**Contributor: Hein Viljoen**

**Entry: Bretyenbach, Breyten (1936 -)**

Breyten Breytenbach is the foremost poet among the ‘Sestigers’, a prolific painter, and also a controversial public figure. He was born in Bonnievale, studied in Cape Town and went into voluntary exile in Paris after marrying Ngo Thi Huang Lien, a Vietnamese (also known as Yolande). So far he has published nineteen volumes of poetry, several collections of essays, seven parts of an autobiography, two highly controversial plays, and two novels. His surrealist-type work is inspired by a Zen-Buddhist sense of the mindful continuity underlying mutable existence. An uncanny ability to transform and permutate words and to bend language to his own will characterises his work.

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After studying at the Michaelis School of Art at the University of Cape Town, Breytenbach travelled to Europe, working in different places before settling as a painter in Paris in 1962. He lived in voluntary exile in Paris, as the South African government refused to give his ‘non-white’ wife a visa.

He made his debut in 1964 with the poetry collection *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* (*The Iron Cow Must Sweat*)and a collection of uncannily-flavoured short prose works, *Katastrofes* (*Catastrophes*)(both awarded the APB Prize in 1966). Both works were highly original and innovative, and made use of surrealist techniques to depict a reaching out towards Zen *satori*.

Breytenbach’s next collections, *Die huis van die dowe* (*House of the Deaf*)(1967), *Kouevuur* (*Cold Fire*)(1969), *Lotus* (1970, under the pseudonym Jan Blom), were so expressive and original that the literary establishment recognized him as a major Afrikaans poet in spite of his vehement criticism of apartheid.

In 1976 Breytenbach was jailed for nine years for crimes against state security after entering South Africa under an alias while on an abortive clandestine mission. He was kept in solitary confinement for long periods, but allowed to write. He served seven years of his sentence. His prison life is poignantly described in one of his autobiographical writings, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984), which became an international success and was translated into most European languages.

Since his release from prison in 1982 Breytenbach has become an internationally recognised artist and strong advocate of human rights. His work is regularly translated into Dutch, French, German and English. In some circles he is better known as a painter than a poet. Since 1983 his sketches and paintings have been exhibited in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Brussels, Rotterdam, Berlin, Stockholm, Hengelo, and various locations in South Africa.

In 2002, after a hostile reception of his plays *Boklied* (*Goat Song*) (1998) and *Die toneelstuk* (*The Play*) (2001) among Afrikaners, Breytenbach withdrew from South African literary affairs and refused to publish in Afrikaans again. He ended this ‘second exile’ in 2007, however, with the publication of *Die windvanger* (*Wind Catcher*). An international nomad, he divides his time between South Africa, Paris, and Gerona in Spain; he is also involved with the Goreé Foundation in Senegal.

**Recommended work:**

*Ysterkoei-blues* (*Iron Cow Blues*)1964-1975 (2001)

*Die ongedanste dans* (*The Undanced Dance*) 1975-1983 (2005)

Francis Galloway, *Breytenbach as openbare figuur* (*Breytenbach as Public Figure*)(1998)