PROFILE

AN AFRIKANE DANTE

No one elevated the Boer language to such pure beauty and no one wielded it so devastatingly against the apartheid regime as its medieval poet Breyten Breytenbach—until his rage turned to despair. His new memoirs show him still consumed by a South African that, despite its transformation, remains his vision of both Heaven and Hell.

BY LAWRENCE WESCHLER

Once asked Breyten Breytenbach, the exiled South African poet and painter, why, in his opinion, after the forces of his clandestine return to his homeland, in 1975, the calming of his arrest, and the debacle of his trial, recantations, and sentencing, the authorities who allowed him to go on writing in prison nevertheless forbade him to paint. At the time, we were sitting in Breytenbach's airy, light-drenched studio, in Paris. (He had been released in 1982, a year and a half short of the completion of a nine-year term, and had immediately returned to his Paris exile.) We had been looking through a life's worth of canvases, dazzlingly colorful paintings with surreal images by turns lyrical and profoundly unsettling. He paused for a moment to think about the question, then said, "They weren't stupid. I think they must have realized that for me an empty canvas would have been an open field of freedom—and they weren't going to allow me that."

They wouldn't be his painter, and for years they barely allowed him even to see any colors. This quintessential colorist had fallen into a nightmare universe of monochrome grays and browns and greenish grays. "C'est la vie," he had commented earlier. "That's the theme the French have for the predominant color of prison life." The pressure within him to paint—or to create images, at least—had become almost overwhelming, and finally he had managed to create and smuggle out to his wife, in Paris, a few dozen drawings. She had preserved them, and some of them are among the pictures we'd been looking at. Several seemed to derive from the hallucinatory cadence of his interior life: images of EXECUTION, expulsion, mutilation, and confession—but others, almost as if in compensation, seemed to be exercises in minute observation: a scuffed shoe, a folded blanket, a draped jacket, a burned note and the extinguished match. Somehow, these modest images were more affecting than the imagined ones, and perhaps the most haunting of all was a drawing entitled "The Orange, Four Times," which portrayed, four, an orange whole (in very evocative lighting through the pencil gray, in some ways seeming to be the drawing's imaginary subject), then the orange partly peeled, then the orange three-quarters eaten (that is, with just a few last sections to be seen), and then—well, nothing (empty air, the orange consumed).

That drawing reminded me of a painting we had been looking at earlier—one of a series that Breytenbach completed during the first years after his release. Against a bosh orange-colored background Breytenbach had created what he was calling "A Family Portrait," which was in fact a group self-portrait: three images of himself at different ages—a poor young farm boy, a middle-aged giant in his eyes; as a clean-shaven, married prisoner in a blue jacket, putting on a brassy face for the photographers at his first trial; and as he saw himself at the moment of painting—squinting through crossed eyes, prematurely aged (at least in his own mind), his black beard foundry with gray.

It's often said of Breytenbach (particularly by his American publishers and reviewers) that he comes from a "distinguished" Afrikaner family. It's true that his forebears date back virtually to the Cape Colony's founding. (Breytenbach insists that those forebears, as is the case with almost all long-time Afrikaner families, their protestations notwithstanding, included slaves as well as masters.) But his own family, at the time of his birth in 1939 into a South Africa still mired in the Depression, was hardly "distinguished," and might better have been characterized as just a few rags above a South African version of "poor white trash." Breytenbach was the third son, born seven years after the first, Jan, and six after the second, Cloete. (He was a twin, but the other twin died at birth. A fourth brother and a sister eventually rounded out the family.) Jan and Cloete can still recall their father's labors as an itinerant worker, scraping together a subsistence living on a crew digging an irrigation canal while they sold their mother pitched a tent each night in nearby fields.

During Breytenbach's early years, his father did manage to acquire a succession of small farms in the Ronderveld region, east of Cape Town, but he must have been having a hard go of it (Breytenbach recalls that his father was drinking a good deal in those days), and presently he had to give up farming and move back closer to Cape Town—to the small town of Wellington. There the family ran a combination general store and boarding house called Greville's, just on the wrong side of the tracks (most of the customers at the general store were "colored"), prophetically situated between a library and a police station.

Breytenbach never lays the circumstances of his upbringing. ("For one thing, we were all—everybody in that region—poor in those days," he says.) On the contrary, he seems to cherish every moment of it, and these memories feed the wellsprings of his creativity in painting, poetry, and prose. A very sense of how the memories get filtered through the medium of Breytenbach's sensibility can be gauged from some of the early, rhapsodic pages in his memoirs, "A Season in Paradise," written in 1973 (the first volume of a trilogy that is achieving completion this month with the publication, by Harcourt Brace, of..."
his "Return to Paradise." In one passage he describes his family's old Blue Moon, with its wicker seat, and how, one evening, returning from a band concert, "I found the cradle of my little girl just like a ball of string released by a horse in full gallop and drawn back roughly against two places." The account goes on, "In the darkness, no one had noticed my fall, and when I reached my mother's room for a few days later, I was already dead and decaying and with the baby Jesus. My mother was very sad." In the reader thinks that he may have missed this passage, the very next page describes a resurrected Breyten playing in a neighboring professor's yard, falling into a fishpond, and being nibbled to death by a swarm of ravenous goldfish. And a few pages after that, young Breyten gets sidetracked by a passing glow "So that my head was just left lying there. But then my bloodsucked little boy was seared, sharpened, sharpened..." Of course, one of the things that make these droll whimsical proverbs so affecting is the way they seem retrospectively prophetic of the author's later work. "Oh, real-life disaster and cruel entombment which the author was to experience was trite to the moment..."

