

AN ENEMY OF THE STATE

Photographs by Bruce Powell



Will Dennis Brutus's war on South African apartheid get him kicked out of the U.S.?

By Gary Rivlin

On the island, the most meager of pleasures was what the prisoner pined for most. A poet by trade, he wrote: "After sentence, in the rasping convict days it grew to a hunger/—the bans on singing, whistling..." The poet longed for a look at the stars, a sight forever obscured by the lights that burned 24 hours a day. In a moment of daring, he reached through the bars of his cell to flip the light switch and plunge his cell into darkness. "But through my delight," he wrote later, "thudded the anxious boots/and a warning barked/ from the machine gun posts/ on the catwalk/ And it is the brusque inquiry/ and threat/ that I remember that night/ rather than the stars."

The poet, Dennis Brutus, re-

members another night on the island, Robben Island prison in South Africa, where enemies of South Africa's apartheid system are imprisoned: "You know I can blow you away right now for going to that toilet bucket without my permission," said a guard, gun aimed, nodding toward a partially filled urine bucket to Brutus's side.

"I waited for your permission, but you ignored me," he answered. Brutus knew the threat was not an empty one. The guards, using batons and rubber piping, whacked the prisoners indiscriminately: as they marched to and from the quarry, to and from their meals of tasteless pap—whenever the mood hit them. In fact, maybe a murdered prisoner would set a good example for the others defying the rules.

But not tonight. The guard lowered his gun: "Brutus, why are you so stupid?" he asked. "What makes you keep on fighting when you know you can't win?" The fight Brutus had been waging until jailed, in the mid-1960s, is the same one he carries on with today—the toppling of apartheid. He fights the rule of 5 million white South Africans over 25 million nonwhites. He fights for the nonwhites' right to vote, and against South Africa's 300-plus laws that oppress and deny on the basis of race.

"What makes you think we can lose?" Brutus asked back.

"America would never allow it."
"I was struck by his naivete," Brutus says now, 18 years out of Robben Island, a South African exile living in Evanston and professor of English at

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Northwestern University. We spoke the day before an immigration judge was to decide whether, after more than a decade in the United States, Brutus should be deported. Brutus continues: "He [the guard] seemed intelligent, but I thought he was the simpleminded one. It was only when I came to this country that I realized who the real simpleton was. It was only then I really understood the degree to which he was correct."

*A wrong-headed bunch we may be
but the bodies of poets will always be
the anvils on which will be beaten out
a-new, or afresh, a people's destiny.*

—from *Poems from Algiers*

Dennis Vincent Brutus, 58, is acclaimed internationally as one of the third world's finest poets. He is an activist, an international organizer, a renegade statesman banned from the country he considers his.

Brutus must prove in an immigration hearing that begins this Monday, July 18, that should he be forced to return to South Africa or his country of birth, Zimbabwe, his life would be in grave danger. (The hearings will take place all week in the Dirksen Building, 219 S. Dearborn; they are open to the public, and demonstrations are planned for each day.) This is Brutus's fifth hearing before immigration authorities. In November 1981, immigration judge Irving Schwartz, an administrative law judge, found him "deportable" ("I find that a rather amusing term," says Brutus), and he is now seeking political asylum, a last resort of sorts. "What we are going to try and do is show the judge who Dennis is," says Susan Gzesh, his primary lawyer in the hearings. "We will talk in the trial about Dennis's history and all his activities in the antiapartheid movement—why he deserves asylum in the United States." According to the Refugee Act of 1980, the federal law that defines asylum, Brutus and his attorneys must demonstrate "a well-founded fear of persecu-

tion on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."

Brutus's life reads like a script carefully crafted to prove political persecution. Brutus has spent most of his life—more accurately, the years since 1955, when, he figures, the struggle against apartheid became his life's focal point—irritating the South African government. A relentless, shrewd opponent both inside and outside South Africa, he remains a feared enemy. According to the book *Inside BOSS*, by Gordon Winter, who for 17 years was a spy with South Africa's Bureau of State Security (BOSS), Brutus is considered one of the government's 20 most dangerous opponents living abroad. The secret police still watch him. Last year, for instance, a white South African

student visiting Chicago called Brutus. "His conversation with Dennis was rather innocuous," says Jan Carew, a Guyanese, a fellow Northwestern professor, and a close friend. "He was not a political fellow, just curious about Dennis, his work. But when he got back to Jan Smuts [a South African airport], the security police took the young man aside and asked if he had contacted Dennis. When he denied it, they played back a tape of the entire conversation." Brutus learned of the incident, he says, after the student wrote of it to a colleague in London.

