Interviews

Interview with Dennis Brutus[1]

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JVW: I'm going to start by asking you some very general questions about your life and about literature.

I want to cover the following: your parents, your early publications in journals, the dates and contents of your various books, your relationship with publishers, the influences on your poetry, the schools and universities you attended, your main memories of those and then we will read and discuss particular poems. Lastly, I would like to have your views on current South African literature, your views of other writers as well as your memories of people like Arthur Nortje and Bessie Head whom you have known. I'd like to know about the type of education you've had because I find the references that you make in your poetry very interesting and I'm sure that it relates to your educational background. Then lastly, what is the possibility of you coming back to South Africa and your views on the current situation in South Africa? So let's start by talking about your parents.

DB: They were both South African. In fact my father came from Saldanha Bay. My mother was born in Uitenhage and they married in Port Elizabeth in October. The first Monday in October was a public holiday, October 1919. Apparently shortly after that they went to Rhodesia as it was then, so that by the beginning of 1920 they were both teaching in Salisbury, in Harare and my brother, who was the first child was born in October of 1920. I was born 4 years later in November 1924 and in between there was a daughter called Helene and after me was a younger daughter called Katherine or Dolly. So it was a family of 4. We were all born in Salisbury with the exception of my youngest sister Dolly who was born in Hankey of all

[1] The interview was conducted on December 19 2000.

places, near to Port Elizabeth in 1926. So my assumption is that at that time of course my mother was in Hankey, but that the family may have moved temporarily to Hankey. I recall growing up in Port Elizabeth roughly from about 1929, from the age of about 5. But my clearest memories were somewhat later in the 30's. Both of my parents, as I say, were teachers at a missionary school in Salisbury. When they came back to South Africa my father taught at a coloured school in Port Elizabeth called St. Peter's. My mother was mostly at home but when she did teach she taught at the coloured Congregational Mission school called Henry Kayser in Port Elizabeth, which was in fact the first school I attended but my schooling was very erratic for a number of reasons. One, I hated school and for some reason I suffered a good deal from nose bleeds and I could make my nose bleed by punching it or whatever. So periodically I had an excuse for not going to school because I had this nose bleed. And then one of the teachers died and my mother developed this myth that I was emotionally attached to this teacher so that after her death I didn't want to go to school any more. Of course, I went along with this story. So I in fact did not start proper schooling until I was eleven years old—1935 at a Catholic Missionary school. By this time both my parents had become Catholics. My father had become a Catholic under the influence of a priest in Salisbury. He came back to South Africa and told my mother from now on we're all Catholics and the children will have to be re-baptized and so I was baptized for a second time in Port Elizabeth in the cathedral or pro-cathedral there called St. Augustine's. And as I say I did not go to school until '35 a little mission called St. Theresa's and by this time of course I was in A B C or whatever it's called—Sub-A, first year, but I was eleven years old and I was older than everybody else in the class. I hadn't learnt to write the alphabet. I had almost no reading skills so I was tremendously handicapped. I couldn't do the work in class. So I would bribe the girls in the class by giving them my lunch and they would do my writing for me but of course, in the meantime I was going hungry because I had no lunch. But at some point I realised that I was going to have to start eating. The tendency is if you're catching up you tend to over-compensate. So in fact I then passed most of the people in those classes and went through a series of promotions which of course had its own disadvantage because I was being promoted upwards but into classes again where the students were way ahead of me. Again I think I compensated for it by catching up fairly rapidly and I think that it was actually an advantage to be disadvantaged. What it meant was that by the time I had reached the last year of junior school, standard 6, as we called it then, I was coming first in class without even trying and wasn't really very conscious of the fact that I was coming first. It didn't make me arrogant or conceited. I almost took it for granted. 'If it happens good', but it wasn't something you strove for. It's interesting because as a consequence of it, I then won a scholarship at high school. My mother would not

have been able to afford to keep me at school—it was the days of school fees. But I won the scholarship in standard 8 which paid for me to go to standard 9 and 10. And then in standard 10, senior year, I won a scholarship which took me to Fort Hare University and which covered my cost there—£120 per year for three years, I believe.

JVW: Dennis, before we continue with that could I ask you what your parents taught at school and was there a lot of literature in your house?

DB: Well, as far as I'm aware both of them simply taught everything. In those days in the mission school you taught arithmetic and reading and history—there was what was called nature study and some kind of physical education exercises-gym. So you really had to be a jack of all trades but of course at different levels. My mother would have taught at a fairly low level maybe standard 2 or 3. My father was teaching at a higher level probably 5 or 6. My mother was educated at a missionary college run by Americans in Hankey of all places. My father would have possibly been educated at Zonneblom College in Cape Town but he then began degree studies by correspondence. There was something called the S.A.C.C. in South Africa—a correspondence college where you got your lessons through the mail and you could get a degree that way. So he took courses in French. He spoke French fairly fluently and possibly German and things like Physics and Chemistry... He did not complete a degree but was somewhat more advanced than most teachers at that level.

To the second part of your question—literature. Yes, this is very interesting and I have not explored it in the past. I'm just going to pick up on 3 or 4 points. My mother would read to us at night but among the things she read was 'Tales from Shakespeare' by Charles Lamb so we were being exposed to 'The Tempest', 'The Merchant of Venice', 'A Comedy of Errors', 'Julius Caesar', and more importantly she had studied those works at the teacher training college and had memorized passages. So she could not only communicate the narrative but even the language and she could recite the 'quality and mercies is not strained it droppeth like the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath'—or from 'As You Like It', 'Sweet are the uses of adversity which like the toad ugly and venomous yet wears a precious jewel on his head'—and she had all that kind of exposure to literature.

Interesting though, a lot of it I was exposed to because she would wash the dishes at night and I would dry the dishes and so we had developed a kind of companionship where we shared this kind of literary interest. My father was actually studying for his degree by correspondence, so he would be reciting poetry and Shakespeare for quite a different reason 'cos it was not so much that he had taught it and loved it but that he was studying. But through him I began to recite Browning

and Tennyson, Blake because he was reciting these people. Tennyson's 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington', Blake's 'Piping down the valley's wild, piping songs of pleasant glee'. A whole range of things.

JVW: Did you start writing at high school?

DB: Not to my knowledge .... Oh yes, half true because I think the very first poem I ever wrote in my whole life was written when I was in high school. It was really just 4 lines about the moon rising above a lake which I had seen and I had tried to capture on paper. I was also writing in Afrikaans and one of my earliest love lyrics was written in Afrikaans.

JVW: Now why would that be?

DB: Well I was comfortable in both English and Afrikaans as languages.

JVW: Did your parents speak Afrikaans?

DB: Yes, but not as much as they spoke English. But I grew up in a community in Port Elizabeth where I would say the use of English and Afrikaans was about 50/50. It then becomes much more English later and an element of Xhosa comes into it, because I moved into a community which was not yet segregated, which had not yet had the impact of the Group Areas Act which only came from 1950-55, post 48 of course. So I grew up in a society which spoke English and Afrikaans, which were very widely used and almost equally used.

JVW: Were you exposed to Afrikaans poetry at that stage?

DB: Yes and no. I was taught by Irish nuns who knew no Afrikaans. So you started with a massive handicap. But when I got to high school for the first time I wrote an exam in Afrikaans. It came back and I got naught out of a hundred. By the second exam I got 22 out of 100 but I was still in deep trouble and I decided to teach myself Afrikaans. And the way I taught myself Afrikaans was by reading Afrikaans poetry. I started reading Malherbe, van der Heever, Langenhoven and people like that—mainly to acquire the vocabulary but in the process of acquiring the vocabulary I also acquired the imagery.

JVW: Were you aware at that stage about all the racial politics in their work?

DB: No, but I was aware of it of course in my society. This was a segregated society where Africans were kept out on the one hand and whites excluded themselves deliberately on the other hand. So you were in this middle pocket where you had vague prejudices but they were not defined. You were also vaguely conscious that you were assumed to be inferior but it didn't really penetrate. I think it was much later when I went into a CNA-bookstore to buy *The Economist* and a woman said to me 'Tell your master that it hasn't arrived' that I really understood what other people's mindset was about me—the assumption that I was just a messenger boy who was sent to buy the master's *Economist* for him or to collect it. But I began in a sheltered community where I was not exposed to the harshness of racism. It's only when I left that community that I become exposed to it.

JVW: What happened to those Afrikaans poems that you wrote, or did you only write one?

DB: There may have been more but I have lost them all. I didn't trouble to preserve them.

JVW: Somewhere I read that Peter Abrahams started off writing Afrikaans but I don't know if that's true, maybe you do?

DB: I believe so and I believe there is some work ... of course his poetry has been published much later—'Mine Boy' and those things. The prose came out much earlier. There is an autobiographical work of Peter Abrahams where it says he wrote in Afrikaans, with some of his writings in Afrikaans.

JVW: We left earlier at the universities so...

DB: Well, I haven't got to that yet, I guess but we'll have to jump to it now. My mother decided I would have to go and work in a factory like all teenage coloured boys—there was really no future once you'd finished high school. Fortunately two things happened—one was a Catholic priest offered to lend her the money to send me to Fort Hare. But in the meantime it was discovered that I had come first in the Eastern Cape at high school level and therefore qualified for a university scholarship at any university. But I had already at that time committed myself to Fort Hare—in my view a very fortunate choice. I think if I had gone anywhere else I would have been less exposed to African culture and African intellectuals so that I could learn the proper respect for them. I worked with people like Seretse Khama, people from Kenya, people from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ghana. We were getting intellectual quality

from the whole of the continent, not just South Africa.

JVW: Is that the same time as Mandela?

DB: No Mandela was before me but did not complete the course. He completed his law degree by articles in Jo'burg and then opened the law firm with Oliver Tambo but did not complete a law degree at Fort Hare. So, when I got to Fort Hare, it was on the basis of the scholarship and as I say I elected to major in Hollands and English. I decided to do a double major and I announced that I was getting a double distinction at this time.

JVW: Did you write at university or when did you start to write seriously?

DB Well as I say, at high school I wrote some verse—English and Afrikaans. I don't think I wrote again until I got to Fort Hare and I then wrote for a student publication called the *Fort Harian* so you may even want to go look at some of my poetry there. I was, I believe, on the editorial board. Some of it under a *nom de plume* or I would just use initials.

JVW: Which *nom de plume?*

DB: Can't remember but sometimes I would write D.A.B.—just my initials. So at Fort Hare, I also became part of the Editorial Board of the *Fort Harian* and I wrote in both prose and poetry. Later I stopped writing prose—I just discovered I was no good at it. I gave up on it. But I continued the poetry. But then I wrote for a considerable period until I think I became involved in political activism and then it seemed to me that poetry was irrelevant. So I abandoned poetry.

JVW: What year was this?

DB: I think I stopped writing poetry about 1950 and did not resume again until 1960. I see a clear ten year period.

JVW: So why did you resume? What made you?

DB: Two things: One was a marvelous love affair but the other was that I was teaching Auden. Through Auden I discovered the ability to simultaneously make a public statement and a private statement and a deeply personal emotional statement and at the same time a major political statement. And I realised that you can make

poetry relevant, both through your political activity and your private life. This is where the 'Night song' poem is important because it is the poem where I first pull the two together.

JVW: Is that one of your earliest poems?