Wellingston, where Breyten spent his adulthood, is just a few kilometers from the Refugio Paul, a town that is cherished in Afrikaner iconography as the birthplace of the "Taal," the Afrikaans language itself, and sometimes Breyten has said that Breyten's special feeling for Afrikaners stems, in part, from the fact that the father of his wife was a Boer. Wounded in battle brought up the language's very crass. Breyten's recurrent self citations other inspirations for his literary voca-
tion—specifically, his mother. Although the Sinhalese family was run, in typi-
cal Afrikaner fashion, as a patriarchy, it was the mother who seemed to have left the most impression on the child—
or, at least, on Breyten. She was, he has told me, "extremely uncomplicated." While his father was dour and somber, occasionally almost despondent, she im-
mersed their modest digs in order and systematically refrained to get depressed: difficulties (no matter how momentarily exacting) simply had to be soluble. But mainly she liked to talk. (Breyten's brother Cloete once told me, "That women, let's face it, the lady suffered from verbal diarrhea. I tell you, her whole family, they'd get together and yak and yak, play their music, and yak some more, all bloody day." When Breyten cites his mother as an influence, he is probably referring to the specific quality of that talk, its wildly leaping, continually unexpected free-associative character, and its tendency to fill a space—qualities that also apply to Breyten's speeches.

Even if the Breytenbach clan wasn't, seemingly effortless that he had to be a general—indeed, a close collaborator with the propaganda services—charged with the explicit duty to define his responsibilities with this with any sort of the apartheid re-
gime. Such disdain for the man's clear, he is certainly projects an aura: his first wife was a niece of the head of the state security apparatus, and his was described to me as a "shadows figure" or "sneaky guy." "You just kept very quiet when he was around," one former parliamentarian said. "You watched your tongue, because you just sensed everything was being said and being reported back."

His production often diverged nicely with the re-
gime's current line, and though he claims not to have believed in apartheid per se, he was, and, in a sense, remains a true believer in the apartheid regime's nineteenth-century doctrine of the "total ostracization": the existence of a worldwide Communist conspiracy aimed at bringing the South Af-
can government down through both internal subversion and revolutionary upheaval in the world's neighboring countries—which, in turn, justified all our re-
ponse. Cloete readily acknowl-
edge having done so to sources inside the South African military, but he insists that those ties have been like any other journalist's, exploiting that he's just as good at what, still, what was of the oldest Breytenbach brother, Jan, who happens to be the most deco-
sored soldier in the history of the contemporary South African De-
Fense Force. Wounded in battle seven times, he has fought all over Africa, in Rhodesia and Mozambique, and especially in Angola and Namibia—and has not only fought but created entire fighting units. He founded the S.A.A.D.'s first reconnaissan-
ces, or special-focus, unit; he also cre-
ed the S.A.A.D.'s most highly vol-
eered and deeply feared parachute bata-
ligue, the Forty-fourth; and, in be-
tween—and most famous of all, per-
haps—during the mid-seventies he fash-
ed the infamous 32 Battalion, known as the 32 Battalion, forging it for, the

most part, out of the suddenly disenfran-
thiated commies, MLAs, anti-apartheid activ-
ists, or pariahs from defeated factions, all left over following Portugal's colonial collapse in Angola. In this capacity, Breytenbach, "the Sword", one of Jan's two books chroni-
cling his military service, is described as a "spooky guy," or "terrible national-weapon type that's very effective."

But he goes on to maintain that the blacks in 32 Battalion were not considered mere cannon fodder, at least by him, and it is true that the unit was occupied with the tendency of its white leaders to fight alongside their black troops at the forefront of every battle, in the process sus-

maintaining far higher casualty rates among white officers than such other units in the S.A.D.F. Jan Breytenbach figured prom-

inently in many of the most fa-
bulous battles in South Africa's cross-border campaign—great victories, to hear the South Afri-
can tell it, or "appalling massa-
cides," to hear the verdict of many of the regime's opponents (and of such independent watchdogs as the Apartheid Research

In his career, he ended in the air

He had been a Royal Navy (a decidedly un-Boerish thing to do), was present at Suez and Saratoga, and finally in the United States Air Force. Wounded in battle seven times, he has fought all over Africa, in Rhodesia and Mozambique, and especially in Angola and Namibia—and has not only fought but created entire fighting units. He founded the S.A.A.D.'s first reconnaiss-
cance, or special-focus, unit; he also cre-
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ently segments of child in thrall to news accounts of the Second World War. (Montgomery was Jan's first hero, and even when the black Afrikaans to be killed in a battle behind-

South Africa then, it was for a white national servitude to die."

The last he himself of the military life—the manliness of it, its physical and spiritual demands, its glorification of an elite that was at the same time an elite of rogues, the leery oor, those highly trained, wild-eyed,
loved this stuff, its uncanny specificity, it was almost worth keeping him in exile just to keep getting more of it. (His descriptions of the physical beauty of the Bolivian jungles, for instance, made me want to go.) And then there was the lore poetry, the lore of the gods, the lore of its very essence—the never-ending scandal that the finest love poetry in the African language was being written in celebration of a "colored" woman, who, furthermore, couldn’t even read it. (So who was writing it for?)