The South African government fears Brutus because he strikes where it's most vulnerable—its international image. South Africa is an international pariah, for many reasons, but one major factor over the last 25 years has been Dennis Brutus and his use of

sport. He used sport in a way no one ever had. He studied it—its components, its ramifications, its importance to the South Africans—and discovered it to be a powerful tool. "Sport is generally the national religion of South Africa," says Brutus. "Even their politics comes second to sport." Brutus's accomplishments in the sport movement have been impressive. He is credited with being the prime mover behind the exclusion of South Africa from the Olympic games, first in 1964, and then again in 1968, after it was briefly reinstated. He led a similar fight to exclude Rhodesia as well in 1972. *Sports Illustrated* called him the "attacking genius" behind the 24-nation boycott of the 1976 Olympics, in Montreal. As Brutus's colleagues in the movement and they will tell you that he is largely responsible for the exclusion of South Africa from virtually every international sport. Ask them how their movement was born, and they will tell you that Brutus was its father.

Brutus was born in 1924 in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia and it seemed likely that he would work in the nearby Ford factory and father nothing but children. When he was still an infant, his parents, both schoolteachers, moved to the "coloured" district of Port Elizabeth South Africa (where there is now Brutus Street). Brutus was slow in developing, he says, and it was not until late in childhood that he blossomed intellectually. He earned merit scholarship, with which he was able to attend Fort Hare University the only university in South Africa that accepted nonwhites. There he acquired degrees in psychology and English and a diploma in teaching.

While at Fort Hare, Brutus took his first cautious steps against apartheid. "I was interested in sport—I took part in a number of sports without much skill," says Brutus. "I became aware that there were black athletes who were kept off the Olympic team only because they were black. That seemed to me clearly unfair; I think that really where I began." He wrote letters on behalf of two weight lifters whose only weakness, it seemed, was the color of their skin.

One day Brutus stumbled upon the



Susan Gzesh

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charter of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Clause one stated that any country discriminating on the ground of race, religion, or politics cannot participate in the Olympics. In 1958, he organized the South African Sports Association (SASA), out of which grew the organization that survives today, the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SAN-ROC). Sport became, for Brutus, the vehicle through which to publicize apartheid, to keep it an issue before the world's people.

"Sports is a unique tool," says Richard Lapchick, chair of ACCESS, the American Coordinating Committee for Equality in Sports and Society. "It is the best tool we've got now to educate the Western public about what apartheid is." "South Africa is invisible, apartheid is invisible to most people," says Professor Lee Anderson, chair of the political science department at Northwestern. "If you want to expand the audience that is sensitive to it, you obviously don't do it through attacks on the Krugerrand, which only a fraction of the people buy, but through an activity like sports, which most people see and follow. It would be hard to think up a more rational target."

The South African government apparently agrees: it has used sport repeatedly in its attempts to bolster the country's international image. One good example is the 1981 U.S. tour by the South African Springbok rugby team. The team was newly adorned with a single black athlete and a black assistant coach—"a team with clear political motives," says Brutus. Not coincidentally, the black athlete was the chosen spokesperson for the team, an idea that backfired miserably. When the press asked if he could live where he wanted, the black athlete had to answer no; when they asked if he could marry a white woman if he wanted, he had to explain that this would be against the law; when they asked if, when he goes back to South Africa, he could have a drink with the players he acted so friendly with in the United States, he had to say no, that there are rules against this. Brutus, Lapchick, and others organized protests to meet the Springbok team wherever it went—protests so effective that the South African Minister of Sport told parliament that the tour was one of the country's most humiliating failures. "When South Africa can successfully reach out and break through its isolation," says Brutus, "it says to the world, 'We're all white, so what?'"

"They want to let the world know that they are integrating their teams," he continues. "They want the world to see that their audience is integrated, that things are changing.... This image South Africa would like to

project is especially important in the Western world, which it depends on for investment dollars, bank loans... to make its economy go.

"These changes are purely cosmetic, to impress the outside world. John Tate [a black American boxer who fought in South Africa] had to carry the status of 'honorary white.' The day after the fight, if a black man had gotten in the ring with a white man, he'd be arrested. The day after, the audience was back to being segregated."

*The sounds begin again;
the siren in the night
the thunder at the door
the shriek of nerves in pain...
Importune as rain
the wraiths exhale their woe
over sirens, knuckles, boots;
my sounds begin again.*

— from *Sirens Knuckles Boots*

In 1961, Brutus was served with the first in a series of government-issued banning orders: because of the efficacy of the SASA, he was forbidden by law to teach—his profession in the 14 years since he graduated from Fort Hare University. He turned to journalism, but was quickly banned from writing or publishing anything, anywhere. The most far-reaching of his bans was one prohibiting him from "gathering." Among the activities made illegal under this order were attending mass (he is a Catholic), entering any officially designated "white" area, and holding office in any organization. When Brutus was elected honorary president of SAN-ROC in 1963, he wrote to the Minister of Justice and asked, "Since under my banning order I am forbidden from being elected to any offices, am I contravening any law by accepting this honorary position?" Brutus still remembers the reply he received: "Dear Mr. Brutus, the Minister of Justice does not dispense free legal advice."