DB: Quite early, when I resume after this long break. I'd like to just finish it by saying that I was then invited to Edinburgh to an international poetry festival to read with Auden.

JVW: In what year was this?

DB: '69... after I had come out of Robben Island. The next international poetry festival I was invited to—around about the same time '69, '70—guess what? I was invited to Rotterdam and you know Rotterdam is a serious problem because my work is attended to and major poets are having their work neglected...But I read Edinburgh and Rotterdam about the same time.

JVW: Auden yes. There is an anecdote about Auden. Auden said something to you about poetry....

DB: Right. Auden's remark in an interview we did with the BBC. Well, two things—there was his comment on my poetry when I read it but then when we were on the interview, he said poetry changes nothing, poetry achieves nothing and I could say well I'm the living refutation because it was through your poetry that I became a poet all over again after I had abandoned it for ten years.

JVW: Dennis, you said you studied Hollands and English—those were your majors. Can you tell us more about the content?

DB: Well the Dutch, Hollands was only about one-third Afrikaans. I read Afrikaans poetry, Afrikaans novels and so on—particularly one which I think is much underrated called *Die Gerig*—do you know the *Gerig*? It's by J.R.L. Van Bruggen.

JVW: Jochem?

DB: Not Jochem. Quite striking novel about the Anglo-Boer War and the conflicts... *Die Gerig* was a segment of the syllabus. The major segment was Hollands and I read Joos van der Vondel and all the plays; I read Hooft—*Van Hooft tot Boutens*—I

read Willem Kloos and the whole range of Dutch poetry as opposed to Afrikaans poetry. We were of course doing Eugene Marais and people like that as well. A funny thing happened and it's an embarrassing story but I might as well tell it. I'm writing my final exam in Dutch. I think I was really very much out of touch with my work. But as I begin to write the exam, we got these exam pads and I'm writing in my name. The exam room was next to a toilet and I heard the toilet flush and for some reason I had been working on a notion of memory and the notion of erasure. And I began to write a poem in the exams about toilets and flushing and erasure and memory. I never got around to the exam. So I turned in the poem instead—but of course I flunked the exam. So that was a major and I'm now in my final year and so what I had to do was switch very abruptly and list psychology as my second major and pass that. So I got a degree on the basis of English and Psychology but I had initially listed it as English and Dutch.

JVW: Let's reflect a bit on the education situation in South Africa at the moment and the education that you had at Fort Hare.

DB: Well, I haven't given it enough thought to do justice to it. But you must remember that Fort Hare is really a product of the British legacy and worked very hard at imitating a British university—just as most South African universities unless they were Afrikaans. The English ones, whether it was Rhodes or U.C.T., even Wits. modeled itself on the British system. More seriously, most of our professors were retired English professors who were coming to Africa in a kind of philanthropic mood. This does not mean that they were bad teachers but it certainly gave them a certain arrogance—the kind of things that the metropolitans would always have about the colonial types. But my first English professor was a man called David Darlow, who was English.

JVW: Yes, a good poet.

DB: Fine poet and what is more he seemed to have a reasonably high regard for me for I didn't feel that I was being put down. I didn't have the sense of superiority and inferiority. And I remember him giving me, when I was completing in the last year, a gift of a copy of his poetry and autographing it for me. A little collection called *Shadows of the Amatola* and some little collection—a kind of post-Victorian, even Edwardian poetry. But... nice gesture. When he left, I was then in my final year, the new professor, Donald Steuart, was a former squadron leader of the R.A.F.—he had a strong military bias. But he was also an Oxford B. Litt. and therefore pretty competent and one of the compliments he paid me was when we came to Browning.

He said to me: 'Okay, take over the class'—this really meant that he was treating me as competent in that area—competent to do Browning for the class. So it was really quite a happy relationship, given of course always you remained aware of the parameters. We were working within a very British kind of framework in terms of the syllabus and even in terms of what they thought education was about. It was to prepare you for your place in society. Now this was not as bad as Verwoerd and Eiselen—the people who come afterwards and who insisted that your place in society is a subordinate place. But the imperial assumption is still that the colonial is not quite as good as the metropolitan and so you have to deal with that. But we started wrongly—I think with people like Chaucer—so you're at the wrong end of literature. You ended up with Browning and Tennyson in your last year so that was so-called 'Modern' and you didn't get near to say a Yeats or T.S. Eliot or anybody like that. After Browning and Tennyson there was nothing.

JVW: But you had quite a good education?

DB: I would say yes, given those limitations and I'm quite sure I should have worked much harder. I was very lazy. I cheated and I didn't attend classes.

JVW: And you didn't continue into your post-graduate?

DB: I received a distinction in English and so I assumed—in fact I was told—that if you got a distinction in English you would get a scholarship to go onto an M.A. or at least an Honours. So I tried that and then I was told that there was a clause somewhere that said if you were a Catholic, you did not qualify for it. I'm not sure how true it was but certainly this happened. I then kind of in half-hearted fashion pursued an Honours degree on my own but I flunked that because I really didn't work very hard at it. I wish I had. But I was also becoming much more involved in politics.

JVW: Dennis, you said you published some work in the *Fort Harian* and then you left poetry for a while. When did you start again and where did you publish these poems?

DB: I don't think I published and I'm not too clear about the dates but let's for convenience sake say I stopped round about 1950 and I began again round about 1960. When I begin again, I am not publishing in any journals. I'd sent a poem to a local newspaper—*E.P. Herald*—and they printed something of mine there which was not politically interesting but was as a result of a Henry Moore sculpture

exhibition in Port Elizabeth. Then, 1960 as I say, I had this marvelous love affair which I'm not sure I should talk about only because it would seriously compromise the other person. But I suddenly have this burst of poetry which fortunately comes at a time when I'm teaching Auden. Now it's possible that I would not have written any love poetry and I would not have written any political poetry but suddenly the two came together. And I think I should point to the kind of poems that Auden was writing at that time. One of them was a great love lyric: 'Lay your sleeping head my love human on my faceless arm, Time and fevers burn away individual beauty from thoughtful children and the grave proves the child ephemeral'. But then he goes on to talk about how this love affair is related to what happens in the world and he goes on: 'In my arms 'til break of day, let the living creature lie, Mortal, guilty, but to me the entirely beautiful'. He wrote a marvelous poem when the war broke out, September '39—The declaration of war and he is walking the streets of New York, Broadway and he sees a car, empty car, no driver in it. But the windscreen wiper is moving frantically. It's just swinging up and down—no one in the car. The poem goes on to say: This is the end of the old regime. He uses this kind of breakdown of society, and then he repudiates all this great political poetry. He takes it out of the *Collected Works of W.H. Auden*—quite surprising. Then we could return to that too, but as I say, here I am having a wonderful love affair, I'm politically active, I'm working with Mandela, I'm working with Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, and the ANC and PAC have been banned. We were working in the underground and literally running the resistance in the Eastern Cape with Govan Mbeki and two of us. Someone was subsequently expelled from the ANC called Themba Kgotla—a great activist who got out of line politically. This woman who was working with me and she was white and she worked with me in the resistance and exposed herself to arrest every night in the ghetto, in the slums. So, part of all of this is kind of heightened tension, heightened emotional experience and I was going out at night with an aerosol can painting slogans on the front of the Dutch Reformed Churches. Sunday morning, people go to church and see an ANC slogan on the front of the church. But of course if you were caught, this was sabotage—you could have been hanged for it in those days. So, the poetry then comes out of this combination of political activism and a love affair of great intensity under conditions of great danger. Then she is deported after having to choose between either prison or deportation. Some of my poetry then deals with the aftermath of that experience. After that again there is a long break in which I stopped writing.

JVW: Mention some of your poems about her.

DB: Well I must say that after her I had a series of other affairs so the poems deal

with that as well. But if I were to choose one poem that particularly catches the experience that we had together, I would choose something like—I can't even remember the lines myself—'But kneeling before you for an instant...'

JVW: Yes, I've seen that one.

DB: You probably know that one where I talk about loving surrounded by bayonets—the sense of knives around you or making love on this back stairs of her apartment building in the wind under the stars. So you have that kind of thing—and we can get into it when we read the poems themselves. Right now I am just trying to catch the quality of the experience.

JVW: Yesterday you said you published some poems in *Drum* and maybe in *New Coin*.

DB: One I wrote in a copy of *New Coin* for an Afrikaner called Daantjie Oosthuizen who was then editing *New Coin* at Rhodes. So I'm not sure if the poem was actually published in *New Coin* but when I gave it a title I said 'This is for Daantjie Oosthuizen of *New Coin*'—something to that effect. I was really not trying to publish. So what it meant was I gave away poems and sometimes other people could publish them. In the case of the one on Henry Moore, that one I sent to *Eastern Province Herald*—others were published in a kind of haphazard way. I should add that for *Drum* I wrote quite a long review of a play that was touring South Africa which had an Indian caste—'The King of the Dark Chamber'—and was touring the whole country. And then I wrote things about sport—sport and racism—because I was always having this almost triple identity that I was poet, I was sports organiser and I was also activist at the same time.

JVW: You didn't say anything about *Drum*.

DB: I'm not sure there was poetry in *Drum*. It was more like reviews.

JVW: And do you remember the people you gave your poems to? I think Ingrid Jonker did the same—always giving away her poems so there is a lot of unpublished poetry.

DB: I would give it to whoever happened to be nearby. Later, with people like Arthur Nortje, I would give it to them for critical comment and you must remember Nortje died in 1970 but our association was in the 60's at the time just before I was

banned from teaching. He was a student in the year that I was banned from teaching. He was in my matric class.

JVW: And John Bruin? When did he come into existence?

DB: John Bruin only comes into existence when I am in prison, and after that in exile. While I was in South Africa I wrote numerous letters and articles under a pen-name. The trouble is that if I saw something like white pages, I would just call myself Mr. W. Page. I would use whatever was available. So, it's difficult now to identify my work because of the *nom de plume*. Some of it appeared in papers like *Contrast*, which was edited by Patrick Duncan, some of it appeared in a journal called *Forum* which was to be published out of Johannesburg and had been the organ of the Springbok legion—people in the army—and *Golden City Post*.

JVW: *Fighting Talk ?*

DB: *Fighting Talk.* I'm glad you mentioned that because in fact that's where most of my literary work was done, but also some of my political work. I have, for instance, a long sequence of poetry called *Tourist Guide* which has never been published in book form but it does appear in *Fighting Talk*. In a newspaper called I think *The Guardian* at that time although it might have been *New Age* when Luthuli got his Nobel Award, I wrote a poem for him. And of course years later when he was found dead—allegedly under a train or killed by a train—I wrote a long sequence that I began in Kitwe. I was there at the time and then continued it elsewhere—possibly Nairobi and Amsterdam. But when you ask me these questions, I am intrigued at how, in fact, there is really no systematic pattern in my writing. It seems to have been random and it seemed to have been sparked by circumstances; certainly a love affair would help one to write poetry, certainly Sharpeville and the killings at Soweto in '76.

JVW: Now referring to Sharpeville, there is an allusion to Sharpeville in one of the poems but I don't find any poems using Sharpeville as the main topic.

