



By L E SCOTT

The Coming of Lewis E. Scott (1972)
Together — Sheila & Lewis (1973)
A Collection of Works (1973)
Time Came Hunting Time — Vietnam (1978)
This Bitter Earth (1978)
Nothing But A Man (1981)
3 Shades (1981)
*Each Other's Dreams — Contemporary Black
American Writing (1982)*
Songs for my Father (1983)
Nightfall (1985)
Reflections & Rages (1986)
*Wimpatjai Bulku Pipinja — Black
Fella's Message — Aborigine Writers (1986)*
Hour of the Wolves (1987)
*In Celebration of my Spiritual Father —
James Baldwin (1990)*
Black Family Letters from Boston (1994)
A Woman Called Maasumaa (1995)
*Earth Colours: Selected Poems (2000)**





*To my family
this wondrous tree
of limbs and seasons*





LESCOTT

EARTH COLOURS

1970 - 2000

Preface by Mark Pirie



HEADWORX PUBLISHERS
Wellington - 2000





© L E Scott, 2000

First published 2000

ISBN 0-473-06803-6

Published by

HeadworX Publishers
26 Grant Rd, Thorndon
Wellington
Aotearoa / New Zealand

Printed by



HeadworX is a registered
trademark of HeadworX Publishers

This book is copyright.
Apart from any fair dealing for
the purpose of review, private research
and study, as permitted under the Copyright
Act no part may be reproduced without
written permission from
the author.

*Book designed and typeset
in Baskerville 11pt*





*my mother stood at the edge of the water
and the earth coloured her*



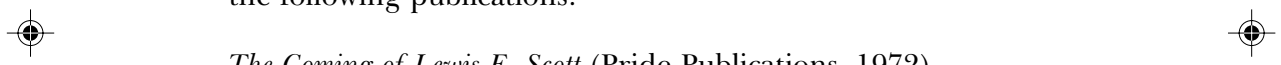


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of these poems have been previously published in the following places:


Black World (USA), *Blue Jacket* (Japan), *Chelsea* (USA), *Chicago Defender* (USA), *Climate*, *Dominion*, *Each Other's Dreams*, *Ebony* (USA), *Essence* (USA), *Evening Post*, *Fire 2* (USA), *Hermes* (Australia), *International Black Writers Forum* (USA), *JAAM*, *Joussour* (Australia), *Koori Bina* (Australia), *Landfall*, *Listener*, *Mate*, *More*, *New Zealand Books*, *NZ Herald*, *NZ Monthly Review*, *North & South*, *Otago Daily Times*, *Ocarina* (India), *Outrigger*, *Pacific Quarterly*, *Moana*, *Pilgrims*, *Poetry NZ*, *King's Cross Pub Poets*, *Pub Poets 3*, *Scopp* (Australia), *Snafu 2*, *Sunday Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), *The Age* (Australia), *The Black Scholar* (USA), *The Carrionflower Writ* (Australia), *The Poet* (USA), *The Trentonian* (USA), *The Union Recorder* (Australia), *Waikato Times*.

Many of these poems have also been previously collected in the following publications:



The Coming of Lewis E. Scott (Pride Publications, 1972)
Together — Sheila & Lewis (Pride Publications, 1973)
A Collection of Works (Pride Publications, 1973)
Time Came Hunting Time — Vietnam (Saturday Centre Books, 1978)
This Bitter Earth (Hawk Press, 1978)
3 Shades (Voice Press, 1981)
Nothing But A Man (Voice Press, 1981)
Hour of the Wolves (Nosukumu, 1987)
In Celebration of my Spiritual Father (Dada Afrika, 1990)
A Woman Called Maasumaa (Bent Publishing, 1995)

Thanks to Mark Pirie for initiating this project and for his editorial assistance.





