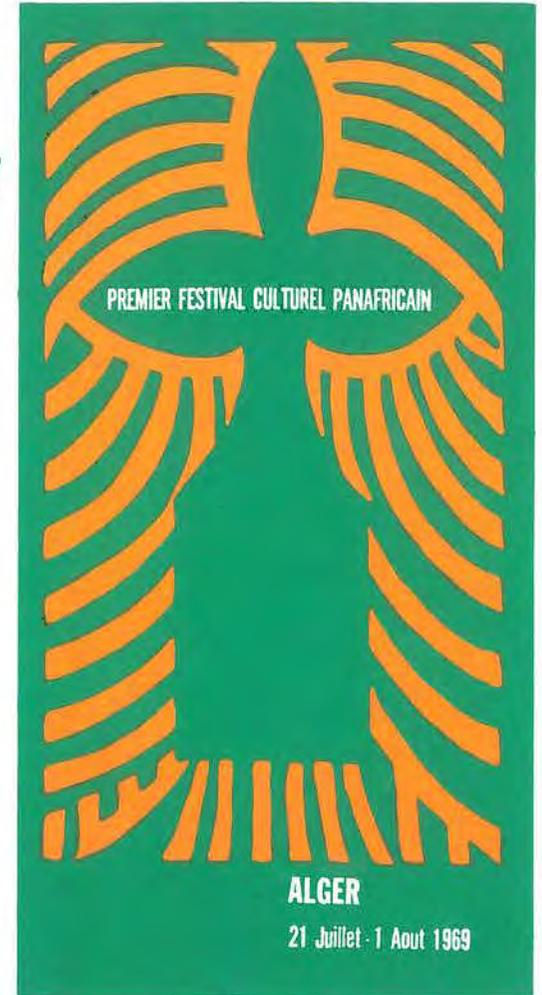


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# Poems from Algiers



Occasional Publication of the  
African and Afro-American  
Research Institute  
The University of Texas at Austin

*Dennis Brutus*

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DENNIS BRUTUS wrote these poems in Algiers while attending the first Pan-African Cultural Festival. His comments on the poems can be found at the back of the volume. The African and Afro-American Research Institute is extremely pleased to offer this booklet in Brutus' own hand as the second in its series of Occasional Publications.

In the past, Occasional Publications of the African and Afro-American Research Institute have been supplied free of charge to all subscribers to the Institute's journal, *Research in African Literatures*, and to other individuals and institutions on request. However, it is now necessary to charge two dollars (\$2.00) for each of these publications in order to defray the expenses incurred in reprinting them.

Bernth Lindfors  
Publications Director  
The African and Afro-American Research Institute  
The University of Texas at Austin  
2609 University Avenue, Suite 320  
Austin, Texas 78712

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Poems

from

Algiers

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Dennis Brutus

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And I am driftwood  
on an Algerian beach  
along a Mediterranean shore  
and I am driftwood.

Others may loll in their carnal pool  
washed by tides of sensual content  
in variable flow, by regulated plan  
but I am driftwood.

And the tides devour,  
lusts erode the shelving consciousness  
fierce hungers shark at the submerged mind

while the quotidian battering spray -----

Even the seabird questing  
weaving away and across  
the long blue rollers coasting  
from green shelves of shore-land  
and rock-tipped banks,  
even the seabird has a place of rest —  
though it vary by season or by tide  
and a mate brooding with swollen nares and puffed breast  
signalling nest-routes with tender secret cries —  
though it vary by season or by tide.

But I am driftwood  
by some white Algerian plage.  
And the riptides rip and tear

ende, devour  
and unrest, questing, yeasts in my querying brain  
and I beat on the fierce savaging knowledge  
rampaging through my existence  
accepting the knowledge, seeking design

For I am driftwood  
in a life and place and time  
thrown by some chance, perchance  
to an occasional use  
a rare half-pleasure on a seldom chance  
and I grate on the sand of being  
of existence, circumstance  
digging and dragging for a meaning  
dragging through the dirt and debris  
the refuse of existence

dragging through the diurnal treadmill of my life.

And still I am driftwood.

Still the restlessness, the journeyings, the quest,  
the querijings, the hungers and the lusts.

(Though we know how clouds gather and have weighed the moon,  
though we have erected and heaved ourselves  
in some vast orgasmic thrust  
to be unmundane and to trample the moon —  
still the blind tides lunge and eddy,  
still we writhe on some undiscovered spit,  
coil in some whirlpool of undefinable tide.)

Yet in the unmarked waters I discern  
traceries of patterns like wisps of spume  
where I have gone

and snailtrails in seasands on a hundred shores  
where I have dragged my sad unresting loins  
— tracks on a lunar landscape that suggest some sense —

And still I am driftwood  
on some sun-straked plage.

Club des Pins / Algiers / en route to Paris.  
8/1969.

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.

We must die ;  
we must buy  
a new honest destiny:

not only tearing our flesh  
to tear the shackles of alien oppression

but groping with lacerated fingers  
to light, to our sense of right.

O may I be strong  
and brave  
and courageous to follow truth

- spirits of the brave  
who have died for knowledge, truth and freedom  
spirits of slave-ancestors knowing the bitter price to be free  
make me strong and brave  
make me too the bruised and ready ripened fruit.

For Chris Okigbo/Wole Soyinka :  
29.7.

In the sunlight  
in the roads along the sea  
they sell the pale-green streaked and patterned watermelon  
with its smooth and tepid skin;  
blue Algerian sky and blue Mediterranean sea:  
and by Clifton, Seapoint and the Cape.