DB: You're right. In fact the reference to Sharpeville is a very oblique one and it's almost a pun because I talk of being 'sharpevilled'—I make it into a verb, yes, and I'm talking about the notion of retribution. We will be 'sharpevilled' into that. The same poem by the way uses the word 'nemesis' and I'm deliberately using it as an echo for the word *umkonto we sizwe*—the spear of the nation. So Sharpeville is sharpened, and there is the notion of the spear. There is a series of political

statements underlying what is said on the surface. And a later poem on Sharpville written in the US.

JVW: Explain the idea of nemesis.

DB: Nemesis of course is essentially retribution—when justice eventually catches up with you. It certainly comes from the Greek but I don't think there is a personality called a nemesis. The Greek's talk of the furies. These are these winged, kind of bird-like figures—Harpies who come and take revenge and they can be described as the action of nemesis whereas the furies in fact represent nemesis.

JVW: Dennis, so you started writing poetry again because of this great love affair and the discovery of Auden, who else did you read? Did you read fervently or did you rediscover literature and what was your exact involvement with literature then?

DB: Well, you'll have to remember I'm an English teacher at a high school ....

JVW: Tell us more about what you read as well.

DB: And I'm starting at Paterson High School in Port Elizabeth—where I had matriculated. I had done junior certificate, I had done higher, senior certificate, I'd won a scholarship. Now I returned to the same school as a teacher and I teach English and I become the senior English teacher—which means I teach the matrics—high school senior certificate. Some junior certificates but mainly high school. What does this mean? It means you teach Chaucer and Herrick and Shakespeare and all the way through to Pope, Dryden. You end up with some contemporary poetry, I'm glad to say, although I had not been taught this myself I was now being a teacher of it—teaching Auden, teaching Spender, people like Louis MacNeice, Alan Rooke and in between of course there's this big chunk of John Donne and Crashaw and the meta-physical poets for whom I developed now a major enthusiasm with the disadvantage that it had not been taught at university–so I'm really getting to the metaphysicals on my own but I find them so much akin to my own temperament. This combination of intellectualism with sensuality especially in Donne-the tension between the two and this delight in complexity for its own sake which is quite unlike Shakespeare–where complexity is functional, it is part of something else. But the John Donnes, the Crashaws, the Carews—they really enjoyed constructing these very complex poems which was why Samuel Johnson disliked them and called them the 'Metaphysicals'. These people yoked unlikely ideas together. But I like that combination.

JVW: Did you also refer, in a similar vein, to Ezra Pound the other day?

DB: Indeed, yes because I find Pound later having that kind of intellectual richness even when you disagree with some of his ideas. So you're quite right that for me, Donne becomes a very important influence on my own poetic approach—poetic manner—I'm trying to do what Donne did just as I'm trying to do what Auden did. Well I'm not of course imitating them, I'm just letting those models help me to work out my own answer. So certainly, but not only, I think did I enjoy Donne or say Hopkins later, but I could communicate this enthusiasm to students so that they began to write like Donne or Hopkins and of course Nortje is the best example of that.

JVW: Just before we get on to Nortje, Donne is your great literary master, Auden and Donne possibly some others. But what about Marx—did you discover Marx in those days?

DB: I actually discover it at high school because some of my teachers were engaged in a debate and the debate was whether you collaborated with the apartheid government and you got all the perks and the promotions, and there were those who said we don't collaborate. So among students as well as among teachers there was a clear division. I think I was fortunate that I fell on the radical side. That's sometimes mere accident, who happens to influence you. But the teachers whom I respected were themselves Marxist or at the very least leftist and some of them were Trotskyist. In fact, that was a further division between the ANC which took a Stalinist position and those who took the Trotskyist position. And I ended up being the editor of a journal of the teacher organisation which is called the T.L.S.A.—Teachers' League of South Africa. I revived a journal they'd had before which was called *Educational News* but I shortened it to *E.N.* and made it more jazzy and in fact I wrote articles about the predicament of people in South Africa and what I call the 'deepening twilight of apartheid'—the lights of freedom were going out all over the country.

JVW: Were you part of the Unity movement?

DB: Teachers' League was part of the unity movement and something called anti-CAD—Anti-Coloured Affairs Department plus the AAC, All African Convention, which put me in opposition to the ANC and so I engaged in many debates with Govan Mbeki and these people. But Sharpeville 1960 becomes the kind of pivotal event and I switch from the Anti-CAD unity movement people and become an

activist working with the ANC without being able to join the ANC. It was important to remember at that time only Africans could join the ANC—the constitution said Whites had to join what was called the Congress of Democrats and Indians had to join the South African Indian Congress. For the Coloureds there was the Coloured People's Congress of which I was an official for Port Elizabeth.

JVW: So you had apartheid in the ANC?

DB: Oh yes and Coloureds had to join the South African People's Congress and only Africans could join the ANC—African National Congress. They only changed that constitution in exile in the late 60's but prior to that non-Africans could not join the ANC. So there I was working. Sisulu flies down to Port Elizabeth to ask me to organize the Coloured resistance. Mandela stays in my house when he's hiding from the cops and goes underground but I could not join the ANC. But I worked with them of course very, very actively and in fact when I went into the shower on Robben Island for the first time Walter Sisulu was under the shower and he called me by my underground name—this was the code name that I had.

JVW: What was your underground name?

DB: Leave that out for the time being—a few people know it. In fact, Ruth First was interrogated about it—almost tortured when she spent 117 days and she said to them: 'Oh, that guy. He's left the country. You're wasting your time looking for him', and the Special Branch police believed it but I was still in South Africa at the time.

JVW: So you knew Ruth First?

DB: Oh, yes. I worked with her of course because she was editor of *Fighting Talk* and I was writing for *Fighting Talk*. But more interestingly, I was writing poetry for her. I'm not going to go into the details of that but I will read one of the poems where I talk about the 'beauty of my land peers warily from a palisade of trees.

JVW: What other details are there? She had an interesting literature as well.

DB: Oh yes, enormous. One of the important things that people don't know about her I think is that she was very courageous in her resistance to a kind of Stalinist hard line in the Communist Party so that even while Joe Slovo, you know was toeing this Stalinist line and defending the Communist marching of the armies into Prague and into Budapest and so on, she was as openly critical of it as was I. So we were

actually allies against Joe Slovo and other people in the party.

JVW: Let's go back to Arthur Nortje and some of the scholars who were great achievers.

DB: You'll have to remember, that he was an illegitimate child—what in the townships was called an 'optel kind'. And I met him first at high school. He was very bright and then I had organized a poetry competition and a short story competition for the whole English class—matric or senior certificate. And a young man called David Roman won—wrote an excellent short story and got the prize. I persuaded the bookseller in Port Elizabeth to donate the prizes and then here I get this astonishing poem called something like 'Thumbing like a lift'. And it's a young man trying to get a ride and writing about the predicament as he walks on the hot tar and the sun beating down on him. This was Arthur Nortje. So obviously the poetic talent was there. Immediately I recognised it. But then I encouraged him of course and gave him the Hopkins, two volume Hopkins—a dissertation by W.H. Gardener, from Natal—and that was a tremendous influence on him, also liberated him I think as a poet. So there is some imitation of Hopkins but there is never the loss of his own voice and so I think in my own estimate that he is the finest poet South Africa has ever produced. I'm very anxious that people should revalue him and I'm not knocking other poets—I just think there is a tremendous skill and a very conscious craftsmanship at work there.

JVW: Was there a type of dialogue between your own poetry and his at that time?

DB: Yes, I always remember him saying to me: 'The trouble is you have no stamina', because I like short lyrics and he liked the extended lyrics. He would construct a lyric so that there would be several facets. I'm not opposed to that but I think if you can say it in 10 lines then you shouldn't say it in a hundred and so we had differences there. I would correct him line by line—not so much correct him but comment on him line by line and find out what he was trying to do. And he did the same thing with my work so I was fortunate really to have an intelligent student who could say to me—this line doesn't work.

JVW: What was his home language? Was it Afrikaans or English?

DB: He spoke both English and Afrikaans. But he came out of an Afrikaans background. Most of his friends called him Attie, which is short for Arthur and of course he'd come from Oudsthoorn as far as I know.

JVW: He didn't write in Afrikaans?

DB: He may have but I never saw any of it. He was also a very talented sportsman—a fine rugby player, a fine cricket player. So he had so many multiple facets to his personality, poetry was just one. Because of the kind of regular contact that we had some people have tried to suggest that it might have been homosexual, which doesn't bother me in the least despite its inaccuracy. We were intellectually very much in tune with each other. That was all there was to it. It's possible that he may have had other homosexual affairs—he was probably bisexual—from the text of his work but that didn't interest me. But as you know, he goes through this phase of writing in Port Elizabeth, then he wins a scholarship to Western Cape. Gets a degree there then gets a further scholarship which takes him to Oxford and then he dies at Oxford. My own hunch is he certainly took an overdose. It's not clear whether it was deliberate or accidental and I think it's still an open question. But I know because he came to my wife—I was, I think, in Algiers at the time at the Poetry Festival there—came to her in desperation and asked her to get in touch with me 'cos he thought I could help him with the British authorities who were demanding that if he wanted to renew his South African passport, he would have to come back to South Africa to do a renewal and he was genuinely scared he would be arrested when he came back. So I think that was certainly one pressure on him—perhaps the major pressure because he was very emotional—to a far greater extent than I was. He would react to a threat just as he would react to praise in a much more exuberant way but his fears were real and his poetry about Robben Island is better than some of the people who were on Robben Island. He had the capacity of empathy, of thinking himself into that situation in an incredibly exact way. But then he has of course a long poem about me where he talks about me being kicked in the stomach on Robben island and the stitches of a bullet injury being opened.

JVW: Dennis, you must have been one of the first black poets to write in English apart from H.I.E. Dhlomo and Vilakazi?

DB: Perhaps.

JVW: Apart from the few poems that appeared in journals ....

DB: You're right in that sense. There was a young man, an Indian in Port Elizabeth whose name was Cooper—I'm not sure what the first name was—who self-published some of his works, short stories and poetry. It would be nice if we could find it. But it's great in the sense that really at the time that I started poetry, there was pretty much nobody else writing.

JVW: What was his name?

DB: I think Coopersamy or ... but they called him Cooper.

JVW: There was also a journal called *Zonk*. What was that about?

DB: *Zonk* was a kind of *Drum* but a little more jazzy and the emphasis was more on entertainment and murder and sex and rape and scandals. But *Drum* as you know was a little more substantial. They tried to carry prose and fiction...

JVW: But there was some interesting literature in *Zonk*?

DB: Oh yes, *Zonk* was quite fun. It seems to me things like *Bona* now are similar to what *Zonk* was. Going back to Nortje after his death, I published his manuscript as 'Dead Roots' but Heinemann asked me to keep my name off the publication because I was banned and it could not be sold in South Africa if my name was attached. Frankly, it was badly done—badly edited.

JVW: What do you mean by 'edited'? Did you change poems?