CONTENTS

Preface by Mark Pirie 9

BLACK

Sharaqa	17
Reflections On A Father	18
Born Into It	20
The Making Of A Child	21
Street Corner In America	24
Perry Street — Black Wasteland	25
Eulogy To Elvis	27
Burning Fingers	28
Shades Of Two Brothers	29
Steve Biko	31
South Africa Election Day	32
My Father — The Great Poet	34
Stop Sign	36
I Been There Child	37
Grandma	38
Collage	40
Fingerprints	43
Threshold	47
A Death In The Family	52
Disciples Of The Black Church	59
America — A Wall Of White	66
Nothing But A Man	67

RED

On The Eighth Day God Made All Fools	71
Valle De Los Caidos	72
M.I.A.	74
The Many Who Died And The Few	
Who Knew Why	75
Stars And Stripes	76
The Vietnamese Poet Says	77
Stranger In Vietnam	78
To Whom It May Concern	79
Mr Undertaker — I Was In Vietnam	80





GREY

And The World Was Dark	83
This Bitter Earth	84
Three Sisters Of Fate	86
Seeking Answers Before The First Nine Months And Then Beyond	87
Skeletons	89
Who Crawled From Woman	90
Breaking The Apron Strings	91
Three Sets Of People Looking After Each Other	92
Feeling Clean	93
'I Would Like To Have Known Your Father'	94
Tangi	96
Equila	97
What Should Be Is Remembered	99
A Poem For God	102
Throughout Life	104

BLUE

This Poem May Not Be Fair	107
Sounds	108
Woman	109
Some Kinda Blue	110
So	111
Kissing	112
Three Women	113
Early Sleep	115
To The Morning Light	116
Bone To Bone	117
Offspring Of Anarchy	118
The Last Request	122
<i>Interview</i>	125
<i>Index</i>	135





PREFACE

I

L E SCOTT has now been writing and performing in New Zealand for over twenty years but you won't find him in any of our major anthologies. Nor will you see him mentioned in either the Penguin or Oxford literary histories or the more recent *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* (1998). Instead, Scott is notably absent from these books — a sign perhaps that he is not really seen as belonging here or 'native' to this country or at least not a 'New Zealand' poet at any rate.

If one were to list his individual characteristics one would soon see why. Scott (an African-American) was born and grew up in racially segregated Cordele, Georgia and later moved with his family to the 'Promised Land' Trenton, New Jersey at age 12. In Trenton he was educated at Trenton Central High School (where he first began writing), before graduating to find himself conscripted to fight in the Vietnam War in 1967 (an experience painfully described in his collection *Time Came Hunting Time*). Scott spent a year of service there and was wounded three times. After his army service Scott returned home and lived in Trenton briefly, studying journalism at Trenton State College and publishing some early works, before leaving the States for good in a form of self-imposed political exile. As Scott himself states: 'My Vietnam mistake was the last one I as a Black man wanted to make on behalf of America and the nightmarish game she's been playing with the world for the last two hundred years.'

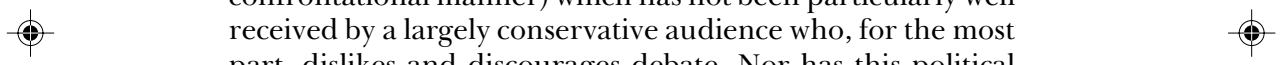
Scott travelled and lived in Europe, Africa and Australia, before settling here in New Zealand, where he has increasingly found a measure of personal stability. In New Zealand he has worked as a writer/performer in the Writers in Schools programmes and toured with various artists such as Beaver. More recently, he has been involved with two African-based cultural shops, first as a founding member of *Dada Afrika* in Auckland until the mid-1990s and then as the owner of *Kwanzaa—the African shop* in Wellington. Over the years he has also become a valued member of the Hutt Valley arts community, sometimes being asked to launch local





poetry collections such as Tony Chad's *Wild Tigers, Pigs & Possums* (1997).