To such absurd lengths did the government go to clamp down on Brutus that, under one banning order, he was prohibited from speaking with his brother Wilfred, also an active fighter in the anti-apartheid movement. When Wilfred would telephone from his home 485 miles away, he could talk to Dennis, but it was illegal for Dennis to answer back.

In 1963, when he was attending law school and teaching illegally in an underground school, Brutus was arrested for attending a meeting of the South African Olympic Committee, "by two members of the secret police who actually came out of a cupboard in the wall." He jumped bail to try to meet with the IOC in Germany, but was caught and turned over to the South African secret police. He again attempted to escape, during rush hour in downtown

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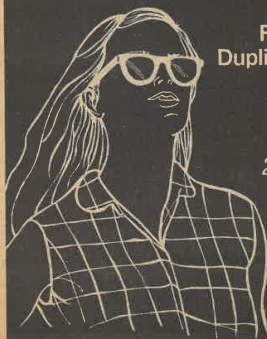


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Johannesburg. "The guard fired at close range as I was running away, and the bullet went through my back and out my chest," says Brutus. "I noticed the red stain on my shirt, but I didn't feel any pain. I felt as if I'd been punched. After a while, I decided I didn't want to run myself to death, so I stopped."

Brutus was sentenced to 18 months hard labor at Robben Island prison. "[A]bout two hours after being locked up for the night, the door opened and I saw a pale body come flying on to the floor of the hospital cell," writes South African exile Indres Naidoo, of meeting Brutus at Robben, in his book *Island in Chains*, an in-depth account of his ten years of imprisonment there. "I ran to the body and recognized my comrade Dennis Brutus lying there semi-conscious. (It was his letters to and from various international sports bodies that had been found in my house when I was arrested.) I called out his name and he opened his eyes and gave me a look of recognition, but he was in tremendous pain. He lay curled up on the floor and when I lifted his shirt I got a terrible shock. His whole back was red and blue and there was a deep gash right across his stomach. Although there were no marks on his head, his face was contorted with pain and he could hardly speak, just mumble..."

Later, when better able to talk, Brutus told Naidoo what had happened after he was shot: "He had been taken to the hospital for major surgery — his life had been in danger — then, with the wound freshly stitched and

scarcely healed, he had been sent to Robben Island to serve his sentence....

"They [the prisoners] were all ordered into the sea to pull out seaweed," Naidoo continues, "and as they waded in knee deep they were mercilessly set upon by the warders who beat them black and blue with batons and rubber pipes, even going into the water themselves so they hit out better."

"Some of the prisoners had slipped in the water and were hit as they rose, there being nowhere for them to run and Dennis, who was particularly weak, was their main target, receiving more blows than anybody else, until he virtually lost consciousness."

"Normally, Dennis had a rich, cultivated voice, he was one of the most articulate of all of us, but as he lay suffering on the bed he could barely get the words together; they came out in a groaning whisper, broken up and harsh, hardly making sense."

In 1966, Brutus was released from Robben Island, and soon applied to the South African government for a passport. His request was denied. Explains Brutus: "I was instead offered a document known as an exit permit, which gives permission to travel. Which is fine. But then they stamp it canceled when they give it to you. You then sign a receipt that says something like, 'I agree to travel on a canceled traveling document knowing this to be a crime, and I agree to be prosecuted on my return for having traveled on a canceled traveling document.' This was such a crazy receipt — this document — that I wanted to keep it as a souvenir. They wouldn't let me. They explained to me that they needed it as evidence to prosecute me on my return, which made sense."

Eleven years after he began actively fighting a government whose basis was the presumption that, as a people, whites had the god-given task of serving as guardians for nonwhites, Brutus left South Africa.

*I am the exile
am the wanderer
the troubador
(whatever they say)
gentle I am, and calm
and with abstracted pace
absorbed in planning, courteous to
serenity
but the waitings fill the
chambers of my heart
and in my head
behind my quiet eyes
I hear the cries and sirens*
— from *A Simple Lust*

In 1981 — 11 years after he first settled in the United States, 15 years after he left South Africa on canceled documents — the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) began deportation proceedings against Brutus.

Brutus has always thought of his stay in the United States as temporary. Until it was revoked, when he was found "deportable," he was in the country on an H1 visa, a temporary visa that had to be extended yearly, created, by Eisenhower, after the launch of the Soviet Sputnik, to bring to this country needed professional skills. His plan, until 1981 at least, was to stay indefinitely, and carry on with his anti-apartheid activities here. "My work in America is important," says Brutus. "It's important that people here are informed of the involvement of corporations and the government in apartheid. Corporations make a handsome profit in South Africa, but how do you think that happens?"

The answer is oppressed black labor. People, especially on the campuses and in the community, must be mobilized, to exert pressures on the universities to divest [i.e., eliminate from their portfolios holdings in companies with investments in South Africa] on the corporations, on the government to take a tougher stance based on their commitment to human rights."