On top of everything else, there was the psychological situation of all, the eerie sense of a winter almost sleepwalking toward his own doom, fully conscious, utterly unaware. In the poem "Breyten prays for himself" he pleads, "Keep Pain far from Me or Lord / Or then may we be taken into custody, Shamed / Hungred / Left / Used / Torn / Cut / Off / Buried / Destroyed / Murdered / In the wide universe / Made to show their parts out / In the dark, dark darkness / Full of life and death / We can’t do one thing or the other."

Breytenbosh observed and participated in the law’s insanity. Like many young radicals of that era, he grew contemptuous of the disciplined institutions of the old life—"especially the French Communist Party, which played a particularly regressive and disempowering role during May of 1968. A few months later, as Soweto-led tanks crushed the Prague Spring, the French Communist Party was one of the first Western Communist Parties to extend its harshest congratulations to the Old Guard in the Kremlin. The South African Communist Party, or SACP, was far more active and would be more active. For the SACP, there was no such thing as the African National Congress in exile during those years. It controlled the ANC’s finances and security and communications; and even non-SACP leaders, such as the ANC’s chairman, Oliver Tambo, were effectively surrounded by SACP cadres. Beytyn, objecting to the SACP’s style, which he considered Stalinist—that is, both doctrinaire and fatefully hierarchical—and he also objected to its long-term grandiosity and relatively obvious strategy. Beytyn was by nature and temperament in these misgivings. In fact, the ANC in exile was itself rent by internal battles along the same lines. The London ANC was under the dominance of the SACP, and worked closely with the French Communist Party to impose control over the anti-apartheid movement. The Algerian outposts of the ANC, by contrast, was in the hands of so-called Africans, members of a movement that (like Beytyn) was less in thrall to Moscow and favored instead a more militant and race-conscious approach. And they, too, were struggling for control in Paris."

Joan Malan, a lifelong activist, militant, exile, and communist computer, was the chief representative of the Algerian ANC, and he now began courting Beytyn in a serious way. In 1969, he recruited him to work with a clandestine leftist organization called Solidarity, an outgrowth of the wartime French Resistance that had become a sort of servicing agency and clearing house for anti-imperialist liberation movements around the Third World. Its leader, an Egyptian Jew named Henri Cartier, was a yes-man almost perversely interested in Beytyn’s training in the techniques of espionage, smuggling, and sabotage. Malan, meanwhile, helped to put together a small secret organization of non-Communist white South African exiles—"called Atlantis originally, and later Oldies"—with the approval, he assured its members, of top elements in the ANC, though the Oldies’ people were never to meet the organization’s existence to any ordinary activists. (At one point, however, Cartier himself came to address them secretly.)

Curiously, during this same period (which was also a period of considerable pain and literary productivity for him) Beytyn was immersed in a discussion of an article, a document that he had joined a Zen center. "I know, I know," he once acknowledged to me, smiling, "To be a Zen Communist is a contradiction in terms. It’s not something you can do away from attraction, not manipulating fancy, not thinking about personal ambition, attention, awareness—all these are the material qualities we are as communists."

The Zen influence—the awareness, the toleration for in-companions, the way of seeing, the making itself pleasingly felt in Beytyn’s painting, but the poetry was becoming more and more overtly political, more mystical in a new volume of poems published in Holland in 1972, which soon became the first piece of African literature ever to come under South African government suppression. The book was hardly surprising, since the volume included the instantaneously notorious poem "Letter from Abroad to Bisho," dedicated to "Bisho," which is to say to the then-Minister Bisho Lwula John Vorster. In one stanza, the poem adopts the agonized voice of a political prisoner, but in the next he addresses the Prime Minister directly:

"... and you, leader, / you take far too much for granted the security of the state / what do you think of when the night winds her frontier / and the flickering light of civilization / is suspended / when the kindling stick is consumed / and the prayer of the poor in a land / of barbed wire and bullet厄 unleash / does your heart still sing in your throat / when you touch the amazing / and you’re right..."

The poem was said to have enraged Vorster—spiriting for the impatient poet thereafter became a private obsession of the Prime Minister.

Later that year, bafflingly, Yolande received an approval to irregularly proliferated and regularly denied visa application. (If one’s thoughts were pulled anywhere else, he would have joined a Zen center. "I know, I know," he once acknowledged to me, smiling, "To be a Zen Communist is a contradiction in terms. It’s not something you can do away from attraction, not manipulating fancy, not thinking about personal ambition, attention, awareness—all these are the material qualities we are as communists.”)

It is curious that the University of Cape Town summer school had already scheduled a week-long conference—a sort of ten-year retrospective—on the Sesimbra movement for the last week in January, and now that Beytynbosh, one of the movement’s prominent members, was actually in the country he was, of course, invited to take part. Beytyn delivered a scathing address. "Mine will be a funeral address," he began, and it quickly
became clear that he no longer put much stock in literature as a transformative agent. Yes, he acknowledged, "Afrikaner writers occupy a privileged if untenable position in the tribe, even if only by virtue of the fact that they have been there since the beginning."