Throughout this time as a shop-owner, however, his work as a writer and performer has remained his number-one passion and goal in life but surprisingly he hasn't achieved the kind of success or recognition in New Zealand that one might expect. A possible reason for this is that Scott comes from a quite different literary background in comparison to the predominantly Anglo-centric writers here. In historical terms his literary forebears aren't so much the twentieth-century giants like Auden, Eliot and Yeats as the famous Harlem Renaissance writers Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Countee Cullen, who were among the first to receive widespread recognition for infusing American life with Black culture and experience, and who were followed by such prominent Black American novelists and poets as Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin in the 1950s.



Another possible reason for his noticeable neglect here is perhaps due to his mainly US focused subject matter and political polemic (usually read in an angry, charismatic and confrontational manner) which has not been particularly well received by a largely conservative audience who, for the most part, dislikes and discourages debate. Nor has this political stance been that enthralling to those in our universities who prefer postmodern sophistication and semiotic analysis. His books include *The Coming of Lewis E. Scott* (1972), *Together — Sheila & Lewis* (1973), *A Collection of Works* (1973), *Time Came Hunting Time — Vietnam* (1978), *This Bitter Earth* (Hawkeye Series, 1978), *Nothing But A Man* (1981), *3 Shades* (with Lindsay Rabbitt and Apirana Taylor, 1981), *Hour of the Wolves* (1987), *In Celebration of my Spiritual Father* (1990) and more recently the collection of love poems, *A Woman Called Maasumaa* (1995).

Besides poetry he has also proved a competent exponent of the short story form, appearing in a number of New Zealand anthologies and publishing the books *Songs for my Father* (1983) and perhaps his most successful collection to date, *Black Family Letters from Boston* (1994). The latter is a compelling take on Black life in America from the perspective of a family member who writes letters from Boston to an anonymous family member living in exile in New Zealand, but who on another level is speaking to us all



about the Black struggle in America. As well as these works Scott has been an excellent promoter of Black writers and literature in New Zealand, travelling to schools to talk on Black writers and to perform his poetry. He has also edited collections of poetry and Black writing, e.g. *King's Cross Pub Poets* and *Each Other's Dreams*.

Scott's committed career to poetry has thus been an uneasy and unusual one. This collection of Scott's poems is an attempt to redress this lack of critical interest in Scott's work and to make available to the public the very best of his poetry from his 30-year career to date. The book should commend itself as an indispensable collection to those who have followed his work since the 1970s and to those who, like myself, are from a new generation of poets and readers in New Zealand and who haven't been fully exposed to his talent.


II

Earth Colours is a collection of strong thematic diversity. Each section of the book represents a colour of the earth (BLACK, RED, GREY, and BLUE) as well as perhaps hinting at the musical colour of notes and possibly a disruption to the colours of the American flag, e.g. GREY / BLACK replaces WHITE. This symbolizes a protest against white America and the American Dream as stated powerfully in his poetry:

Mr Undertaker
Don't let them put no Red/White/Blue
Over me at all
Don't let them speak no words of thanks
Don't let them speak no words at all
(‘Mr Undertaker — I Was In Vietnam’)

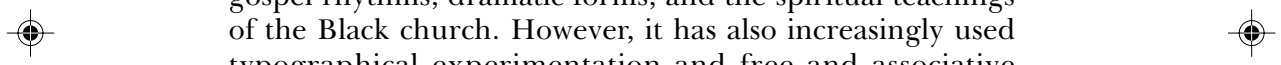
Each of these four sections then takes a particular colour as its thematic cue, for instance BLACK continues to work against the American Dream by looking at racial problems in America (some autobiographical), and by focusing on the disadvantaged Black/Indigenous community worldwide trying ‘to shit out’ their oppressive history. RED (the colour of blood) records Scott's response to Vietnam, while GREY addresses ‘the seeds of doubt’ and God, and explores aspects of creation, birth, life, and its complements: death and decay. And the last section BLUE reflects on love and sex. It is a book, then,





coloured by his life experiences as a Black man not only in American society, but also his experiences in Vietnam, and more recently in Africa, UK, Europe, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand.