Brutus intended not to leave until he could return to South Africa, which is to say not until the revolution. "I am a South African, and in time I will assert that," says Brutus. "An illegitimate government can't take away my citizenship."

The well-known and not-so-well-known from around the world have been attracted to Brutus's case. Hundreds of letters and telegrams supporting him have been sent to the INS and State Department. Defense committees have sprung up in Chicago, Boston, Amherst, and Minneapolis. Among them, letters from Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Congressman (now Mayor) Harold Washington, at least 51 other members of the House (including Tip O'Neill, Claude Pepper, and every member of the subcommittee on Africa), 17 senators (including Alan Cranston, Edward Kennedy, and Charles Percy), and the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

Brutus first learned of his troubles with the INS when he received INS form I-541, sent on February 6, 1981, signed by Jay A. Palmer, then acting director of the Chicago district INS office. It informed Brutus that he has failed to show that he plans to leave the country "within a definite time" and has thus "created the presumption" that his stay in the U.S. is

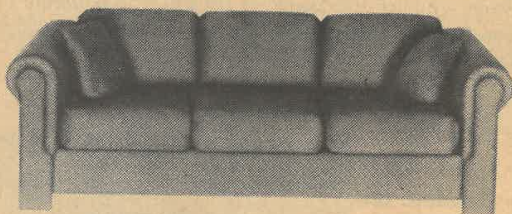
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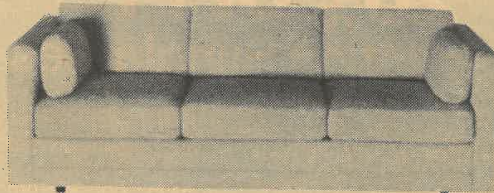
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permanent; that he was employed illegally for four months because he was without a valid visa; and that it "will be necessary for you to depart from the United States no later than March 5." Seeking to reverse the INS decision, Brutus first met with middle-level INS officials, but to no avail. On November 10, 1981, he appeared with an attorney before an immigration judge here in Chicago. At issue was whether or not to grant Brutus's request for permanent residency which, if successful, would have nullified the order to deport and enabled Brutus to carry on his work in this country indefinitely.

During the several hours the hearing lasted, it was suggested, on the one hand, that if deported Brutus would be a target of assassination for the South African secret police because of his lifelong battle against

apartheid, and, on the other hand, that he had violated immigration law and—a law being a law—was therefore ineligible for permanent residency. "The judge really had no choice," John Brahos, then INS's chief legal officer in Chicago, told the *New York Times*. "The judge had to rule Mr. Brutus was barred [from permanent residency] because of unauthorized employment."

The unauthorized employment issue has particularly goaded Brutus's supporters. Brutus admits he broke the law when, under contract with Northwestern, he continued to teach without a valid visa. It's difficult to deny, however, that he fell into violation because of global issues beyond his control. When Rhodesia won independence from Great Britain in 1980, the British government directed Brutus to turn in his passport, and apply to the new government of Zimbabwe for a replacement. It took the fledgling government more than six months to send a replacement; it was during this time that Brutus missed the yearly deadline for extending his

visa.

Further, Brutus maintains that during this period he kept in contact with the INS, and that at each step he queried the service about how he should proceed. William Zimmerman, director of Northwestern's Office of International Programs, says he called the INS "immediately after" Brutus learned that it would take some time to obtain a Zimbabwean passport. "I asked if he should go ahead and file anyway [for his yearly extension] without a passport," says Zimmerman, who since 1972 has assisted Brutus in complying with INS regulations. "Their response was, 'Well, there is no sense filing now—all we would probably do is lose it somewhere along the line, but more than that we can't do anything about it until he actually gets the passport.'" A few months later, when Brutus did file, the INS misplaced his file for about six months.

The hearing ended oddly. The immigration judge, Irving Schwartz, was implacable during the hearings, and at times unceremonious. After ruling

Brutus "deportable," Schwartz smiled—a modest smile, but a conspicuous one. "Where would you like to be deported to?" the judge asked, as after hours of scolding a young lad, was now asking him to pick his favorite candy in the store.

Brutus refused this chance to ensue that he would not be sent back South Africa or Zimbabwe, or to another country where he feared for his life. "I was a bit alarmed that the question was asked," Brutus said later. "I am not going to make a choice, and tell them to go ahead and deport me there. To this one or that one. The choice is theirs."