The audience's response to Breyten's talk was enthusiastic—enough so that the speaker was invited to return to the University of Natal for a series of lectures the following week. The audience was composed of a mix of students, faculty, and members of the public, all of whom were engaged in the discussion of Breyten's work. The event was well attended, and the speaker was praised for his insightful and thought-provoking remarks.

Breyten and Yolande had a number of friends and acquaintances who were also engaged in the discussion of Breyten's work, including some of his former professors from the University of Natal. These friends and acquaintances provided valuable insights and perspectives on Breyten's work, and they were all grateful for the opportunity to engage in such a meaningful and intellectually stimulating conversation.
for a long time and is still one of his closest friends, dressed up his habit in exasperation whenever he approaches the subject. "He was such a bloody fool, such an inept computer," Coetzee told me in Cape Town. "He may well have simply stepped himself up—for instance, by being too careless over the phone—or even actively betrayed himself. His whole life, he had practiced a kind of body art—usually to introduce you to the"..."

"As soon as Breitman arrived in the country, for example, he began an affair with one of the stewardesses on the flight down, even though it was known that stewardesses on South African Airways were often big skiers; inevitably, indeed, Breitman believes this stewardess did end up informing on him. A few months later, in any case, she married his newly divorced brother. Ce"..."

"Breitman made contact with more than forty people during his first two weeks in South Africa—while apparently being tracked the entire time. Driving around one day, a week or so after he arrived in Cape Town, he finally noticed that his car was being tailed by a white Ford. The next few days were "like something out of a very cory third rate movie," as he writes in "The True Confessions." He would lose his tail, they would track him down, he would lose them again. But in any case he had nowhere to go, and he was now thoroughly exposed—"at least in disguise," he says. Police roadblocks and checkpoints sprang up all around the city, and the airport and the train and bus terminals were swarming with reinforcements. He eventually consented to catch the night express train to Johannesburg—boarding not at Cape Town Central Station but at its next stop, which happened to be Wellington. He got a friend to drive him there. Some weeks later, passing through Paarl, in the hills above which, just a few weeks earlier, the regime had dedicated a hulking public Monument to the Tsol, and then past Groenvlei, his parents' old boarding house (though, by then, they had retired to Orania, on the coast), and past many of the other staging areas of his youth, the wellsprings of his vocation. When the night train finally ar"..."
"Do forgive me, sir. I've been too much in a panic in my voice to any

Breyten was silent for a time. "And then," he said, exhaling deeply, "I mean, I am a writer. In a strange, macabre way, it's a fascinating experience to write one's confessions to the public. For me, writing has always been a way of better understanding the connections of the world. But, in that situation, to really probe and manipulate those linkages immediately, in a very literal way, the life-and-death sorts of issues we writers ordinarilylie just to make believe we're confronting. And then, as well, I did feel a need to explain myself, to justify and account for the decisions of my life...to myself as well as to them. And, too, the way in which the whole interrogation was taking place in Africa—the language itself, after all, being at the core of any problem, my sense of complicity, but also, the hope that it could ameliorate the feeling of sympathy in them—that...too, was okay.

Although Breyten was not physically tortured—and, of course, during this time there were many who were being tortured, especially among the black prisoners—the pressures brought to bear on him were uniquely intense. He was not just a white African political prisoner—a rare enough bird—and hence a traitor to so many other white South Africans as well, but also an Afrikaner writer, with all that that implied.

During the months that followed, Breyten was passed among a battery of interrogators, with one such agent—the lead investigator for the domestic-security police, a man named Kaaleb (Little Ca$) Brooddy—he developed a peculiarly perverse relationship. At a moment when Breyten was exceptionally racked and vulnerable, Brooddy made a personal project of this new prisoner—and Brooddy himself was, as Breyten now says, "really twisted, that guy...so twisted." Perhaps Brooddy's most cynical display of power occurred one Saturday morning, when, accompanied by only his son, he came to take Breyten out of solitary and to drive him to his own home, for a walk through his garden, a meal with his family, a bit of badinage with his two young daughters—this was a long time and some of the privations of captivity had taken their toll. Brooddy made a mental note to himself to visit the brother to wash up, even offered him the use of his own bathtub, before hurrying him back to prison. But, once there, instead of leaving the cell, he led him into a side office, in the middle of which stood Yolande. It was the first time they had seen one another since that arrest. But then Brooddy didn't leave the room: he just stood there, sneering, a motion made all the more agonizing by the previous few hours' electrically choreographed hijinks.

And yet a few months later Breyten dedicated a new book, consisting entirely of poems composed during his imprisonment, to this very Brooddy, Brooddy's interest in allowing Breyten to continue to write poetry and in seeing it in publication seemed to grow. In its second edition—the first to be seen—to further toy with Breyten's mind, and in part to win points with the Afrikaner professor, of whose cultural validation he appeared to crave. The regime's interest in allowing publication of the brood was more voluble. Many of Breyten's poems include strikingly vivid evocations of his actual situation. The decision to allow them to be published and reviled to be read around the world in the Afrikaner pattern of simultaneous revulsion from and identification of Breyten's poetry—the notion that they could separate the language master from the terrorist. (Even Breyten in prison, his poems continuing to appear in academic periodicals, the box reserved for his photographs was blank, as if he had been afraid to list him in the "black list,"

Why Breyten was allowing the book's publication at all under those conditions, Breyten says, had more to do with the dedication, is another matter. Breyten claims that he was not free to participate in any way, but that it was still alive, and, furthermore, that the saying "the thing that can't be published..."