DB: No. There were several versions of some poems and I think I could have spent much more time selecting or arriving at the final version or the correct version. A lot of the poems were in manuscript and I sometimes had to actually guess whether the word was 'have' or 'hand'—it was really difficult. So there are some textual errors for which I must take the blame. I was anxious that Nortje's work should not be forgotten. And it seemed to me—I still think—that he is a major South African poet, perhaps the best poet to come out of Africa, and that's a very high praise of course. But I admit that there are textual errors for which I must take the blame and my defense is that I did it because it was done in great haste. I was doing a hundred other things at the same time but I still wanted it to come out and to be available. And I'm glad to say that, as far as I know, the print edition was exhausted, it's now out of print. You can find it in rare libraries, and I think they have a copy of 'Dead Roots' at Rhodes. I was successful in persuading people like Guy Butler that Nortje deserved more exposure and so the *New Coin* people at Rhodes did publish a collection to which I contributed and again my name had to be kept out. It was called 'Lonely Against the Light'—a very fine little collection and then of course this year when I was down at the festival I gave a talk on Nortje where for the first time I addressed the allegation that I was to blame for his suicide because I had pressured him into political activism when he did not want to be politically active. I think it's

nonsense, this claim, and I think there is so much political material in Nortje's work that that in itself contradicts the notion that Nortje did not want to be politically engaged. He had a marvelous poem which is called 'Apartheid' where he writes about being in a car. He is given a lift by a white person and he talks about the miracle that because two people are in the same car, however much the law might try to keep them apart, they share the same air, because they breathe the same air and he has poems about the Coloureds who were part of the resistance like 'Witbooi'. He talks about 'Witbooi' and people in the interior who resisted British governance and he talks about storming the barricades and people who have to chronicle the happening of the struggle. There is so much politics in his work in a non-sloganizing way that for anybody to say that he was opposed to politics and I tried to force him into politics is nonsense. So I never seriously addressed this but this year in Grahamstown I said 'Let me at least once respond to this rumour'.

JVW: Now to another very interesting author—Bessie Head who only came to the fore in the '70's, maybe late '60's. When did you first come across her work?

DB: I knew her husband Harold Head who became a journalist in Port Elizabeth at the *Evening Post*. But when I got to know Bessie as a person, she actually decided to flee South Africa and go to Botswana and she came through Port Elizabeth and found shelter at my place with her little boy and she left her husband in Cape Town. And the story, as in many of Bessie's stories, is very convoluted. The versions she gave me was that she feared arrest because of her involvement with the PAC—that may be true. Certainly her ex-husband Harold Head who is still living now in Toronto was involved with the PAC. Others say that a friend of hers was in danger. Anyway she crosses the border, gets to Botswana, but stays in Port Elizabeth for a while at my place and among other things there's this curious episode where we go for a drink in the pub and I buy her a drink in the Alabama, this little Coloured hotel, and they have these formica plastic table tops and she accidentally gesticulates and knocks over her beer and it spreads all over the table and I say, 'Don't worry I'll buy you another', and she insists on lapping it up with her tongue. This was one of those odd things which was very Bessie. But when I am at Wits, studying Law, she sends me her manuscripts and I write back very encouragingly and she reports this in her letters. But it turns out that pretty much all the established writers in Cape Town had told her 'You're wasting your time, you have no talent. Eventually she found me and then subsequently someone like Randolph Vigne, a few people who encouraged her. I'm very pleased that there is clear evidence in her letters that I helped her by giving her confidence at least and telling her, 'Keep mining this stuff. There is a real ore here which you have to dig for but it's there'. I then meet her, once or twice, but

most importantly in Berlin at this festival called Horizonte?, where we have this peculiar episode where she alleges that she was insulted by Lewis Nkosi, which is quite possible because Nkosi insults people without even knowing he's insulted them, especially women. But she walks off a TV-set in the middle of a panel discussion and demands her ticket and leaves the country. Shortly after that, she dies of a heart attack back in Botswana. But we got on quite well. And then after that I met Lewis in Jo'burg and I said to him 'What did you say to Bessie?'. He says, 'I don't know, I don't know what I did or what I said', which in a sense, one has to believe of Lewis. She was very talented and they now have a Bessie Head Museum in Gaberone and her manuscripts are being collected.

JVW: What about your relationship with publishers, how was the first book published, what was involved in the run-up to it and then your subsequent books?

DB: Well it's all very odd and very disorganised but a couple of things happened. An essay appeared in *Fighting Talk* by Ezekiel Mphahlele announcing a poetry competition for Blacks only. I wrote an essay in response to that saying, 'Nonsense, a poet is a poet. His colour doesn't matter'. So we get into this debate about it and as a result of it I make a very odd decision. I decide to enter the poetry competition, win the prize and then return the prize. This happens. I actually win the prize—it's called the Mbari Poetry Competition. It's run by Zeke Mphahlele and people like Spender and Kristol, and they were called the 'Encounter' group in Europe. They were funded by the CIA. Some of them knew it, some of them didn't. Auden didn't know it. He claims that Spender knew it but I don't know. Certainly there was a very consistent effort post-war by the CIA to buy intellectuals in Europe—very concerted. They set up a thing called the Congress for Cultural Freedom and Zeke heads it and Africans only are allowed to enter. So I enter and I win a prize and I turn back my cheque. I say I don't want the money because I don't approve of poetry competitions run on a racial basis. So, here we go and guess who wins third prize? Arthur Nortje—but of course he keeps his prize. I return mine and of course he was entitled to do what he saw fit. I wasn't saying because I do something, you must do it. He kept his prize, I mailed my cheque back. Subsequently of course, when I learnt that this was run by the CIA, I felt very good but I can't say that I'd rejected it on the grounds of the CIA. I had rejected it because I said I don't accept racial categories in poetry. And people can agree or disagree. So after that Mbari Press writes to me and says you won the prize, we congratulate you. Do you have any more poems? I said yes, but I'm having an affair with a woman in Jo'burg and I say to her you choose what you like and send it to Mbari and I'm glad to say, she must have made a good selection because it's then published and it becomes 'Sirens, Knuckles, Boots'. But

it's published more by accident so I'm not really good at answering your question.

JVW: The majority of the poems are love poems in this book?

DB: About relations, political and love—we have a combination.

JVW: Was that ever banned at that time?

DB: I don't think it was even banned, because it never came into the country as I was already a banned person. On Robben Island, they bring me a copy of the book and they say, 'Did you publish this book?'. And I say, 'Yes'. And they say, 'But you knew it was against the law?' And I say, 'Yes'. 'You're a banned person, you can't publish which means a further 5 years in jail'. And I say 'I guess so', and they draw up a charge sheet. But on the charge sheet they have to give a date when I mailed the manuscript out so they come to me and ask me for it and I say: 'Look, if I knew the date I would give it to you but I simply don't know the date. I can't remember when I mailed this manuscript to Nigeria and in fact I may have not mailed it. The woman may have mailed it'. Interestingly the charge collapses simply because they could not supply a date on the charge sheet on when I had committed the crime so at least I didn't have to spend an extra 5 years. But you can see how my relations were very casual and just to take it a step further, when I'm published in London subsequently, *Letters to Martha* it's not at my decision again. It's first published in a little journal called *Christian Action* and then Heinemann approaches *Christian Action* and says they would like to publish these poems, are there more? And John Collins with whom I worked in St. Paul's was connected both to *Christian Action* and Heinemann. So I give them *Letters to Martha* and—just to answer your question a second time—Martha is my brother's wife and when my brother goes into Robben Island after I came out, I then send the poems to Martha to describe the experience of being on Robben Island but I have to call them 'Letters' because I'm banned from writing poetry so by calling them 'Letters' the poems became legal. But of course I couldn't write them to my wife because we were living in the same house. It had to be for someone outside. Martha, my brother's wife was from Cape Town—he died of cancer in London after escaping from South Africa. That was the 'Martha' that was then published by Heinemann, really on their initiative. And then they published my next volumes, *Simple Lust* and *Stubborn Hope*, and in between comes 'John Bruin' which happens in a very curious way. I'm having a beer with Lindfors in a pub at St. Paul's Cathedral and we talk about my being banned. And he says, 'Well, supposing your poetry was sent to South Africa under a pseudonym, what could they do?'. And I said, 'Let's try it'. So we get together and put together a small collection

called *Thoughts Abroad* and I choose the pen-name 'John Bruin' because I want to be Coloured so that those who are interested will know it's a 'bruinmens'. But you have to be wise enough to know that and I would call it 'troubadour press' and again the troubadour is a kind of a clue. So it's published and was sold in South Africa and reviewed by Nadine Gordimer—a very favourable review. But then Heinemann tells the media in South Africa that John Bruin is really Dennis Brutus. So it gets to South Africa and then the book becomes illegal.

JVW: Was Heinemann angry at you for publishing it on your own?

DB: Not to my knowledge because it was a very small publication. It was not competing with anything. So that was 'John Bruin'. Then Heinemann publishes first *Simple Lust* and then *Stubborn Hope*. But in the meantime the University of Texas agrees to publish two of my other collections. One is *Poems from Algiers* and the poems I wrote when I was in China, *China Poems*.

JVW: These are your global poems?

DB: I'm expanding at that stage. And of course with my students when I was visiting Prof. Texas we put together another collection called *Strains* which was edited by two students—Chip Dameron and Wayne Kamin. So all these came out and then together with Lindfors, and I put together what was called *Voices from South Africa* and another anthology called *Seven South African Poets*.

JVW: That was Cosmo Pieterse?

DB: That's right. Cosmo edited for Heinemann *Seven South African Poets*. The one I did was called *South African Voices* and comes out of the University of Texas. But in all cases I have not had to fight with publishers except lately. I was dissatisfied with what happened at Three Continents Press, publishers of the critical perspectives. But in the case of *Simple Lust* there was a British edition by Heinemann plus an American edition which came from Farrar Strauss and Giroux who had a subsidiary called Hill and Wang who published *Simple Lust*—and, I think, *Stubborn Hope*.

JVW: What was the reception of these books like? How many were sold?

DB: Recently I got a figure; it said about 16 000 of at least one of them—*Simple Lust*—had been published. The figures are—some of them—are in the critical

perspectives. They've checked with Heinemann and asked them to show them the returns. But in most cases I think the publishers did not work very hard at getting exposure or getting it reviewed and if you don't get that you don't have an audience. *Simple Lust* is still prescribed as a textbook in the United States in African Studies courses. So there is a steady purchase. I got a cheque recently for £699 from Heinemann which is really quite substantial. Seven hundred pounds for poetry is pretty good. So it means that you're getting about 2 pennies on every copy. But I think it's being selling steadily. Of course I haven't worked at promoting it because I think that would be egotistical.

JVW: Did you write any poetry in prison?

DB: Yes, but it was all discovered. It was on toilet paper.

JVW: What happened to it?

DB: Destroyed, so what I did was to recreate some of that, particularly poems about say sodomy and violence. So there are recreations where the originals were confiscated.

JVW: Which poems are those?

DB: Well, there's a set called 'Postscripts'.

JVW: Oh yes, I know.

DB: Which are part of the *Letters to Martha* and then you have an earlier sequence and then in *Stubborn Hope* you have a sequence called *Robben Island Sequence* which deals with the rocks, and slipping on the rocks and the beatings and all that. So, the poetry about Robben Island appears in different places but none of it survived prison. What was found there was confiscated—with the exception of one which is very curious. I met Stanley Makoba recently in Parliament building in Cape Town and he was on Robben Island with me and in fact, he claims that I was an influence that turned him from crime to religion. He is now a bishop and head of the PAC. My job was cleaning the floors, polishing and that meant I passed everybody's cell. And these guys were in single cells. And he says I asked him what was he reading? And he said: 'Nothing', because even the Bible had been taken from us—not allowed to read it. But when I came past his cell again, I slipped him a book—there's a remarkable book by G.K. Chesterton called *The Everlasting Man* and I

think that's the book I gave him. But it turned him around completely. He became deeply religious in solitary because of this book. And in fact he recently gave me a copy of his autobiography with an inscription in it talking about the spiritual experience of Robben Island.