The asylum hearing that began Monday will again be before Judge Schwartz. Brutus's side, says attorney Gzesh, will parade a string of expert witnesses through court to try to convince Schwartz that Brutus has "well-founded fear of persecution" South Africa and Zimbabwe, South Africa's neighbor to the northeast. Most will be offering testimony on the politics of southern Africa, or Brutus's fight in the antiapartheid

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BRUTUS

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give encouragement to governments whose policies fail to recognize these American ideals. — from Cardinal Bernardin's letter to the State Department

Strong words, but a State Department spokesperson was having none of it. "I don't know what they are saying. The Congress has passed a specific law and we abide by the letter of that law. . . . There is no room in the law for discretion," she said. (After I hung up I realized I hadn't caught her name, though after a bit of indecision she'd told me it would be best to refer to her as Public or Congressional Affairs Adviser. I felt obliged to give search, but the path to the Public and Congressional Affairs Adviser was so circuitous, and our eight-minute conversation so inane, I figured it was not worth another go through the hoops.) She continues: "Does the applicant have a claim of persecution?—the guidelines are very specific." She adds that requests are handled by an asylum division within the State Department,

to "separate requests for asylum from foreign policy matters."

The foreign policy matter that some claim encroaches on Brutus's application is the Reagan administration's atavistic policy toward South Africa: "constructive engagement," as it is labeled. According to a memorandum written by Chester Crocker, then assistant secretary of state designate for African affairs, after 20 years of worsening relations, "the possibility may exist for a more positive and reciprocal relationship between the two countries based upon shared strategic concerns in southern Africa. . . ." Those strategic concerns include South Africa's role as a virile anticommunist force in a part of the world where black nationalism is perceived by the Reagan administration to be synonymous with communism.

How friendly the two nations have become, and plan on becoming as long as Ronald Reagan remains president, is largely a matter of speculation; but in that same memo, Crocker wrote, "We can. . . work to end South Africa's polecat status in the world and seek to restore its place as a legitimate and important regional actor with whom we can cooperate pragmatically."

Doesn't this new policy toward

South Africa have some bearing on the State Department's assessment of South Africa, and therefore on an applicant's claim of persecution? "I don't respond to hypotheticals," responded the Public and Congressional Affairs Adviser. She also refused to speak specifically about the Brutus case. Mostly she argued that the asylum process is pretty much devoid of politics.

"That's just garbage," says Gzesh. She cites a decision by the federal courts calling the government's policy on the Haitian refugees discretionary and politically motivated. "The federal courts agree that it's a politicized process. They [State Department officials] are just lying, and they're being hypocrites, if they say it's not a political process." Gzesh adds, sounding a more optimistic, qualifying note: "They're not completely polluted by foreign policy interests, and sometimes you will win on the merits of an individual case."

The potential for partisan politics and national interest in asylum decisions is so great that it is difficult to view the process as anything but intrinsically political. "There is a Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs which makes the recommen-

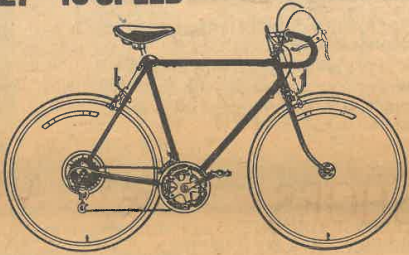
dations, but they make the recommendations in consultation with the country desk in the State Department," says Gzesh. "What is the country desk? The country desk is that part of the State Department which is the source for information for that particular country, and from where policy considerations considering the foreign relations of the United States with that particular country are made. There's not even an attempt to have procedures which isolate decisions in asylum cases from foreign policy decisions. It's right out there for everyone to see."

Gzesh provides an illustration, using the hypothetical case of a Salvadoran teacher applying for asylum. "The case would go to the country desk at the State Department, which is saying 'Send more arms,' and is trying to certify for Congress that the human rights situation in El Salvador is hunky-dory. That same entity has to review the claim of a teacher from El Salvador who is saying, 'If I go back, I'm going to be killed, because I'm a teacher, and teachers are considered subversive.'"

The point, say Gzesh and others, is that Brutus is a pawn in the U.S. government's communist-capitalist

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battle over the world. Our country's outrage over violations of human rights, they argue, is selective, and the main criterion is whether the United States wins points in the war of symbols with the Soviet Union. Asylum for a Polish activist, for instance, would score points for the United States; asylum for a pesky poet from South Africa, a feared enemy of the government, would not; it might even entail some losses. "Dennis's main problem is that his particular country of oppression happens to be a close ally of this country," says Jan Carew.

Talk like this strikes INS agent Robert Esbrook as paranoid anti-Americanism. "I would like to think that an American citizen would have a government that was trustworthy," says Esbrook. "That it would not make decisions based on motives which aren't consistent with American ideals. And I'm personally satisfied that there have been no political overtones in this case. That's what experts are there for. I have confidence in their abilities. . . ."

"In a lot of articles lately that I've seen, I've read allegations that are to me real disturbing, because they really cast a cloud of suspicion over this department," says Esbrook. "No one

individual is making a decision about somebody's life. . . ."

"I'm not giving you a professional presentation here. I'm just giving you a little about what I know about the case, in the hopes someone will someday write that we're doing the best we can with what we got, that we've got procedures of review. . . ."

"Segregation and apartheid are obviously totally abhorrent to any American citizen. Obviously there must be something in the information developed by the State Department, or by someone, that is very, very damaging. Something that affects national security. . . ."