As for the dedication, he says that it was a 'mammoth piece of rubbish,' that Breyten's dedication on the title page was "completely wrong" for allowing the book's publication. All of which may be true. But it is also true that by this point a tightening...


The page contains a text excerpt from a newspaper article, discussing events related to the trial of Breyten Breytenbach. The text describes the trial's setting, the description of the court, and mentions personal reflections on the events. The text also touches on the legal proceedings and the impact of the trial on society.

The text reads:

"If they had had a Rogac in the nineteenth century, the world would have been a better place. By the time she'd finished, there was hardly a dry eye in the audience, with the exception of the judge's."

"It was writing that brought me to Broodryk's office, where I was introduced to the cool, charming Breytenbach. Yet when two of my colleagues came buzzing in, bizarrely enthusiastic—"they didn't see me to congratulate him on the completeness of his triumph," he recalls. "So who knew?""

"There was an odd feel of speculation that Vorster himself had personally directed the sentence—and, indeed, some indication that between Vorster's final statement and the actual sentencing, Cillie had received a phone call from the Lord Chief Justice in his chambers."

"Breyten's spent most of the next couple of years alone in a narrow, high-ceilinged cell, still, even though he was no longer facing the death penalty, right alongside death row (the better, his words go, of being put to the expiation of solitude). One evening in Paris, he described that way of the Pretoria Commission to me. 'The hanging room—the actual chamber where they executed the prisoners—was emaciated, of course, of course, the central characteristic of the place. Even though you never saw the room, you could hear it.etrofitting the room of the Pretoria Commission...""

"Breytenbach told the story of how he could actually hear the quality of the lighting of the other people, because you knew that everybody else in the room knew that that prison was awake, lying there with their ears cocked to the bars or the wall."

"The room, of course, was still an issue, but it wasn't the focus. Instead, it was the story of Vorster, the man who had offered him a deal. "In the end, I believe that you can make much better use of me than is present in the current case," he wrote."

"Vorster, however, was the one who wanted to be a part of everything, with nothing to do but think and think and think and the humbleness and the shamefulness of it all. "Isolation has made me sick of myself, and sick of others," he later wrote. "My contacts with the outside world were limited to one letter in each direction per month, not to exceed five hundred words and subject to censorship, and one half-hour per week."

"This final sentence is crucial in any attempt to evaluate the significance of the letter. How sincerely did he mean it? General Gideonseh, at any rate, never took him up on the offer, and for good reason. Not even a week later, as Dryer has pointed out, a young writer named Peter Groene- wald, suddenly ridiculed with misgivings, was spilling his guns to the prison commandant—yes, anyway, so the prosecution would consider it to be Breyten's second trial. Breyten, it seemed, had managed to maneuver his way back into the game with one touch with Breyten during those first months of his sentence, and this one made the one with Broodryk seem positively transparent."

"Beginning in April of 1976, Groene- wald, a twenty-year-old rookie guard, took to watching away his night shifts by playing cards with his own proverbs and machineries. Brey- ten, and for any court, played along, spinning fantasies of his own. Groene- wald said he had followed Breyten's trial and admired his style, his writings, his courage. Groene- wald requested paper and pencils, so that he could write and draw. "As long as the situation hadn't been this stranglehold of his creative impulsion. It wasn't just that Breyten was being held incommunicado with the out- side world, he was now being kept from communicating at all, from expressing himself in ways that had become as necessary to him as breathing.""

"Correspondence provided him with pencils and blank paper, and struggled out completed poems and drawings, dutifully sending them on to Paris. (Among these were the pencil drawings of blanks and shoes, of popu- lation and decaptications, and of the Orange, Four Times," which Breyten 
later showed me,) Groener said to smuggle letters out as well, to friends and old allies, both outside and inside the country, many of the letter being the same people Breteny had got into such trouble the first time around.

As the nights passed, the two men began to weave ever more convoluted fantasies of— or plans for (it was hard to tell which)—barbaric escapes and subsequent acts of derriérage. (These included, it was alleged, the blowing up of the Monument to the Tad, above Parallel.) But Groener said presently stalled under the pressure and informed his superior of their shenanigans—or maybe he had been a plant all along. "Who knows what the hell was going on," Timothee Coixet subsequently commented. "On the one hand, you have the police's version, and one can never believe a word they say, by definition. And, on the other, you have Breteny's, and he's a poet and, as such, incredibly incapable of merely literal truth." (The whole thing was obviously a setup.) Closer to the point forward, Groener was wired for his nightly conversations with Breteny, and every piece of paper leaving the cell through its supposedly secret channel—containing letters, as Dreyer had characterized them, "of stunning brilliancy"—was being routed through the photocopy at the secret police headquarters. The police allowed this charade to continue for several more months, but they were monitoring every letter going in and out, and when those letters grew more and more outrageous, urging Breteny to take certain necessary steps without anything being done—his activism credentials had been further tarnished.

The judge ended up dismissing all charges except one, relating to illegal smuggling of correspondence, for which he found Breteny guilty and payable on completion of his sentence. More important, he ordered an immediate rectification of the conditions of his imprisonment for the remainder of that sentence: for starters, he was to be taken away from death row. A few weeks later Breteny was transferred out of Pretoria detention and taken to Pollsmoor prison, on the outskirts of his beloved Cape Town.