In terms of technique Scott's poetry can perhaps be best associated with the New Black poetry that emerged in the 1960s through such strong and original voices as Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Bob Kaufmann, Sheila Perry, and LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka). Yet, essentially, he is part of a rich heritage of African-American writers who have contributed to American culture since the seventeenth-century, and who first arrived in the States as slaves from Africa — a life still being so graphically re-created in such recent books as Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1995).



This New Black poetry of the '60s was written during a time of great civil unrest in America with the Civil Rights movement picking up speed in the Southern States, and with events such as the assassination in 1968 of Martin Luther King. It is a mainly oral-based style that has been melded with Black jazz and blues, folk cadences, African chants, gospel rhythms, dramatic forms, and the spiritual teachings of the Black church. However, it has also increasingly used typographical experimentation and free and associative structure (as in the work of Wanda Coleman [see *Poetry NZ 18*] or in Scott's own 'A Death in the Family' and 'Threshold'), as well as utilizing a more explicit Black idiom. Accompanying this New Black voice has been an almost militant political conviction about the fate and circumstance of the Black/Indigenous races struggling throughout the world. This urgent social aspect is perhaps what makes it so distinct from the largely escapist writing emanating from the white establishment.

This political style has also come to be known as 'Black consciousness' raising and has been most prominent in the USA, the Carribean, England and Africa. In some respects the New Black poetry shares more than a few similarities with Maori/Pacific poets such as Apirana Taylor, Albert Wendt, John Pule, Robert Sullivan, and Hone Tuwhare. These poets have all become part of New Zealand's mainstream body of literature in recent years as it has increasingly matured and evolved during the twentieth-century.



Scott's poetry collected here fits in to this distinctive African-American tradition. It also shows his debt to his historical forebears and the likes of James Baldwin, perhaps the most important influence on his work. In particular it shows his debt to the Black oral tradition. This is a tradition that has not just been inherited from Africa but has perhaps been made possible by the oral learning and gospel singing in the Black churches.

The poetry of L E Scott is not always easy reading, however. Its voice is often harsh, angry, aggressive and lurid in its depiction of Black life and human behaviour. But a gentler tone is shown through his humour (especially in his family poems) and by his love poems collected here in the BLUE section.

Once describing his style as 'testifying' rather than the work of an entertaining 'performance poet', Scott is a man with a distinctive spiritual and political message. His origins are rooted in the Black church and there is a strong, gospel quality to his poetry, as evidenced by his rhythmic voice intonations and by his ability to use the voice as a jazz instrument. In some ways Scott's voice is also concerned with 'telling it how it is' for all people struggling for freedom/independence, whether it be in Somalia, South Africa, the United States of America, Indonesia, Aboriginal Australia or even right here in Aotearoa.

It is a voice, I believe, that is deserving of a place in our literary landscape and notably different from the work of other New Zealand poets. But it is a voice that needs to be *heard* and read ALOUD. Indeed, it is a voice I'm privileged to present and collect here in substantial form for the first time.

Mark Pirie
April 2000
Wellington







BLACK

*the ebony blue-black from the depth
of my soul will stand before your eyes
and be-tell your guilt*







SHARAQA

It is called the Sirocco from the Libyan deserts
By the Greeks on the island of Paros

The desert is its mother
But unlike the mother of man
It does not carry the offspring
For nine months
Its birth, life and death
Come within nine days

Three in creation

Three in life

Three in death

In its life — it is like man
Hot, steady, oppressive

A wind





REFLECTIONS ON A FATHER

i

My father to be sits in the cold living room, in the dark.

My mother to be lies awake in the dark, cold bedroom, waiting for him. She knows why he is sitting in the dark; she knows what will happen when he comes into the bedroom and what words she will have to say to him. Like her mother and her mother's mother, they have always known what words to say in times like this. She knows, as her mother and her mother knew, that those words they passed down to each other to give their men in times like this are but lies. Lies to keep that morsel of life in their men fom total death — just another day, a minute. So she lies, as her mother and her mother did.

My father to be sits in the living room and that morsel of life cries out: I am, I am, I AM A MAN.