*Club des Pins.*

*A South African in Algiers: Homesickness*

Cosmos, daisy and agapanthus  
Kanna, scented geranium and Katjiefiering!

*A school at Ben Aknoun.*

I remember nights in the semi-dark  
streetlight seeping through the troubled room  
and a bland voice on the crackling set  
unctuous announcements of justice and arrests;

outside, heavy authoritarian footfalls,  
tyres braking for a sudden raid,  
our taut-held breath as every vehicle passed.

I am filled with wonder at your unspoken courage,  
with gratitude for enduring that held me strong;  
with shame for my ungrateful unkindness.

For May: Algiers 28/7.

Only in the Casbah  
in its steep, stepped and narrow ways  
warrening in shops, homes and passages  
past the refuse and the children  
and the shrivelled tenacious dames;  
only in the Casbah  
where the bombed structures gape  
in mute reminder of the terror of the French  
only in the Casbah  
is the tenacious, labyrinthine and unshatterable heart  
of resistance  
truly known.

Algiers, 27.7.

Mystery, beauty, withdrawnness:  
to speculate about possible thoughts  
behind the impassive reposeful face,  
the bland unrevealing eyes:  
What possibilities! What fantasies!  
What lost opportunities for outrageous delights!

Hotel Albert Ier.

My lusts will not let me rest:  
they are the wolves ravening on the edges of my mind  
the cancer eroding its exposed tissues;  
when will one find rest and where?  
Shall I yield to this devouring and relish it?  
and accept a demented prospect down  
disintegrating years?  
My lusts will not let me rest;  
strong appetites chum in the entrails of my self.

Club des Pins.

What does one know?  
What does one know to believe?

Yet my life is so suffused  
with such a graciousness of sense:

how shall I not believe?  
And how shall I not hope?

El. Plouffe: 22.2.69.

## Comments on Poems

I learnt of the Algiers Pan-African Cultural Festival only very shortly before it was due to start and remember my incredulity on discovering my verse being quoted in a long essay on African expression in the advance literature.

I was naturally delighted to be invited, but en route became increasingly filled with misgivings about my right to be called an "African Voice": how far were my ideas and opinions and art at all peculiarly African? Thus I first questioned Africa and myself, in bad stumbling verse, in an attempt to find

what was true. — This is not a defence, but an explanation.

I worked out the problem I think, in a series of answers about Africa — some in discarded (or lost) verse, — in assertions of myself and my (South) African experience, but especially in my re-discovery of the "variousness" of Africa and the extent to which my own difference was a part of it. And especially in a sense of "belonging" — as far as it is possible for a loner like me to remain belonging for any time. From this, perhaps, the alienness of "driftwood."

I think it is possible to trace a developing line from the diffident and oblique statements of the first verses to the more assured assertions up to the driftwood poem, which was the last completed — though not the last begun.

There is also, I think, a movement from self-acceptance to self-assessment: but I find the language and images offer nothing which requires special comment.

These verses need little explanation - even comment can be minimal - unlike a lot of my other verse, where I enjoy talking about what I was trying to do, or the problems I encountered, or the situation which gave rise to the poem.

Both the watermelon verse and the "Homesickness" lines - where the wordy title is self-mocking - try to work by indirection - as in the leap into Afrikaans for the name for japonicas.

The Casbah poem, after a walk there, is also oblique, as a comment on the absence of evidence of the revolutionary origins of modern Algiers.

The question of "Africanness" might be resolved in various ways for the critic - and has a special relevance now, with a Seminar planned on the question for Yaounde, in December.

But whatever African experience and values it might assert which are peculiarly African, the one thing Africanness need not assert is exclusivity. I mean a knowledge of other - e.g. Western - values and critical or aesthetic standards should not disqualify, still less debar one from a critical function in Africa: to have exchanged ideas with black militants in Texas, or talked with Maoists on their

maraes, with radicals in India or young activists at English universities, these things should better equip one, just as the Prado, the Sistine Chapel, the Taj Mahal or a Stan Getz Concert enhance ones experience.

I settle for being the non-totemistic "new" African artist Ebrahim Salahi spoke about this month, who will simply take his place in the whole of world culture while always bearing certain distinctive features as a result of his origins and experience. And it may be that in some respects our experience is more humane - i.e., is more considerate of

human feeling, because we have, up to now, in some measure, escaped the dehumanizing processes or events which have made a mark, or are marking, other societies.

Dennis Brutus  
Finchley, 21.7.1970.

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DENNIS BRUTUS was born in 1924 in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, of South African parents. Educated at Fort Hare College and the University of Witwatersrand, he taught for fourteen years in South African high schools and participated in many anti-Apartheid campaigns, particularly those concerned with sports. The South African Government eventually banned him from attending political and social meetings and made it illegal for any of his writings to be published in South Africa. In 1963 he was arrested for attending a meeting. When released on bail, he fled to Swaziland and from there tried to make his way to Germany to meet with the Olympic executive committee, but the Portuguese Secret Police at the Mozambique border handed him back to the South African Security Police. Realizing that no one would know of his capture, he made a desperate attempt to escape, only to be shot in the back on a Johannesburg street. On recovery he was sentenced to eighteen months hard labor. When he finished his term in prison, he was permitted to leave South Africa with his wife and seven children on an "exit permit," a document which makes it illegal for him to return. He has lived in London ever since.

Besides being the author of two highly praised books of poetry, *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots* (1963) and *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (1968), Dennis Brutus is President of SANROC (South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee), the organization that led the movement to exclude South Africa from the Olympic Games because of that nation's discriminatory sports policies. He is also Director of the World Campaign for the Release of South African Political Prisoners.

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