JVW: What about the poem that survived?

DB: The one, yes. He reminded me of a poem that I had totally forgotten and so he said to me it's something about the beads of rain, of barbed wire and it resembles the beads of a rosary, and I may have used that image in a poem which he remembers but I don't remember the poem anymore. But I'm told it survived somewhere.

JVW: Were you ever aware of Mandelstam?

Dennis: Mandelstam I knew later— I didn't know him at that time but I knew people like Lorca, Pablo Neruda, people I had read before I went to prison. And Achmatova—interestingly Ruth First sent me a manuscript of her poems so there was some exposure there.

JVW: Before we read some of the poems and discuss them I would like to know about your feelings about the current South African literary scene.

DB: It's an area that I am particularly interested in and I've been talking about it in public in Grahamstown and Johannesburg and elsewhere, and I'll be talking about it next year in Grahamstown at the festival. Two curious things: One, poems, poets, writers who are part of a marvelous, radical tradition in opposition to oppression and for some of them it was racial, for others it was economic and for others it was political and so on. But you had these wonderful, courageous voices speaking out. The Kgositsiles', the Don Matteras, the James Matthews' and of course the Nadine Gordimers and subsequently the André Brinks, Breyten Breytenbachs and so on—great, courageous writing—critical of injustice in its various forms. Here's the fascinating thing—point two, suddenly those voices have disappeared. Although there's so much inequity and injustice and poverty and hardship and cruelty in South Africa now, those voices are silent. They're not only silent but they have circulated a letter saying there is no need for radical voices. This is so remarkable—a letter is published with 19 signatures, 19 writers who were part of that radical tradition. They meet, they talk about the necessity to revive something called COSAW—Congress of South African Writers—which was the major vehicle by which they expressed their opposition to oppression. They meet and say, 'We don't need COSAW, there's

no need to revive it', and this letter with 19 signatures is circulated. But it gets more complicated. Subsequently, Zakes Mda and other people whose names appear on that list say, 'We did not sign that letter. We were not asked to sign that letter', and they challenged Nadine Gordimer about circulating a letter on their behalf that they had not signed. So you have a very interesting situation which I am now of course developing and hope to develop in Grahamstown where I am going to say, 'Alright, let's see, do we really need COSAW? And what happened to those radical voices?'. And I'll be talking about it in Johannesburg when I leave Durban because encouragingly—and in opposition to the people who say we don't need COSAW—it turns out there are a lot of people, writers who are saying on the contrary, 'It's time we found our voice again and we started speaking out'. And whether injustice comes from a white source or a black source, it is injustice. You have to speak out against it. I'm now getting ready to issue a call, kind of broadcast over the net, elsewhere to say: 'Anybody who's interested, let's get together and find those radical voices, organize ourselves again'.

JVW: I don't know if you're the right person to answer this question for me but what I find fascinating is the way people see South African literature, say, English South African Literature. There was this debate between Lionel Abrahams and Ursula Barnett about whether a white writer can be a South African writer. Barnett was saying that's not possible. People like Lionel Abrahams shouldn't be included in compilations of African literature.

DB: My own position has been very clear right from the start—that writers are writers and you don't distinguish on the basis of race or pigment, ethnicity. I have made a distinction—and it's made people like Tim Couzens and others very angry—between those who collaborated with apartheid but who still hoped that they would not be punished for their collaboration.

JVW: This is very interesting where you have the African languages. A lot of those authors in a sense collaborated with the whole Bantu education system, although some of them might have produced interesting literature like Nyembezi.

DB: There may be a more complex situation there which I'm not really able to discuss now. But I have to remind you that African writers were not only co-opted into Bantu education, but very often they were instructed what to write and it had to be in conformity with an ideology and I think they must be called to task for it. You have to say, 'Look, this is what you did and you better admit that this is what you did'. It's a bit like the whole reconciliation debate. But, just to go back to it, I think

that for me there's never been a problem about whether you're South African, whether you're black or white. If you were born here, you grew up here, your loyalty is here—that's where you belong.

JVW: And the language issue? How important is the promotion of African languages?

DB: I wish I knew more, Johan, about the current debate on the language issue which I think has become very complex. My short answer would be to say that all the languages of South Africa are entitled to equal treatment but they may not all demand equal treatment or require equal treatment in the sense that some are spoken by very small groups. Others are spoken by large groups and one of the questions that emerges is really intercourse. The commerce today is predominantly English or Afrikaans, so that's going to happen anyway. But certainly the languages should be treated as equal constitutionally.

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JVW: Dennis, when I started reading your poetry again this morning I recognized a number of themes which became common in later South African poetry; like the post-office scene in this 'Waiting' poem—'Waiting (South African style): 'Non-Whites Only''.

DB: This is an early poem and it's me just beginning to become political and in a sense still rather tentative in my language. But I'm commenting on specific occasions and avoiding the kind of generalized, sloganizing politics. I don't want to be writing poetry about a 'rise and resist' and 'get it together for Mother Africa' or whatever. True, a lot of that was being written so what I'm trying to do instead is choose a specific incident, a specific locale and then make a very specific reaction to it. So I'll just read them.

The first one (and they're both called 'Waiting (South African Style)' which means non-whites only waiting):

> At the counter an ordinary girl
> with unemphatic features and
> a surreptitious novelette
> surveys with Stanislav disdain
> my verminous existence and consents
> with languorous reluctance -

the dumpling nose acquiring chiseled charm
through puckering distaste -
to sell me postage stamps:
she calculates the change on knuckley fingertips
and wordless toothless-old-man mumbling lips.

The second one:

Was ever office-tea-coloured tea as good as this
or excited such lingering relishing ever?
Railway schedules hoot at me derision
as trains run on their measured rods of time:
But here in this oasis of my impotence
the hours drivel through lacunae in my guts:
Stoic yourself for some few hours more
till the Civil Service serves—without civility:
'Arsenic and Old Lace' andantes through my head.

JVW: I think one can recognize the Auden influence.

DB: I think so, yes I think so.

JVW: When and where did you come across 'Stanislav'?

DB: Of course it's actually Stanislavsky but I turned it into an adjective 'Stanislav' but you're right, the acting technique was that you have to develop to the point where if you want to express an emotion you don't express it just with words. You have to express it with your entire body. So if you're angry, your whole body is angry. If you're amused, your whole body is amused. If you're disdainful, every pore in your body must be expressing that disdain. So there she is with her whole being asserting her disdain for me and of course it's a little tongue-in-cheek. I'm writing but I'm not being devastated by her contempt. I'm rather amused by it. So it's a kind of tongue-in-cheek observance. But 'arsenic and old lace' might be worth developing. There was a movie made in Britain of two old ladies who were very nice and they had all these boarders and every now and then they would poison one of the boarders by putting arsenic in the tea. So when I see her preparing this office tea while I have to wait, I say, 'Oh boy, if only I had some arsenic now to put in her tea'. But again I am making it light by using a verb. The phrase runs through my

head like a musical phrase, an andante phrase. It was playful at the same time. So, it's not as if there is venom, there's not a genuine desire to poison her, to murder her, it's a whimsical thought that runs through my head.

JVW: Dennis, what would be the status of this type of poem in our post-apartheid South Africa? Would students for example be able to identify with what's happening there if you teach a poem like this?

DB: My guess is that they would have a vague memory of how it was and they might have a vague memory of how their parents said it was. But because of Joe Slovo, because of Nelson Mandela, because of what is called the 'sunset-clause', many of the people who were part of the apartheid establishment are still around. They are hold overs of the old regime and so you can even today encounter some of that prejudice. I have to tell you though, that now the reverse prejudice is present as well. There are Blacks who will deliberately make whites wait. It's the reversal of the days when whites deliberately made Blacks wait. So unfortunately you have both manifestations now. Both of them are based on abuses of power; people who have power and use their power to make others their victims.

JVW: The next poem is 'Erosion: Transkei'.

DB: A fine one, if only because it was written in Durban and most of it I think was written in the bath. I was sitting in the bath when this poem came to me. I had traveled from Port Elizabeth to Durban in a lorry or a van and I had gone through two kinds of Transkei. The Transkei of the Bantustan collaborators who had been given irrigation and tractors and so on and so their soil was very good. But there were other chiefs in the Transkei and the Ciskei who refused to collaborate with apartheid and they were deprived of water, irrigation, tractors and so on. So going through the Transkei you saw all this erosion of the land—it's a geographical poem except the word 'eros' is the hint that it's also an erotic poem. It's a poem about a woman and a doctor who 'sneaked' me into the hospital, put me in bed as a patient. So it was just one of the many adventures I was having. But when we went out dancing she would wear a sari draped over her bare flesh so I had all this lovely sensual feel of her flesh under my hands as we danced. And of course the poem ends with the image of drought and rain but it's also an orgasm, a sexual climax. So the poem is running on those two levels. It's called 'Erosion: Transkei'.

> Under green drapes the scars scream,
> red wounds wail soundlessly,

beg for assuaging, satiation;
warm life dribbles seawards with the streams.
Dear my land, open for my possessing,
ravaged and dumbly submissive to our will,
in curves and uplands my sensual delight
mounts, and mixed with fury is amassing

torrents tumescent with love and pain.
Deep-dark and rich, with deceptive calmness
time and landscape flow to new horizons -
In anguished impatience await the quickening rains.

What you might miss is the rhyme scheme. It is quite subtle: 'scream' and 'streams' and 'delight', 'pain', 'rain', 'amassing', 'soundlessly', 'satiation'—the whole kind of sound, music... but it's very much an erotic poem. Talking about the land being eroded as a result of apartheid and people being punished for failure to collaborate with apartheid, but also talking about the impatience for change—political change but it's also about sexual climax.

JVW: I think we should get back to the erotic theme a bit later on. The next poem 'At a funeral' is also interesting because it also becomes one of those themes in the later apartheid poetry especially after 1976. I would like to know who was Valencia.

DB: Majambozi .... I would say this would be probably again in the 60's when I'm beginning to write poetry again. She's a young woman, ironically who completes her medical degree at Wits and dies within a month. (She acted in a play in Durban which Lewis Nkosi saw.) So suddenly all the years, the effort that her parents put in to put her through medical school, seems to be totally wasted by her death just after she's completed. So the poem is about her and about talent and potential being frustrated and that's one level of the poem. But it's also a poem about the ANC, which begins with the ANC's colours, black, green and gold. Her colleagues turn up for the funeral wearing black hoods from their degrees but with the green or gold—the arts graduates or science graduates, one is a green silk hood and the other one is a gold silk hood. So I'm beginning by using those colours but it's also signaling a political statement. The poem will end with a comment about the Pass laws and resistance to the pass laws: better to die than to allow your identity to be created for you by a pass book so that you should preserve your own identity and not submit to the law.

JVW: Let's go to 'Night Song: City'.