He thinks about his father, his hand strikes out in the darkness, trying to destroy what he has become. I am a man, I am a man, I am not like you, I am a man. I will not let the white man make of me what he made of you. I don't fear the white man like you did, I don't fear him, I fear you, because you made me fear him.

My father to be strikes out in the darkness at himself.

My mother to be hears the door open, he's standing near the bed, the covers are slowly being pulled from over her body. She feels his hands, she reaches for his body, there is a moment of pain as a part of him pushes its way into her body. She holds on as he tries to go deeper than there is to go — to escape. It is time to say the words, yes, God, it is time to say the words her mother and her mother said in times like this. The words must be said, the words must be said now! Yes, the lie, speak the lie now, woman. Speak. Speak. 'Things will be better tomorrow.'





The seeds of my father to be, and the seeds of his
father and his father rush towards the eggs of my
mother to be. The seeds move toward the eggs fast,
faster, with all the bitterness, fear/hate, shame,
madness, sorrow, humiliation, the decay of the soul —
that morsel of life that wants to grow and live.

The seeds are coming to make me, to make me.
They have left the body of my father to be, they are
coming to make me. To make me in the image of my
father. Moving fast, faster in the body of my mother
to be. The seeds are coming, crying out: I am, I am, I am ...

ii
A woman cries out
As the child she is giving birth to
Tears its head from between the darkness
Of her legs.

The cries of the woman soften
As the child pulls itself deeper into life

The line is cut —
The beginning of the end
Is over

It is a man-child
The word is spoken
After the blood is washed away
Now he must walk into life
The after-birth has given up
All claim to him
Walking, walking, walking





BORN INTO IT

I cannot recall when I first heard the word
It just always seemed to have been there
Pre-existing
Waiting for me to come along
To become a part of my every day
And at some nebulous moment
The word came into my life
nigger

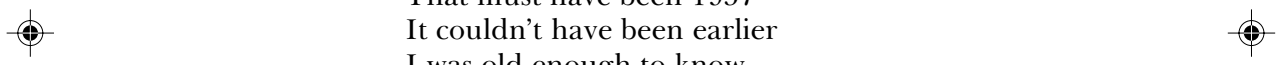




THE MAKING OF A CHILD

*As it was told to me—
Now I tell it to you*

i
I'm not sure
What year it was, but
I was somewhere between
A child going to be a man and
She — well
It was the same year, a winter
From that summer we met
It snowed for the first time
'Since many a long year'
The old folk said as they played
In the snow like us children



ii
That must have been 1957
It couldn't have been earlier
I was old enough to know
She was a girl and I was a boy
Tho, she wasn't really a girl, cause
She had hair there
It felt soft,
She smiled and said —
'And someday, you too will have hair
where I am touching you.'
'Will you still like touching me then?' I asked
She smiled and said —
'Perhaps even more than I do now.'

iii
I'm not sure, but
I think it was the same winter
My father beat me for nothing
When I told him what this white boy
From the other side of town called me



My mother cried
I had never seen her cry before
I thought grown folks never cried
But when I asked my father if I was a nigger
That was when he beat me for nothing
And walked out of the house,
Crying, like me

iv
It was the same winter
My mother died with my little sister
Inside her
My father and me
We rode in this big black car to the church
To see my mother and my little sister,
Who were asleep together in a long box
When I spoke to them,
They didn't say anything back to me at all
But my mother did smile at me
When my father picked me up and took me away
Outside, my father looked up at the sky
Where God lives and said —
'Why, why, why, why'

v
That was the same winter
My father had lost his job
He was always drinking
Sometimes he would forget to give me any food
And he would look at me a long time
He would cry and talk
To my mother and little sister
Who never came home after I saw them sleeping
In the church

vi
I think it was the same winter
I went to live with my father's sister
One morning I couldn't wake my father up
Some grown folks came and put him in a box