"It's very difficult to deport somebody who doesn't want to get deported. You can get continuances, a review by this board, by that board. . . . There have been so many people involved in this case all the way along, from the immigration service to the State Department to the judge, that if everyone in that system comes down with a denial, then you're talking about a massive conspiracy."

A conspiracy of massive dimensions, however, is unnecessary. At this point, only two ingredients are required: a politically motivated decision by the State Department, and a judge (or

judges if there are appeals) who goes along with it. The latter is especially conceivable considering a file marked "classified" that arrived with the State Department's advisory letter and now follows Brutus and his case through the immigration system. It is impossible to say for certain what is in the file; the INS and State Department will not say, and Gzesh, who might say, cannot, because Judge Schwartz has denied her access to it. Brutus himself has his hunches, but cannot be sure what information the government is sending the judge either, and he most likely never will. Even if it is the deciding piece of information in the hearings, it need not be revealed: first, the judge does not have to give reasons for his decision, and second, immigration law gives the judge discretion in deciding whether the contents of the file must be aired in court and their accuracy determined. Only government officials know what eye-zizzling information is contained within the file—true or false.

*There was a girl
eight years old they say
her hair spiky braids
her innocent fist raised in imitation
Afterwards, there was a mass of red,*


*some torn pieces of meat
and bright guts fluttering
a girl, once, in a print dress they say.
— from the soon-to-be published
Salutes and Censures*

What bothers Esbrook and others at the INS, what really bothers them most, they say, is that this whole protracted affair could have been so easily avoided. If he had left the country, the stated reason for denying him permanent residency—his employment while without a valid visa—would no longer have been relevant. All Brutus had to do was hop a plane to Toronto, apply for reentry, and simply put out the time lag of the INS bureaucracy. "It could have been resolved quite simply if he had chosen to leave the country," says Esbrook.

Why didn't Brutus and his so-called immigration experts think of this? Maybe it is because Brutus is—as one Northwestern official described him—an absentminded professor with his head in the clouds. Or maybe he is irresponsibly ignorant of immigration law, as some suggest, and delinquent in his duties as a guest in this country.

But as Brutus knows, and his attorneys know, and the INS knows (though Esbrook would speak of

continued from page 34



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But Brutus is suspicious of the number 11. "It could have happened before, but it didn't," says Brutus. "Nothing happened until the Reagan administration took over, which is why I have to suspect they had something to do with it."

"Bureaucracies, even without malevolent purposes, can create Catch-22s, where you cannot do this until you do that," says Jan Carew. "But here, I think it was deliberate. I am sure of that, and the reason why is when Northwestern inquired about Dennis's case... the INS says they see no problem. A few weeks later, Dennis has a letter telling him he's in the country illegally, he doesn't have a visa."

"Now this could be just a fairly normal screw-up where two INS officials were not in contact with each other," says Carew. "One could conclude that. One could also conclude that the one who spoke with the official from Northwestern was not high enough to be aware of the orders that were handed down to get rid of Brutus."

How would Brutus's name have come up in talks between the two countries, and why? "I would say," says Brutus, "that probably about two years ago, when they [South Africa and the United States] began looking at a strategy for making South Africa respectable again—internationally ac-

ceptable, part of the West, part of the anticommunist struggle—the think tanks in Washington, in Pretoria, and elsewhere made the decision that South Africa must find diplomatic ways to ease themselves back into acceptability."

"It's difficult to prove [that the deportation proceedings were politically motivated]," he continues. "But you do have Winter's comment that I'm in the top 20 political opponents of the state. So, I would say there might even be somewhere short lists of the few people who are identified [by the South African government] as the most significant opponents, people outside who are particularly a nuisance...."

"I think one should look at my activities: sport and divestment. These are precisely the two areas where there has been the most significant protest against South Africa. If they [South African officials] would ask what are the biggest snags they will run into, it would be sport and divestment. I might well have come up. I might well have been mentioned as one of the problems they would have to view—as their opponent...."

"We now have 12, 15 colleges that have voted to divest, and about 18 that have voted to partially divest. What it means is not just that I'm active in certain areas, but that I'm

effectively active. Things happen. There are a lot of guys who can talk. Rhetoric is fairly common. But when rhetoric is translated into action, it worries the South Africans. They fear the loss of foreign investment...."

"I sometimes out of conceit am tempted to say it's the two areas that I'm active in which turn out to be the most successful ones. But I do put in a lot of work. I don't fool around. I think the secret of my success is choosing limited goals, and then winning them. Instead of going for the whole damn antiapartheid campaign, you select a specific target and you win it. Then you go on to the next target."

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. — Shelley

"When I go around the country, in his wake, people remember Dennis," says Jan Carew. "People who hear him never forget. This is what concerns the State Department and INS: he wins the hearts and minds, to use [President Lyndon] Johnson's cliché. He is articulate. He can influence people. He appeals to people with an utter sincerity. There is nothing more powerful, and potent, than standing up for a righteous goal. His cause is right, and his strategy is to tell the truth."