DB: Well, as I said, this is the one that really releases me after I have read Auden and I begin to realize that one could simultaneously talk about your private affairs and public affairs. I originally was going to call it 'Nocturne' but I decided that 'nocturne' was too foreign a word. It didn't really belong in the English language, it's French, and so I chose 'Night Song' which is good Anglo-Saxon English. Two things are happening; one is I am part of the resistance organizing to get engaged in a sabotage action—so that's the political level—but at the other level of course it's a love poem which says to the woman 'Sorry, I can't be with you tonight'. And so the opening is ambiguous because it says:

> Sleep well, my love, sleep well:
> the harbour lights glaze over restless docks,
> police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets;
>
> from the shanties creaking sheets
> violence like a bug-infested rug is tossed
> and fear is immanent as sound in the wind-swung
> bell;
>
> the long day's anger pants from sand and rocks;
> but for this breathing night at least,
> my land, my love, sleep well.

JVW: I'm interested in this erotic association of the land, the personification of the land as a mistress and so on. Do you know Eugene Marais' poem 'Lied van Suid-Afrika', where South Africa is this mother who smothers her children in the sand?

DB: I know some of Marais, of course, things like 'Winternag' and so on. I've probably read that one but I don't remember it straight off and I'm not sure it would have been incorporated into my ideas. But I knew Marais' work because I liked it—especially poetry in the anthology *Digters uit Suid-Afrika*. It's the one by Pienaar.

JVW: Shall we move to 'It is your flesh that I remember best' which is dedicated to your wife and I would like you to tell us something about her.

DB: Sure. I'm in Johannesburg and I'm confined to Johannesburg. It's illegal for me to leave Johannesburg, but my wife is in Port Elizabeth. This is really a love poem

which of course is also about the fact of separation. I think it's a very honest poem although she doesn't really approve of it. I say that the essential element of our relationship was a carnal one and you know I admit that. But other people might say well it's an emotional one or an intellectual one, whatever. But I say, well, it's your flesh that I particularly remember.

> It is your flesh that I remember best;
> its impulse to surrender and possess
> obscurely, in the nexus of my flesh
> incohate stirrings, patterns of response
> re-enact the postures of our tenderness.
>
> Yet I would contemn myself in guilt.
> for contumely if this were all
> for know, as dearly memorable are speech
> the shy expressive gestures of your eyes
> your patient, penetrative patient mind.

So, I compensate by saying of course the other elements are important too, but let's be honest about it—this is the central one.

JVW: One of the most beautiful poems is this 'Rosy aureole of your affection'. I would like you to read it.

DB: Oh yes. 'The rosy aureole'—interesting. Of course an aureole is a nipple. It's the circle of red flesh around the nipple. So I use this image of a nipple to insist that there are all kinds of little fine filaments running from the nipple which is how milk gets through the nipple after it has been accumulated. But I use that complexity to suggest complexities in our relationships and I end up by comparing it to a spider's web. And the black widow spider will kill the male after he has fertilised her and I see the female demand to be made pregnant—it's the same thing. The womb yawns but it demands the sperm, it demands to be fertilsed. But once it has been fertilised, it really has no use for the male after that point. So picking up ....

> The rosy aureole of your affection
> extends beyond our urban-bounded knowledge
> to tangled undergrowths of earlier time;
> subtly obscure lymphatics of the flesh
> proliferate bright labyrinths of mind

and cobweb-shadow them with primal dusk.

Beyond our focussed shaped projection
to immensities of tenderness defined
like blind protrusion of these searching nipples
shut-eyed in luminous rooms of lust I nuzzle,
loom shadows darker than the dusk of passion
that turn our pinks dusk-grey as spider's back.

Beyond your open, hungering embrace
yawn other older mouths from oozy shores
and over me, enormous, straddles
the ancient foetus-hungry incubus
that leaves me sprawling, spent, discarded
dry-sucked and shattered as a spider's shard.

JVW: What I find interesting is the way the poems flow into each other. You don't have titles to separate them from the previous poems. Was that done on purpose?

DB: Yes you're right and that's where I think the printer is very important—the way they place a poem. They should give you a clue. I should say that I always said a good poem doesn't need a title and the only poems that need titles are poems that need a sign-post which helps you to enter the poem. If you need an external clue to make sense of the poem, then you should provide a title. But if the logic of the poem is within the poem itself and all the explanations are there, I try to avoid a title. And of course other poets have different approaches but for me the rule of thumb is a title if it's necessary to make sense of the poem. If it's not necessary then don't give it a title. But then you're right. You have to be careful so that the reader knows whether the poem on the next page is a continuation of the previous poem.

JVW: Tell us something about the writing process with you. How do you write? Is there one particular way?

DB: Let me tell you something that sounds a little hard to believe but it still happens to be true. As a young boy in Port Elizabeth, in the segregated Coloured area—interestingly we were right next to an African location. And the Africans on Sunday would come onto the hillside outside the Coloured area and sing hymns or they would chant. And they would also have a kind of 'indaba' if they had a debating issue. They would debate for the community: 'What are we going to do about so-

and-so who has disgraced us? What are we going to do about so-and-so whose dying and his wife has no support?'. The community would discuss serious political issues too. But one of the things I learnt which I never forgot was that the skill of oratory often depended on starting with something that looked like nonsense. You had to catch the attention of your audience by saying something that was paradoxical, that was contradictory and then as you developed your argument at the end you have these murmurs of agreement when the phrase with which you opened was repeated but it now made sense. This seems to be one of the great elements of African oratory which is also of course part of the skill of the craft. So I would write a poem and I have one here which begins 'We loved each other better because we hated', and you say: 'What the hell? Hate makes a love better?'. And I show how two people who are linked in the hatred of oppression—that hatred which they share is what intensifies their love for each other so that what started as a contradiction eventually makes sense.

JVW: Dennis, you've referred to your experiences of African poetry, but did you read any particular handbooks on the writing of poetry because you use a lot of meter and rhyme?

DB: One of the most useful books I read of poetry was an Afrikaans book and I'm not sure I remember the title. I read the Dekker, 'Literatuur-geskiedenis' which I bought for myself as soon as I had enough money. But there was a book which was about literature and it was by an Afrikaner. It was in Afrikaans and it had a green soft binding and I learnt so much about poetry including English poetry from that book. In fact I only understood the poetry of someone like Danté Gabriel Rosetti via an Afrikaans author.

JVW: I'd like to know the title of the book.

DB: I think it was a van Bruggen but not Jochem. It might be called *Literatuurgeskiedenis* or something simple like that. But I must say that that was one of the most helpful books that I read on the craft of poetry and the craft of literature. My father and I had a terrible relationship, but one of the books I got from him was 'The Study of English Literature' by George Saintsbury and I always felt that to compensate for the hostility, lack of love between us at least through that book he was communicating his knowledge to me. So the short answer Johan is that actually I was always trying to find out more about poetry, poetic forms, and poetic ideas and so on and of course by the time I got to Fort Hare and I was majoring in English there were a couple of useful books; one by a man called Greening Lamborne which

was about how to write poetry and how to read poetry, and one by a man called Bernard Groom which is a history of English literature which was a prescribed text that included a discussion of course of poetic form. And then once I started teaching obviously I had to buy books to improve my own skills in teaching and of course in the process one uses skills to write poetry. But my mother I think was a very important influence—the fact that she was reciting Shakespeare and Wordsworth to me while we were washing and drying the dishes. The fact that my father was reciting some Browning and Blake. So it was more by osmosis, you absorbed knowledge rather than found it in books. I suppose I'm reasonably competent in my knowledge of poetic forms which is why I can teach them and, as you know, some of my poems are very deliberately constructed as Petrarchan sonnets or Spenserian sonnets.

JVW: Dennis, earlier you claimed that you're the greatest erotic poet of Africa. Do you include the African languages in that equation?

DB: Well of course that's again said tongue-in-cheek. No, I don't. But it depends on what one means by greatest and if by greatness you mean more frequently than anybody else which is one way to define the commonness if you like or the most complex, more multiple, more numerous and also kind of explicitness. My poetry will talk about cunnilingus, talk about cock-sucking, all kinds of intimacies—and some are not naked or crude or clumsy because I think the line between eroticism and pornography is that the one has a certain art about it. This is how we defend it. So there's a good deal of my poetry which in fact is erotic at one level even while it is being non-erotic at another level. This may be why some people have not identified the erotic element because they're focusing on say the political or the landscape. For me the notion of hills and breasts is very often present, if you are open to that suggestion. But more interesting, the word 'continent' for me is 'cunt' as well and when one talks of the hibiscus, the opening of a red flower, I think of Wells' 'Rosebud'—some people say there is a sexual image there. The erotic appears more frequently in my work than, as far as I know, any other poet who writes in English in Africa. I know people like Soyinka have done it, Kgositsile has done it, others have done it but they do it less frequently.

JVW: How important is the erotic within politics?

DB: Politics or poetry, one could look at it either way and I'll start with the poetry. It seems to me that to suppress the sexual erotic element in poetry is dishonest if in fact it is a component of your experience and you either exclude it or you repress it, you

deny its existence. If it is a part of your experience then the honest thing is to include it, and poetry is always about honesty. You cannot have good poetry that is dishonest. But that is the first area and we can return to that. The second portion of your question is much more difficult—how important is the erotic in politics? It seems to me I would touch on two points there. The one is the incredible impulse to attempt to control the erotic impulse which nearly all politicians seem to succumb to. And more and more as you achieve power the more you try to control the sexual and erotic activity—it's amazing that somehow political control is equated with what happens in the bedroom. Although what happens in the bedroom is really none of the business of government or politicians. That's the one element—it's very intriguing. The second one, more complex, more difficult to define, but it does seem as if the politicians fear the erotic. And it may be that they fear it because it's as Freud said, the libido, the impulse to pleasure becomes almost self-destructive, suicidal, you may end up in the pursuit of pleasure and it amounts ultimately to what people talk of as the 'death wish' and of course the interesting thing about sex is that to repeat it is not to be satiated. Ten minutes later you want to do it again. Twenty minutes later you want to do it again. So there is this libido, this powerful impulse which is very often self-destructive and I think the politicians fear it because you cannot rein it in, you cannot discipline it, you cannot regiment it. You can't say 'Stay on line, I'm ordering you'. It is one of those impulses that's both irrational and uncontrollable. To some degree there always is a controllable degree. There always is a rational degree but you can push beyond the edge of rationality. So whether it's coming from a Marxist perspective or liberal perspective, choose whatever you like, it's amazing how eros and sex gets into the debate and nearly always the debate is about how to control it as if it is something that is feared. Of course, Plato long ago said: In a republic you would ban all the poets. First thing you would do to create a republic, ban all the poets. Shakespeare's approach is quite different. When Shakespeare's working class is plotting a revolution, they say first thing, kill all the lawyers.

JVW: What about the different women in your poetry because there seems to be a lot of different, unidentified persons?

DB: There was Ruth First. We can read the poem I wrote for her.

JVW: Which one is that?

Dennis: That's 'The beauty of my land peers wearily ...'. It's about caution in the sexual encounter. How you are both willing and unwilling. But more importantly I

think you're really asking a question about the way women and the landscape are often interfused so that my relation with the land is almost a sexual one. It's certainly an emotional one, it's certainly a romantic one but it almost amounts to the point where it's sexual. In fact that where one's pleasure in the land is orgasmic. We can definitely reach that point. But when I talk for instance in the 'Troubadour' poem of 'exploring your secret thickets with an amorous hand' this is both the land and the woman and one is really doing the two things at the same time.