Just like the one my mother and my little sister
Had been in
I rode to the church in a big black car
With my father's sister
When I spoke to my father
He didn't say anything back to me at all
But when his sister pulled me away from the box
He was sleeping in,
My father smiled at me

vii
I'm not sure, but
I think it was the same winter
That I had my first real
Big birthday party at my father's
Sister's house
I was ten that winter





**STREET CORNER
IN AMERICA**

A young Black child
Standing on a corner
Falling snow
Summer clothes
Chilled by a silent
White world





PERRY STREET — BLACK WASTELAND

Perry Street —
A street in any ghettoville
Where life is fast, but death is faster
Where the value of life is decided by an argument
About who paid for the last shot of whisky, and death,
Death is waiting on the tip of the tongue
For the wrong answer to be given
Between two friends

Perry Street —
Where pussy is exchanged with the white man
For the price of getting the monkey off their backs
The monkey that he put there
The white cops
Riding slowly through niggerville,
Looking for a blow job
While they uphold the law of the land
Black cops
Riding through fast,
Believing that they themselves
Have escaped their birth

Perry Street —
Where life is always funky
And the white man keeps pumping in shit
On a daily basis

Perry Street —
Where Blacks and Hispanics live side by side
But there's more than just a life style
That keeps them from communicating
The game that is being acted out
Between these two oppressed people
Is the same game that America is all about —
Everybody needs niggers
To give their life value





Perry Street —
My home
Where the garbage in the hallway
Doesn't belong to anyone in the house
The rats know it
And that's why when you meet them in the hallway,
They don't run
They stare eyeball to eyeball
And dare you to fuck with them
The garbage has the stink of mankind on it,
And besides the rats, that's who it belongs to





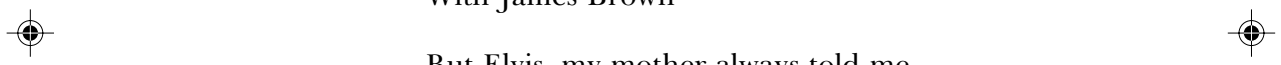
EULOGY TO ELVIS

Oh Elvis
You hound dog
You did do a bit of sniffin'
And when I read
That you had died at Graceland
Even my black heart
Almost forgave you

But then I thought about
All that money you'd made
You were such a bold white nigger
That you didn't even blacken your face
To put some shade on your act

I almost bought one of your records
By mistake —
I don't know how the lady confused you
With James Brown

But Elvis, my mother always told me
Never speak ill of the dead
So I'm not going to accuse you of rippin'
But I still can't forgive you
For what you said in the 1950s
The only thing a nigger could do for you
Was to clean your blue suede shoes





BURNING FINGERS

Watch a flame on a candle
Take two fingers
Hold them closely around the flame
Let the pain linger just for a moment
Or better yet —
Until the whole body feels the pain

Take the two burnt fingers
Put the flame out
You have just been introduced
To the first moment of being a Black man





SHADES OF TWO BROTHERS

The African-American poet says —
My eyes are dying
I can no longer see
Which way my life is going

The African poet says —
Even when you stretch your neck
You will not be able to look
Behind the mountain
You must live the moments of life
That will take you there

The African-American poet says —
Fate is beating the life out of me
I no longer feel strong

The African poet says —
The crocodile is strong
Only in water

The African-American poet says —
I will close my eyes
It is time to sleep

The African poet says —
The shield and the forehead
Do not hide

The African-American poet says —
Maybe in death
My soul will come to know
The land that gave my skin its colour





The African poet says —
The colour is older than the land
And the Nile
Mountains do not meet
But humans do

The African-American poet says —
I have never known happiness
Living among man
I have never known the Nile
Nor have I ever drunk
From its source of life

The African poet says —
No village is left out
By the sun and moon
They are the eyes of God
You must open your eyes, my brother
And face the crocodile
When he comes on land





STEVE BIKO

Man
Child of woman
Must a man die to be free?
There is no freedom in death
Words upon my lips are silent
Touch my lips, world
They are closed
Cold
As the forever state of death on them
In this bottomless, cold clay
Freedom-less place
You now ask forgiveness





SOUTH AFRICA ELECTION DAY

For those who have died

Truly, Black people must be God's first-born, for we are asked to forgive a multitude of white sins visited upon us and at the same time carry on the belief that humankind's humanity somehow rests in the act of our forgiveness. So many Black people on the face of this earth have died for no other reason than that they were not white.

