you cannot hear
It wasn't this
that we wanted, I know,
but in mind and in spirit
we are

We are
my friend Mussunda
we are

Inseparable
still marching to our dreams

Hearts beating rhythms
of fiery nights
on platforms feet dancing

in tropical enchantment
the sounds in my eardrums refuse to die away

— o io kalunga ua mu bangele. . .

We are!

the blood and the seed

Agostinho Neto

We

from far flung Africa
and above the treachery of man,
across the majestic and unconquered forests
across the flow of life,
which runs anxious, eager and abundant in the
rivers' roar,
through the melodious sound of muted drums
through the eyes of youthful multitudes,
multitudes of arms, of pain and hope
from far-flung Africa
beneath the claw
we bleed from grief and hope, from sorrows and
from strength,
bleeding on this earth disembowelled by hoes,
bleeding with the sweat of forced labour in the
cotton fields,

bleeding hunger, ignorance, despair and death
in the wounds on the black back of a child, on a
mother, on honesty
the blood and the seed

from far-flung Africa

black

and bright like mornings of friendship
desirous and strong like the steps of liberty.

Our cries

are drums heralding desire
in the tumultuous voices, music of nations,
our cries are hymns of love that hearts
might flourish on the earth like seeds in the sun
the cries of Africa
cries of mornings when the dead grew from the seas
chained
the blood and the seed

— see, here are our hands
open to the brotherhood of man
united in certainty
for the future of man
for right, for peace, for friendship.

From our toes, roses grow,
perfumed with the river Zaire's tenacity
and the grandeur of Maiombe's trees.
In our minds
is the road of friendship for Africa,
for the world,

hoisting the flag

Agostinho Neto

When I returned
the soldier ants had vanished from the town
And you too
My friend Liceu
voice gladdening with hot rhythms of the land
through nights of never-failing Saturdays,
You too
sacred and ancestral music
resurgent in the sacred sway of the Ngola's rhythm,
You too had vanished
and with you
the intellectuals
the Ligue*
Farolim
the Ingombata meetings
the conscience of traitors betraying without love.
I came just at the moment of the dawning cataclysm
as the seedling bursts the rain damped ground

* one of the associations which carried out political activities under the cover of cultural ones and was banned in the wave of repression which preceded the 1961 risings.

thrusting up resplendent in youth and colour,
I came to see the resurrection of the seed,
the dynamic symphony of joy growing among men.

And the blood and the suffering
was a tempestuous flood which split the town.

When I came back
the day had been chosen
and the hour was at hand.

Even the children's laughter had gone
and you too
my good friends, my brothers,
Benge, Joaquim, Gaspar, Ilidio, Manuel
and who else?
hundreds, thousands of you, my friends,
some for ever vanished,
ever victorious in their death for life.

When I came back
some momentous thing was moving in the land
the granary guards kept closer watch,
the school children studied harder
the sun shone brighter,
there was a youthful calm among the old people,
more than hope — it was certainty
more than goodness — it was love.

Men's strength
soldiers' courage
poets' cries
were all trying to raise up
beyond the memory of heroes,
Ngola Kiluanji*
Rainha Jinga+,
trying to raise up high
the flag of independence.

* An Angolan leader who fought against the early Portuguese invaders.

+ A queen who led her people against the Portuguese in Angola in the 17th century.

february *

Agostinho Neto

It was then the Atlantic
in the course of time
gave back the carcasses of men
swathed in white flowers of foam
and in the victims' boundless hate,
brought on waves of death's congealed blood

And the beaches were smothered by crows and
jackals with a bestial hunger for the battered flesh
on the sands
of the land, scorched by the terror of centuries
enslaved and chained,
of the land called green
which children even now call green for hope.

It was then that the bodies in the sea
swelled up with shame and salt
in the course of time
in blood-stained waters
of desire and weakness.

It was then that in our eyes, fired
now with blood, now with life, now with death,

* The Angolan revolution began on February 4th 1961 with an attack on Luanda prison.

we buried our dead victoriously
and on the graves made recognition
of the reason men were sacrificed
for love,
for peace,
even while facing death, in the course of time,
in blood-stained waters

And within us
the green land of San Tome
will be also the island of love.