JVW: So it's an interesting psychological thing, this erotic association with the land. I suppose you find it with Breytenbach as well as other poets.

DB: What it does is it gives you such a bond with the land that exile becomes intolerable. Exile is the ultimate punishment because that's the total separation.

JVW: Yet you seem to be a poet of another country- were you thinking of coming back?

DB: Do you know that set of poems called 'Sequence for South Africa'?

JVW: No.

DB: I talk about exile there and I say exile is not like amputation. It's not as if a limb has been cut off. When a limb is cut off you can feel the ends of the nerves where the cutting took place. But exile is quite different. You can choose not to be conscious of being in exile and it's only when someone says to you stupidly: 'What's it like to be in exile?', then you get so mad because they've reminded you that you are in exile when you've chosen not to be aware of it. You have shut that out of your consciousness because by shutting out the recognition of your predicament you shut out the pain.

JVW: Is it not exile that actually brings about this type of relationship with the land?

DB: Oh no. The relationship existed prior.

JVW: Because of the distance? So you can desire from a distance?

DB: No. The desire was there while I was in Jo'burg, while I was in Port Elizabeth, while I was in Durban—it was real. What I had to do when I left the country was to say I will not allow that pain to enter into my awareness. I literally shut it out and it

only entered my awareness when someone rather tactlessly raised the question. But I myself would not raise the question.
JVW: On page 24 there's an image which I don't understand: 'It's still fresh treason to the country'. How did you see it? Why the word 'treason'?

DB: You must remember that this is not written outside South Africa. I'm inside South Africa and I'm choosing between the land and the woman. And I decide for a while to choose the woman. And then I give her up and I say I'm sorry the land is more important than you are. So for a while I was guilty of treason. I betrayed my real love, the country for this woman but then I leave the woman and go back to the country.

JVW: On page 25 one of your best poems, I suppose, 'Gaining teetering on the edge'. Will you read that one?

Dennis: There was a rabbi who asked me: 'Is this poem about cunnilingus or not?'. I like that. It could have been about both but I'm really addressing something else here. The fact of mortality and you must remember this is where John Donne comes in again. All Donne's great poems are about death including the famous 'terrible sonnets'. So while I'm with her and I'm rejecting her, I'm not rejecting her because I don't want the sexual intimacy. I'm reminding her instead that one dies. The 'too-tired, the soon too-tired muscle' is not a penis but the heart. The heart is a muscle which gets tired and then you die. And the 'cage' of course is the rib-cage. Within the rib-cage, the 'soon-too-tired muscle'—that's the heart- 'and all this animal spirit spent'—this emphasis on sheer carnality, this reiteration of mortality—that's the most important word in the whole poem. The remembrance that you have to die, you are mortal. The reiteration of mortality and all these immediate joys are ephemeral. They'll all pass. That's why I say no.

JVW: What I don't understand about this poem is on the one hand you describe the bathroom and then you move to the prison.

DB: No. The light coming into the bathroom is the same kind of grey light that comes out of a prison. It's not really in a prison. The prison light was like light that comes through opaque windows of bathrooms. So you are getting a kind of grey light instead of your normal light and I call it 'prison-grey'.

JVW: You make reference to the 'troubadour' in your first poem in this volume and I see there's repetition in 'every mind as a function like the chorus of her'...
DB: Right. 'Morosely I, morosely I know I try'. Ballad form.

JVW: Who's Bernice, on page 29?
DB: She was a woman who was a law student at Wits. at the same time that I was a law student and she allowed me to use her apartment. I write something for Bernice but in fact it's a poem which is more like an exercise in a Japanese form. So I might as well just mention it. The Japanese have a poem that you write on a fan on all the vanes of the fan. Each vane has a line of the poem. But you can close the fan at any point and the lines will make sense. So you have to write a poem in such a way that there's repetition, there's a pattern, but also no matter how randomly you read the poem, it will make sense and that is what I'm trying to do here. There's a lot of repetition here and in fact the poem has a kind of Japanese quality. It's all about delicate blossoms falling and things like that.

JVW: Then this poem: 'Under me your living face endures'.

DB: Sydney Clouts wrote to me congratulating me on this poem and he said: 'In my view this is an achieved poem'. And it's only 7, 8 lines long. I was very pleased but I have to tell you that because I respected Clouts and recognised that he was a poet of considerable talent himself, a word of encouragement like that meant a tremendous amount to someone who was literally living in the desert. There was no-one I could discuss my work with, so Clouts' note to me was very important. But it is, I think, a successful love poem and it's about traveling to a woman. I'm going to meet her and she's waiting for me. This is the woman that's going to be deported. But at the same time I'm flying into Kimberley and the mine dumps and what was called sludge or slime, an ugly portion of Kimberley. So the poem is both again a political poem talking about South Africa, about oppression in South Africa, ugliness in South Africa. So it's a poem which is both about a woman and about South Africa and about the predicament of both. The woman is being deported, the land is being raped. And so I'm really dealing with the two and my own tenderness for both the woman and the land and so I write the lines 'descending to you in a rage of tenderness you bear me patiently as I fly into Kimberley'. But in some ways this one 'Kneeling before you' may be the best expression of that kind of lyricism. It's both love for the person but written in the context of the political tension.

> Kneeling before you in a gesture
> unposed and quite unpractised
> - I emphasize, though we need not be assured
> for neither could take time to posture
> standing always stripped to the very bone and

central wick of our real selves
that burnt simple and vulnerable as flame –
Kneeling before you for a moment,
slipped quite unthinkingly into this stance
- for heart, head and spirit in a single movement
responded thus to some stray facet
of your prismatic luminous self
as one responds with total rhythm in the dance –
I knelt

and in answering, you pressed my face against your womb
and drew me to a safe and still oblivion,
shut out the knives and teeth; boots, bayonets and knuckles:
so, for the instant posed, we froze to an eternal image
became unpersoned and unaging symbols
of humbled vulnerable wonder
enfolded by a bayed and resolute eternalness.

JVW: So it's about the tension between politics and love?

DB: Right and very much in the context of loving a woman in a dangerous situation.

JVW: The one 'For a dead African'? I would like to know the context of that one.

DB: 1956, John Nangoza Jebe. But as I told you between 1950 and 1960 for 10 years I wrote almost nothing, but you can see '56 I write the Nongoza, and in '61 I write the Luthuli.

JVW: So these are two of your earliest poems?

DB: Yes, very early. This is after I stopped writing. I stopped writing in '50 and I don't begin again except that I write this one in '56. This is before the love affair. This is before the Auden. So it's kind of independent. The ANC has a march in New Brighton and Kwazakele on what was a sort of Good Friday night. The police come along and open fire and this guy was killed and the moment I heard about it, it triggered a poem. But it was a poem which was really about contradictions saying that if we have a hero who was not recognised as a hero you could do heroic things and the history books would not record it because the history was being written by biased people who saw events in one way. So it's really among other things, about

perspectives—the perspective of the oppressor and the perspective of the oppressed. So John Nangoza Jebe—I did not know him personally but I knew about ANC marches and I knew that he was killed in the march. So I wrote this poem. Do you want me to read it?

The important thing I think about 'For a dead African' is that the tone is ironic. You should not say this is a poem which says there are no African heroes. I'm saying there are no African heroes in the histories written by the oppressor.

> We have no heroes and no wars
> only victims of a sickly state
> succumbing to the variegated sores
> that flower under lasting rains of hate.
>
> We have no battles and no fights
> for history to record with trite remark
> only captives killed on eyeless nights
> and accidental dyings in the dark.
>
> Yet when the roll of those who die
> to free our land is called, without surprise
> these nameless unarmed ones will stand beside
> the warriors who secured the final prize.

What I think is important about a poem like this in 1956 is that this is at the time when the ANC is still committed to Gandhian, non-violent resistance against the pass laws, people going to jail, Mandela, Patrick Duncan, everybody. But the poem anticipates a later phase of armed struggle. When I talk about 'warriors who have secured the final price' I'm encouraging weapons who are going to come after the unarmed group. So I'm rather pleased at the fact that I was honestly saying there will be a military phase even when the ANC officially was saying 'Oh no, we're going to win this battle through unarmed struggle and Gandhian tactics'.

JVW: This reminds me also of Ingrid Jonker's poem 'Die kind'.

DB: Right. Which of course is about 'Nyanga' and the child who died and how that child becomes the voice of the resistance.
JVW: Okay Luthuli, especially the African ....

DB: Looking back on the Luthuli poem, I'm a little more cynical now than I was then. When Luthuli was given the Nobel Peace Prize it was primarily because the West was trying to head off the movement to armed struggle. So what you did was you rewarded the guy who stood for non-violent struggle and in a sense you were saying 'Don't engage in armed struggle'. Of course armed struggle was to come immediately after because Sharpeville, March 1960, is in a sense a turning point. By December of 1960 the ANC is announcing that from now on the struggle will no longer be a non-violent struggle. It will include armed struggle. It will include violent elements. But Luthuli gets the Peace Prize partly, I think, in an effort to head that off. So I wrote a poem which then appears in *New Age* or *The Guardian* or whatever the unbanned paper was at that time. And I use the image of the lion, African lion. It's not a bad poem. I was just banned—October '61—so it was my wife in fact who read it in public at a celebration for Luthuli after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I was not able to be there but it was printed in *New Age*.

JVW: Do you have any link with the African poetry tradition?

DB: A little, because this imagery of the lion, of the man who crushes the reeds by the river, the man who can take on the rhino, break the jaws of the crocodile—all those are great images from the oral tradition. There's a little there.

> The African lion rouses in his shadowy lair
> and challenges the clamorous
> earth:
> - its billow blots all discard and all jars.
>
> Hippo and elephant and buffalo without dispute
> go lumbering to the drinking pools:
> - but all the land he views he rules:
>
> From here he pads on sun-picked bone and brittle thorn
> sniffing the tawny skies of a new day:
> - power ripples over him like the light of dawn.

And I think it's in the oral tradition very much a praise poem. Just in passing I should mention that Blade Nzimande wrote a praise poem for me which he read at the end of a class I was teaching in Oxford. I taught summer school on African

literature at Jesus College, Oxford and he was in the class and on the last day of class he announced that he had written this praise poem for me.

JVW: In English?
DB: No, in Zulu first and then in English, but the original version is in Zulu. Unfortunately I've lost my version given to me but he might have a copy. It was a very nice poem which praised me for my commitment and my willingness to go to prison.

JVW: How did he deliver it?

DB: Very impressively with a strong voice. Not the way that the 'izibongo' would, with the staff and the leopard skins and so on but he just read it in class. It was a small class—about a dozen students.

JVW: Dennis do you still write poetry?

DB: Sort of and actually it's a good point to get into. The last decent poem I wrote was written for this young man that was shot and killed on the campus of the University of Durban-Westville. I see the killing of a student there as not unrelated to the killing of the students in June of 1976. Just as the point is reached of repression when the young people challenge injustice and the result of the forces in power is to use the limit of their power, killing. I see the death of this young man as foreshadowing the entry of a phase where as resistance grows to the injustice which unfortunately the ANC government is guilty of, they are going to resort to the same kind of ruthlessness as the previous regime. So my poem is about that and I refer to June 1960 and I refer in fact to the poem called 'For the students at Durban-Westville'. Now this is interesting—in the audience when I read it at Windybrow Theatre with Nadine Gordimer was Don Mattera, Arthur Maimane—who was one of the old Dutch campaigners—plus people like Raks Seakhoa who used to run COSAW. So for me to be reading in the presence of these guys who were radicals but are now so complacent, to read a poem which says to them: 'Hey, you have to get ready for a new struggle. You ought not to be silent in the presence of injustice,'—it was very challenging. What was interesting was that nobody reacted. They neither criticized me nor applauded me. They were not going to agree and they were not going to disagree but somebody has to fire the opening shot which gets people thinking.