Carew, a professor of African lit-

erature, is a close friend of Brutus, and a colleague in what he calls the struggle. The struggle is how Brutus and Carew met. "News gets around—you hear about people," says Carew. "I knew of Dennis and his work long before I ever met him."

Carew was late for our appointment. "I have to send a back brace to Dennis in New Hampshire [at Dartmouth College, in Hanover, this past spring, as a visiting professor]," Carew said over the phone. Later, he said, "It's a terrible ordeal to send the thing... but Dennis is flying to California and needs it." Brutus's daughter had organized a poetry reading by her father, to raise money and arouse interest. "It's the worst thing for him, to sit on a plane or in a car; I know, I had a terrible back problem for a while. He has two herniated disks, which are giving him hell. The doctors told him to stay in bed for ten days on his back—" Carew cut his sentence there, shrugged, and gave a look that said, "but that's Dennis...."

"There's an apocryphal story that Dennis tells," Carew says, settling back. "You know, Dennis is a very difficult person to get to know. It took me about 12 years. He drops something, and then the next year he drops something else—some little tidbit which he doesn't think is important

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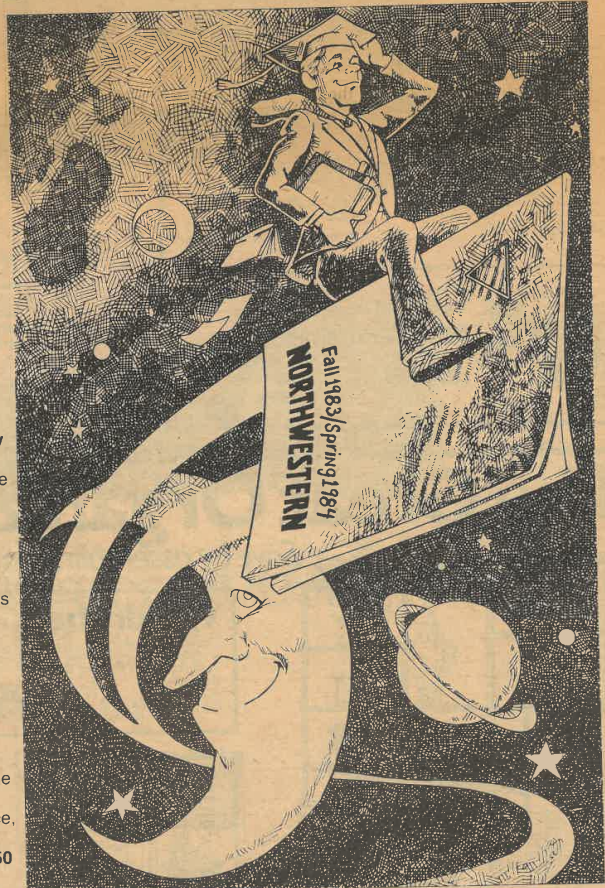
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BRUTUS

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and it's fantastically interesting. He has a story in prison, when he was at Robben Island. One of the prisoners made a guitar, made a musical instrument from little bits of wire, dried seaweed, and things—a fantastic thing. This thing took an infinite amount of time. And then, when the fellow had assembled the thing, he could play notes on it—he could make music. And he got to playing one night, and he played this one note night and day. He was driving everybody mad: 'Jesus Christ, man, why don't you play a full tune, people with guitars play up the scales, they play melodies.' And he said, 'Look, they are still looking for the right note—I found it.'

Carew continues: "In a sense, this explains a lot about Dennis's character. I mean his single-minded preoccupation with South African liberation, which has affected all of his life—his poetry, what he does, what he thinks. His whole being is affected by it in this single-minded way.

"When you encounter it, at first it is a bit off-putting. That kind of

single-mindedness we are not accustomed to. You have a range of things—other notes. But after a time, this becomes mesmerizing—this sheer concentrated zeal and power that he brings to bear on his preoccupation. Not for himself, but for the South African struggle. It makes you want to understand it, it makes you understand that, if there are ten of Dennis in South Africa, apartheid is really in danger." He quickly adds that there are a lot more than ten, which is to say that apartheid is in danger.

"Dennis is very disciplined. Discipline has come through suffering. If you went through his experience, you would be disciplined, too. It's not only discipline, it's a calm, patience, control.

"He has a unique, objective insight into the heart of the South Africans. He sees how trapped the oppressed and the oppressor are. He sees this better than just about anyone. They have tried to break him, but he bears absolutely no malice towards his oppression. He sees how trapped they are, how ridiculous they can be being a master. A self-appointed master is a ridiculous thing. You're really caught in a trap. To try and extricate yourself is an extremely difficult thing."