At Pollsmoor, the conditions of Breteny's incarceration improved significantly; he was allowed outside on a regular basis, was no longer confined to isolation, and was given things to do (specifically, he was assigned to the prison woodshop, where he was granted broad clerical responsibilities); and it now became easier for his friends to visit him monthly. That said, Pollsmoor was still one of South Africa's largest prison centers, no less rigorous in its observance of the system's archaic rules (all visits, for example, remained noncontact, through a glass partition), and at the same time a zone of relentless violence and violation.

Now, however, at the insistence of the Afrikaner presses, Breteny was allowed to resume writing regularly—though under highly peculiar conditions. He was permitted to write as much as he liked, but he was not allowed to retain anything he wrote, even for purposes of reference or continuity. At the end of each day, the day's production was confiscated "for security," with the assurance that it would all be returned to him at the end of his sentence. He never knew whether to believe such assurances (in the end, thanks in part to pressure from his lawyers, they were scrupulously observed), but he could have no doubts that in the meantime every word was being pored over by regime psychologists and security operatives. The guards even confiscated the blotters in his prison cell; any letter sent from his cell would be closely scrutinized for signs of the "underworld's" reach.

Breteny was almost a Dostoevski embryo—a "writing death," he once called it. "Writing took on its purely literary shape, since it had to echo, no feedback, no evaluation, and perhaps ultimately no existence." And yet, even under such circumstances, he managed to produce a body of work of protonic vitality, notably including a feverishly enigmatic novel, made up of a series of overlapping short narratives, which he entitled "Ambrose," a typically Bretenyish inversion, ingeniously evoing the French words for "burrow" (ambrous) and "to die" (mourir). His prose poems eventually filled five volumes—and, reading them, one indeed feels a sense of going into a dark mirror, with the themes of a lifetime reaching up again, oddly inverted. One of the poems begins, "snake and generation; allow me to take this lover / of Bongani Bird, the embalmed dream in the green soil," and concludes, "so one is guilty of immensity."

The acht of homesickness is again pervasive, but now in Paris (rather than in the Boland) that is being longed for, and it is with Yolanda (rather than his parents) that he is being confounded with such startling specificity, as in the case of one poem where he hauntingly savors a reunion meal of beans and meat for two at a restaurant on the Rue Moussart-le-Prince.

There are poems of prison life, some of them replete with licentious violence. And then there are poems of the Boland, of his youth and his parents and

"February 1, 1985," Breteny's first painting after his release from prison.
their old age and his fear that they will die before she's released. There is a particularly beautiful ode to his mother, which ends, "And now you are old, natural, sad and weary, like flowers as we die." He then, in the nursery, found it was so much love for you before you go! The authorities never censored it, it was not to be removed, only to preserve his grief. He applied for permission to attend the funeral, which was denied and then granted and then denied again.

Breyten's father continued to visit him in jail, following his mother's death, named straight and increasingly difficult, until one day, two years later and several years before his son's scheduled release, he was killed by a stray shot, which left him paralysed and entirely mute.

In September of 1978, Vorster reigned as Prime Minister, and after that, the situation surrounding Breyten's incarceration seemed to lose some of its personal edge. His situation grew increasingly normal, and he was committed to more gross murders. In April of 1982, Vorster fell sick, and Willibald Simola, the imprisoned leaders of the ANC, were transferred to Pretoria from Robben Island, a fact to Breyten, in his capacity as storekeeper, to verify their quarters, and he did so with a particular zeal, though he didn't meet them at this time.

Breyten had stopped being a horror for Breyten. And yet on the far side of that horror Breyten found a kind of peace—in the old red corner, in the certain sense, that he had been searching for at the Zen center in Paris. "I didn't go into a prison as a form of spiritual exercise," he once told me. "And, believe me, I wouldn't recommend it to anyone who is looking for a spiritual experience. I came, however, at the same time, that the scattering of the sense of ego, the abdication forced upon one, the sense of survival, I came to understand for the first time what so much of Zen poetry is about the acuity of observation, the humbleness and immediacy of beauty."

YOLANDA SAYS HER HUSBAND

THE WAKE

(Pseudonym, 1978)

when my mother was dying
I had to fly my mother through the swirling current
to reach the bank where she had lain out
in the yard's sparkling yellow
the sun set, in the Arabian scene
playing up the edges of ancient faces, ancient
and forebears sitting peacefully
sipping tea in waffle baskets.

poet and shipper she was under the white sheet
her eyes luminous and somehow without sparkle the supplied her plumage
arms distributing with deliberate gestures
the ultimate messages and blessings
(only the tired gray bon had already come unadorned:
visions of everything going amiss and she
at rest now with inner self Matthew and Mink died and
right the two old great were by Jose standing to,

and she also kept on bedecking me by name and
and could not place me at all,

but had to rescue my means the authorities
get wind of my escape into the current
quizzing of which I seek
(was this the great downfall?)
to wash up teeth a-drawer down below banks
somehow just further where made

grain elevators slush the heavens where haystacks
set and marts are dug down by the surf,

and straining at their beads I heard the stirring
dogs their group clogged with the yelping fury of the hunt

—BREYTEN BREYTENBACH

(Translated from the Afrikaans, by the author)