Talk about love poems and I have bad news. The only decent love poetry I have written recently is poetry of 'Lament for a dead woman'. She died under an

anaesthetic in the most absurd circumstances and she's very dear to me. I can't even say that we had continued at an erotic level. Our level of relationship had become much more complex, much more intellectual but she died astonishingly in San Francisco for a ridiculous operation she was having to straighten out her nose—would you believe it—and she was suffering from asthma. She gets an asthma attack while she's under anaesthetic, starved of oxygen and becomes brain-dead and so they just pull the plug on her because there's no point in keeping her alive. So I'm trying to deal with that but it is poetry of loss, poetry of lament. I'm finding it very difficult to write it.

JVW: 1976, you were in exile?

DB: Right.

JVW: How did you experience that?

DB: Well I can't recall right now but I had kept in touch with the Black Consciousness Movement, with what Biko was doing and Barney Pityana and these people, and I knew that they represented the whole new thrust which the ANC was not too happy about but these were the guys that were taking over the struggle. I went back to Soweto. I've insisted that you cannot erase that memory even if the SACP wants you to erase it because it's an important part of the history of the country, the history of struggle.

JVW: What about the ALA and your role in its foundation?

DB: I think there is some distortion of the facts so it's good to at least give my version of that. One, I'm professor at North Western University. Bernth Lindfors invites me to become a visiting professor for a year at the University of Texas and I like that. But while I'm there I discover that there's been an effort to form an African Literature Association which is being frustrated because the white academics are fearful that they'll be excluded and they'll lose their control over the black academics, so they resist this formation. There's something called African Studies Association (ASA) dominated by whites where the blacks are just really on the fringes. So the blacks attempt to form an independent organization. The whites are now very unhappy. I learn about this and I say: 'This is nonsense, let's go ahead and form the association'. So while I'm teaching in Texas, the ASA, the white-dominated organization, meets in Chicago, but we agree that at that meeting we're going to form a sub-committee and look at the question of forming an ALA. When

we get there and people are debating and there are a number of blacks incidentally who oppose the formation because they don't want to oppose the whites and the various perks that they get. Anyway by sheer coincidence Lindfors moves me to chair the discussion. And of course I had already made up my mind that I'd wanted such an organization. So the way I steered the discussion, it was hopefully very open, but it ends with them saying: 'Alright, let's form a sub-committee which we'll draft a constitution for'. So we meet and I'm on the sub-committee and the next morning we report that 'We have this draft, you guys want to approve it? Okay when are we going to have the first meeting?. Sharpeville day in Texas because I'm there and I've already invited writers to come there. So the ALA is formed but I think it's important to be aware that there were both Africans and African-Americans who actually opposed it. We tried Ezekiel Mphahlele by name because he was one of those who opposed it, so did Willie Kgositsile. Oswald Mtshali was neutral, Wally Serote was neutral, but I got them all to Texas. I was elected the first president but I think it's worth recording that I actually steered it into existence at a time when there were people who opposed it. Dan Kunene was another who opposed it. I still think it was one of the most useful things I've ever done because it's now become the leading organisation in its field, huge membership, big budget, tremendous influence, helps people to be published, people to get jobs, people to be promoted to full professors—a whole range of activities which would not have happened if the ALA had not been formed. So it's one of those things that I feel quite pleased about as an achievement, although I should add there are at least three others I'm pleased about so maybe I should mention them as well. I think to get South Africa expelled from the Olympics was not insignificant. It took a lot of hard work, starting here in Durban. We formed SASA in Durban and SANROC was formed in Durban and Durban was a very good support but to have achieved that was a major activity on its own. ALA was important but then you must remember that in the United States, in Britain, France, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, India—I went everywhere on the question of getting money out of the apartheid economy. So I had a major role in the disinvestment campaign, just as I had a major role in exposing conditions on Robben Island, political prisoners and so on. So these are some of the other activities that are worth noting as part of my achievements, my record.

JVW: You often recite some of these old Afrikaans poets and it amazes me why you do it.

DB: Well why do I? For one, because I think sometimes what they said was relevant to whatever discussion we're having. Two, because I think it's important to assert the viability of the Afrikaans language. I think it's a language with a rich literature

which we ought not to lose sight of but that's another point. But of course it does amuse you and perhaps it's partly for your amusement as well that I will quote Totius, Langenhoven, Eugene Marais, Louis Leipoldt and I enjoy that.

JVW: Have you ever read 'Oom Gert vertel' by Leipoldt?

DB: Yes that's a fine poem. And one of the things I learnt from 'Oom Gert vertel' is a marvelous way of underplaying emotions. You say, 'Excuse me there are tears in my eyes. It's just that my pipe is smoking, that the back of the smoke has got in my eye'. So you play down the emotion but in fact you intensify the impact by that downplaying of emotion. Very skillful.

JVW: Yes and 'Dis al', I think that's your favourite?

DB: That's right.

JVW: That's a struggle favourite—'Dis al'.

DB: Jan Celliers—'Dis al'.

> Dis die blond,
> dis die blou:
> dis die veld,
> dis die lug;
> en 'n voël draai bowe
> in éesame vlug
> - dis al.
>
> Dis 'n balling, gekom
> oor die oseaan
> dis 'n graf in die gras
> dis 'n vallende traan
> —dis al.

JVW: Perfect Afrikaans—a nice ending, 'Dis al'. Coming back Dennis?

DB: That's a complex issue.
JVW: Breytenbach always declared his love for his country and when he had the opportunity to come back, he never came back.

DB: True. He's chosen not to and of course I've chosen not to and there's a kind of contradiction there. But I think my own situation has a kind of internal logic and it starts with the fact that the people who were with me in prison are now the people in power and the irony is that the things we fought for, struggled for and went to prison for, are the things which they are now denying. And not only denying but they are frustrating any efforts to achieve the kind of just society that they spoke about and if that's not bad enough, worse is the fact that while they can see people living in poverty, near starvation, sickness without medical care, homelessness—they can live in disgusting affluence without a sense of guilt. If I were back in South Africa I would be out in the streets each day denouncing the contradiction between what they're doing and what they said; denouncing their betrayal. So I have this choice and when I make the choice to do that I have to know that I'll be heard. I've come to South Africa six times and when I talked to people about the failure of the ANC to deliver, very interestingly initially they looked at me in bewilderment. They say: 'But we have the vote. We have democracy. The apartheid law has been abolished. We have a free country'. And I have to say: 'I don't believe that'. But coming here this week was significant because you had a group of people coming together saying: 'We are going to challenge the truth and reconciliation commission because it has not delivered and more seriously it was based on the premises which were not the premises of the people. The people were not consulted about, people did not participate in the decision-making process'. So what I see now is the possibility of coming back to South Africa and being heard and not only being heard but finding people who are willing to be allies in a critical statement. So the time may come when it's possible for me to return. I could have come when Mandela invited me back, when he said: 'Let's have this celebration for all the people on Robben Island'. I said: 'Sure'. I was there at the celebration because at that stage you could not see the extent of the betrayal. You could suspect it but you could not see the extent. Now you can see it more and more. You're going to find white and black South Africans who say: 'This is intolerable. We have to do something about it'. Not just complain. You've got to go beyond complaining to demand change and if the change is not delivered we will produce the change ourselves.

JVW: Can we deliver when we are dictated to by the big international powers like the United States?

DB: I think it is true that just at the time when we had discarded apartheid unfortunately, we moved into a new era dominated by the IMF and the World Bank. So you're quite right.

JVW: Was that a new era or did it start when the ANC went into exile?

DB: Perhaps, but I still think historically if you lived in South Africa, the point counts. When just as they say, 'Shake off the yoke, suddenly hey along comes Basson and Wilkinson and these guys. So you're quite right. The deal was being made outside, but calendar-wise you can see it happening in South Africa at a given point. Now I think the question becomes: Can you realistically challenge this new era when the monster is not apartheid but a global monster? My answer is yes provided your response is a global response. If it was local in South Africa alone, forget it, you'll never achieve this.

JVW: So how do you do this?

DB: In Durban in August of next year when the UN comes here to Durban have a conference on racism and the world is told: 'Oh, look at South Africa: justice for everybody, no racism, no poverty, no homelessness, no joblessness'. We are going to expose the lie and say: 'You had better take another look at what Mbeki is telling you and see the reality of South Africa'. So in a way South Africa is going to be the crunch-point globally. It will take us between now and August to develop our protest on the understanding that the police are going to be incredibly ruthless. Teargas, dogs, batons—you'll see it all. They're going to unleash their power against us 'cos we are going to unleash our power against them.

JVW: Are we going to publish this?

DB: I don't mind. I've been in three major global protest actions and each one has been more intense than the other. And with each one the police repression has been more severe than the previous one. Seattle was bad where we had probably 50 000 on the street. The cops were just plain inefficient until the end when the mayor called in the National Guard and declared a state of emergency. I don't know if this was reported, but that was the stage to which it had escalated. After November of last year in Seattle we had April this year in Washington. Thousands on the street but the cops were very clever. They pre-empted the march by arresting all the people the night before the march and the following day they turned the teargas on us—we were really very disorganized. I still think we had some success there but that's another matter. Success and failure I think are relative terms. But I was in Prague in September where they sealed the border. A train-load of demonstrators from Italy were stopped on the border. The train never got into Czechoslovakia. They brought

out the army, they brought out water-canons, they brought out teargas and they brought out what was called concussion grenades and they would box the demonstrators and cover them from two sides so there's no retreat. They were beating guys over the heads, they were dragging women by the hair—over 800 in jail and then we had to struggle to get them out of prison. So as I see it, there really is the development of global resistance to global oppression. The global oppression comes from IMF and the World Bank. We're not dealing with the government only, we're dealing with international institutions.

JVW: My problem is that it is reactionary; don't we need to think beyond that?

DB: Very good, I'm delighted that you raised that because you're quite right. You cannot change the society by putting people in the streets. It might help but you need a lot more than that. You actually need a programme, you need direction, you need analysis, you need an alternative economy.

JVW: A vision?

DB: You need an alternative vision. So you're quite right but fortunately people understand that that does not come overnight. It grows and it grows slowly and it grows by consensus. We're not interested in dictators, gurus who come along and dictate solutions. We are working out a consensual solution and it will be third world countries involved—Asia, Africa, Latin America working together to develop a global consensus. But it's coming. You're quite right. We need it. It is coming and I'm glad.

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Flying into Midrand

(For students at Durban-Westville)

Still undulant curves shadow our horizons
delicacy of pastel shades clutch at heartstrings
but disgust sours saliva, rancids breath;
how have our hopes been betrayed
what newer outrages scar our landscapes
what student blood puddles our dusttracks;
time for fresh resolves, challenges,
time for new confrontations.

Dennis Brutus
June 18, 2000