"He doesn't hold himself up as some sort of savior," says Northwestern professor William Exum, of the sociology department and Afro-American studies. "But he does play some semblance of that role for many students here... His presence is a reminder of South Africa. His presence helps heighten awareness of the problems there, it draws attention to them. Anyone who has heard about Dennis's own particular struggle can hardly be unaware that he is, in fact, a victim of the South African regime, and that in his life he became a victim because he struggled against the regime.

"To say he is a victim is, of course, not to say he has been rendered utterly powerless," says Exum, "or dehumanized, or other kinds of things which happen to victims. Dennis has come through the experience with a remarkable wholeness and sanity and compassion."

According to Carew, not everyone on Northwestern's campus is enthralled with Brutus's presence. "The administration acted atrociously," says Carew. He places blame particularly on university president Robert Strotz: "He had to be almost literally forced out of the closet, and when he came out, he wrote a halfhearted letter."

Brutus claims that Strotz "made no effort to urge the immigration department to permit me to stay... The letter said, 'Yes, this man works for us, yes, we would like him to work here.' It was a very routine letter that said what it had to say, and nothing more... A stronger letter from Strotz would have been helpful. His letter would have carried a lot of weight."

Strotz claims that when he and Brutus last met, Brutus told him that he was "completely satisfied" with the administration's efforts. Strotz says that he offered to write a more detailed letter describing Brutus's academic accomplishments and abilities, but Brutus declined the offer. "I have no personal desire to see him deported," says Strotz. "But I have no in-depth knowledge of the legal issues or personal issues." According to Brutus, to say that he was completely satisfied is misleading: "I feel much more could have been done to support me. There was no enthusiasm in the letter." He said he was satisfied that Strotz had indeed written a letter, a fact he was unsure of until actually seeing a copy.

"Strotz told Dennis that he spoiled his conference," says Carew. "That was the conference on South Africa [in 1981]. The entire campus was

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mobilized against it because it was a biased conference that did not bring persons that give the point of view of the majority people... There were masses of pickets outside during the conference. So Strotz said to Dennis, 'You spoiled my conference.' There was, we learned, what was bothering him. That's why he dragged his feet."

Strotz doesn't remember using exactly those words, but does feel that Brutus tried to "destroy" the conference, through means Strotz personally finds "unethical and immoral."

"They [the Northwestern administrators] are a bureaucracy," Carew continued, "and simply don't like anything that makes them feel uncomfortable. Principled positions are likely to make them feel uncomfortable. This is the way they are."

"Having Dennis and myself is something strange to them. They like to put everyone in a slot, and neither Dennis nor I act like what they think a black professor should act like. On the other hand, they would boast about the fact that they had dissidents. 'We

have Brutus and Carew,' like we were valued property."

What are the two of them doing wrong? "We have been able to mobilize the whole campus—the white and the black students. If it were only the black students, then you were performing according to ritual. When you go and appeal to best sentiments of the white students, this really upsets them. What's most dangerous about this is it might be contagious."

Despite the support they have from the State Department, despite their apparent upper hand in the asylum hearing, it seems INS officials wish they could drop the whole thing and, as inconspicuously as possible, crawl from the mire. "An INS official told me—I guess he wouldn't want me to give you his name—told me that there are some people there who wish they had never taken the case in the first place. They are really regretting it," says Gzesh. Says Esbrook: "People who don't understand how the immigration law works, and what the real

issues are, will very honestly come to the conclusion that we're dealing with a racist decision, or a political decision... We've gotten an awful lot of negative publicity from all this."

"If we're proven wrong by the judge, that is fine with us," says Esbrook. "We'll never argue with it. When it's up, it's up. Everybody got their shot at it, and if we lose, that's OK."

Gzesh says she will appeal if Brutus's asylum request is denied. Through appeals, she says, "I don't think there's any problem in keeping Dennis here for quite some time—maybe a few years—even if we lose this hearing in front of Judge Schwartz."

And Dennis Brutus? Naas Botha, the blond-haired, blue-eyed golden boy of South African rugby, will likely be joining the Dallas Cowboys this August as a place kicker; there's still a lot of work to be done there. The divestment movement has been particularly strong over the last year. Massachusetts recently passed a law requiring that the state's public pen-

sion funds be withdrawn from any U.S. company doing business with South Africa. The time seems ripe for similar action by other states, and by municipalities. He should be caring for two herniated disks, but who knows about that? In fact, sitting all day at an immigration hearing is terrible for his back, but, as Brutus says, "There's not much I could do about that, is there?" He's done some preparing for the hearings, but, well, he's been in worse predicaments and has always managed—somehow—to grow stronger. He's always managed, whether through sport or through the simple words with which he tells the world, in his poems, of his struggles: "Somehow we survive, and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither./Investigating searchlights rake/our naked unprotected contours;/over our heads the monolithic decalogue/of fascist prohibition glowers/and teeters for a catastrophic fall;/Boots club on the peeling door...."

"But somehow tenderness survives."

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