YOLANDA SAYS HER HUSBAND

YOLANDA stayed behind to clean up the house, and all of her seven years of half-life
she stayed behind to clean up the house, and all of her seven years of half-life

During the last years of her crusade on Breyten's behalf, Yolanda obtained a powerful ally in President F. W. de Klerk. The two, in private, shared a love for freedom and equality. De Klerk praised her work, giving her the title of "Mother of the People." Yolanda, who was a former schoolteacher, used her knowledge and skills to help other prisoners and their families. She also worked to raise awareness about the plight of political prisoners in South Africa. Her dedication and tireless efforts were an inspiration to many. Breyten's mother, Yolanda, passed away on February 13, 2013, after a long battle with cancer. She was 74 years old.
HERE WE GO
(Pullitzer Prize, 1962)

"Go up to a friend or lover and tell him/"Not quite mange marrant à demerer."

Wept and gnashed teeth, allow me to take this leave of Sunny Bird, he exclaimed down in the green shirt; he groans up and blinks his watery handkerchief and breaks a foolish poem to besmirch you, for example.

to come out of hospital you must

be in a coma

dead butt wise to the light looking at your lids how the shadowy worm swirled

run back from the sea

to the labyrinth of hoodwink where the mountain contracts round

the forest the trees are columns of darkness

run the delicate web of butt

head-shoulder telling with silence gone to put
duddled by moon deep in eyes and dreads that never were dust

past neighbor clay dog watching a farming stick to the knees in dark almost get among shot julien make an offer they'll ride on with you but the morose spiders and spiders eaten better cunning ducks have pedaled the outer body through and the scrab does white look the hands themselves not

is he carried in barbershop- would you not rather than him mercy? the fact of words has been consumed, no one in guilty of treasoness.

—BREYTEN BREYTENBACH

(Translated from the Afrikaans, by the author)

was neither any longer, a native Afrikaner nor a member of the A.N.C. in exile—indeed, in fact, the entire event was not a mere resistance, but a real rebellion against the A.N.C.; and, some of which may well have been partly inspired by the event he had seen and a half year of incarceration.

In the short run, the Botha regime expressed itself dispelled by the A.N.C.'s latest antics by slapping him with a series of visas despite—actions that made it impossible for him to return his father, who had suffered a series of heart attacks, until virtually the last moment.

(He was eventually allowed to return to his father's deathbed on a four-day visit.)

But Breytenbachtrembled committed around the country's edges, and in early 1991 he and Yolande were finally allowed back into the rapidly reforming country for a three-month stay. (It was this visit that became the occasion for his latest book, "Return to Paradise.")

He remained a prickly customer, however, ultimately independent and at times almost defiantly eccentric in his celebration of the individual in the face of any tendency toward hegemonic control, whether National Party or A.N.C.-inspired. ("Only a writer can save us from chaos now" in a typical recent pronouncement.) He even ended up alienating Breytenbacht at one point by the idea of the two nations merging into a single political entity, which finally subsided in a wrenching private reconciliation. They agreed that it was the country itself that was growing in this way, and that they had no need for American journalists (perhaps, he had had his share), and while he would not be a welcome visit from Breytenbacht, Breytenbacht was not to bring me anything that had passed between them and he still keeps up with them.

We visited Cloete in his summer cot-
tage in Moornings, east of Wellington, on the banks of a fragrant hill overlooking a chasalpa river. Their exchanges were gay and easy and yet surprisingly intimate.

(Cloete struck me as very cynical, de-

spiring, dark-humored, and emoti-

tionally contemptuous, though by no

means contemptible.) Cloete was talking about selling his cottage, because the country was going all to hell. "So why don't you sell it to me, then, instead of to one of the black colonists?" Breytenbacht teased. "You mean to a white commune instead of a black one." Cloete retorted, mock-seriously. Although they didn't talk politics—they seldom do anymore—

Cloete told us of his latest incarceration: he was now serving as a top P.R. adviser to Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Isikha Isikha Freedom Party, one of the most obstructive forces opposed to the country's newly emerging order.

On the main road, east of Port Elizabeth, toward his sister's place, in Grahamst-
town, Breytenbacht ambled about a few times to his ex-wife's homestead, in the nearby hamlet of Sulem, trying to obtain his current to our visit. But Jan had no use for American journalists (perhaps, he had had his share), and while he would not be a welcome visit from Breytenbacht, Breytenbacht was not to bring me everything that had passed between them and he still keeps up with them.

He's really on a rampage," Breytenbacht

laughed at one of these calls. "He worked up, kept repeating how 'Big Blood's coming, Big Blood's coming.' Actually, Jan hadn't simply called from the S.A.D.F.; he had been forced out in 1987 after trying to blow the whistle on his unit's ally Jonas Savimbi's (man whose career and very life he had person-

ally saved on several occasions) for racketing and patently illegal trafficking in the hills and hides of endangered Angolan wildlife species. Jan had discovered how trends from the ensuing corrup-
tion run high into the South African military's own top command, and when he tried to go public with his informa-
tion he was summarily stripped of his commission and banished from his beloved former base.

Breytenbacht and I spent the night at his sister Rachel's home. We lunched through their mother's photographers album, ma-

tronomically noted her chronologi-
cally delicious. Rachel's fifteen-year-old daughter, Antje Karsten, recalled for us her child's-eye view of Uncle Breytenbacht's incarceration. ("I just thought you wanted to be alone") and then recited some of the poems of his she had been learning at school, which had especially moved her.

Next day, we headed back to the Port Elizabeth airport, but we gave ourselves an extra hour and de-

toured by way of Sulem, which turned "I feel like Briinnhilde, but in 'The Kentucky Cycle.'"
out to be a tiny hamlet—really just a general store, off to the side of which, up a dusty hill, Jan’s farmhouse was parked. Bryan went up to the gate while I stayed behind in the car. A few minutes later, Jan’s adult daughter came out and we stopped. “Where’s father? He’s always quite kindhearted and very hospitable.” And he was. His Britich wife had prepared tea on the back porch (they had been hinting that Bryan would come by, but had almost given up), and Jan was regaling his brother tales of his new life as a farmer, raising chickens and growing olives. They avoided any talk of politics, and, finally, Jan seemed to want to talk about what was the wild life in his beloved Capri, preserve and the royal bath, that had been made of that one time. He had just completed a book on the subject, and he arranged for me to get a copy of the manuscript. The entire hour, as he spoke passionately on the subject, I couldn’t help recalling Bryan’s wonderful speculation about the English countryside. The English life might have followed if he had only been born a decade later.

We took our leave and made for the Port Elizabeth airport, where Bryan boarded a connecting flight back to Yolanda, in their Spanish vacation farmhouse. I was to join them there a bit later, but in the meantime I slipped off for a few last days in Cape Town. That evening, in my hotel, I leafed through Jan’s manuscript and found the experience at once absorbing and profoundly unsettling, for the two entire separate narratives seemed to cross side by side through its pages, almost distortions of each other. One was a tale of unending war, and the other a tale of human and almost accidental carnage. The flesh-blood substance of the two “sides” of the story, at any rate, never quite seemed to register. The other was a passionlessly and a passion that are the passions of an Edenic preserve (both brothers and bulls are drawn to the imagery of paradise lost and squandered); a celebration of elks, elms and lions and leopards and tigers and and the grandeur of nature itself, and an unarguable wall at the systemic evocative of all that splendid. That destruction had clearly got to him. Only near the end of the manuscript, and almost in passing, does he seem to draw the connections. “I am all for a just war, but I also have a great deal of respect for women and for the old and the young. I am not against a just war, but I also have a great deal of respect for women and for the old and the young.”

A few days later, I joined Bryan and Yolanda in a small stone farmhouse in the hills outside a small town; a few hours’ drive north of Bonaire. It was strange the way, by so much for a small place, the three brothers had managed to secure virtually identical views from their kitchen windows—at an overgrown orchard, the swell of dry hills in the mid-distance, the wide sky above, the wind blowing gently down below.

Yolanda was excited; for the first time since childhood, she had become fasci- nated by her own roots, and in a month’s time she and a friend were going to be making a trek back to Vietnam. Bryan seemed pleased by the idea. Meanwhile, he was busy in a small packing studio he had had built over the garage during this last South African trip; he had made the final ar- rangements for an exhibition of his paintings—the first ever in his homeland—to open this December.

Evening was coming on, and Bryan and I were back, watching the setting sun blur the surrounding hills. I heard a pair of owls hoot off in the distance. “Owls!” I asked.

“No,” Bryan said, waving. “Wood pigeons, probably. But we do have owls here. And owls. And quite a number of legumes. Well, we have everything.” From there he free-associated to Victo- ria and the birds around the prison, the only outside life he had ever seen. “That’s one thing about spending a long stretch in prison, he commented. “You never really get out anymore; probably you are continually being drawn back in.”

We were silent a few moments; the sun was descending, the light deepening. I asked him whether he had ever looked back grudgingly on his behavior during those years. “Oh, sure,” he said. “There are as- pects of my behavior that still leave me appalled. But I also remember that that’s what they’re continually programming for—you’re being conditioned for self-destruction, they’re making you self-destruct, you’re being made guilty. The whole process is a continual rape of one’s own self-inconsistency. So that, now, it leaves its scar tissue thick across one’s soul, worrying you.”

And yet, in a way, I have more confi- dence in myself than that. Damn it all, so I wasn’t able to be perfect. Self-awareness is not self-volition or self- protection. I was, I am, a flawed human being. But that’s more interesting than being an iron nail. And there’s something to be said for fucking up. In fact, fucking up, if you aspire to be an artist, may be the great creative principle; getting broken, broken wide open, and then eluding among the shards. Moving on. Painting—writing—are always, in any event, a metamorphosis, a kind of rebirth. The sun had set and the world had suddenly gone quite dark. We went back inside. Some of his old gallery-show catalogues were strewn across the kitchen table, ready for his forthcoming South African exhibition. And one of them happened to be open to the “Family Port- rait”—his triple self portrait. I smiled, pointing to it. “Ah yes,” Bryan con- fessed. “We had a kid here. The other day, he was looking at that picture, and he asked me what the bird of the old man kept holding the little boy.” He laughed. “I didn’t think that.” I asked him how he himself felt about that picture nowadays. “Oh,” he said, “you know how it is. That’s one, dead at the age of nine, Me, dead at the age of thirty, Me, dead at the age of forty.” (The expletive, the glittering sand, the field flowers under your feet). “I have sympathy for all of them, as I do for any dead. But they are not me.”

The Kars Lagerfeld Skirt.