Truly, Black people must be God's first-born, for in the midst of so much hate and deprivation, not only have we been asked to strive but to forgive as we have buried so many Steve Bikos and Dr Kings. What a wondrous gift and burden God has bestowed upon us, that in our hands so much responsibility rests while those who have claimed this very position have boot-marched over it.

Truly, Black people must be God's first-born, for we have been asked to toil and plant the seeds and yet have been denied a full taste of the harvest. And as we have brought this food to the tables of others, we have been asked to do so with a subservient and humble smile. We have been asked to breast-feed the very ones who for so long carried on the mantle of our oppression. Even as we have been murdered we have been charged with being the beasts among humanity.

Truly, Black people must be God's first-born, for we have been through the fires of Sharpeville, Mississippi, Soweto, Robin Island and Alabama and now the jailers of those places are asking those who have been so unfairly jailed not to seek revenge or retribution.

Truly, Black people must be God's first-born, for having survived with a belief far transcending the fear of God, and against all the odds, the burden of forgiveness has now been added to the weight we have carried. Let this be the warning to the second-born. Let this be the last time.





Truly, Black people must be God's first-born and as James Baldwin said, speaking of the second-born: 'It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent'

Truly





MY FATHER — THE GREAT POET

For the family

When we moved North to the Promised Land
From Cordele, a small town in Georgia
Located near the american dream
I was scared
My mother said
I would be going to school
With nice little white children
Who would not grow up to be
Like mean white people

My first day of school
I had a white teacher
She was friendly
Asked me about my family
What kind of work my father did

He's a sharecropper and a Great Poet
I said

She smiled the same kind of smile
I had seen in Cordele
That white women gave my mother
When they came and waited outside
For their washed and ironed clothing

What kind of poetry
Does your father write?
She wanted to know
He doesn't write
I said
How can he be a poet
If he doesn't write, are you sure
Little boy, your father is a poet





My mother says he's a poet,
I told her,
Every time she looks at us 15 children
My mother says to my father —
You have the touch of a Great Poet
Look at our beautiful creations

Oh my God
My teacher said —
15 nigger children your mama had?

When I went home
From my first day at school
My mother asked me all about it
And how did I like my teacher
I told her that my teacher
Must be from Cordele too
My mother looked sad
And tried to smile

Well, she said
I guess the North
Is a part of the american dream too

That night at the dinner table
My mother looked at my father
And said —
Great Poet
We have another creation growing





STOP SIGN

Hey world
There's a stop sign
Up there in front of you
And it looks like
It has been painted black
To me

Hey world
That's not a black
Stop sign up there
It's a Black man
With a gun in his hand





I BEEN THERE CHILD

For my Mother

Lord-Child

I ain't broke yet
and I knows where I been
I knows where I got to go
and I knows what I got to do
to get there

Lord-Child

ain't got no mo'e smiles now
and I been mad so long
done got tired
ain't got no mo'e chillums to raise
my man been gone a long time now
trials and troubles even with you, God
but I ain't never left your side

Lord-Child

and I just like I am
when I came here
all by myself
but I ain't broke yet





GRANDMA

The old lady smiled
Under the shade tree
One could not tell
That there were new wrinkles on her face

Boy — she said
Do you know how old I am?
I, knowing her all my life, replied
No, ma'am
She shook her head

Boy — she said
I rightly don't know myself
But I do know one thing
I done seen the sky
When it had no colour
I done seen a doctor who had no medicine
But whatever it was I had
He took it away

Boy — have you seen them things?
I, knowing her all my life, replied
No, ma'am
She shook her head

Boy — she said,
I gonna tell you another thing
That I done seen
I done seen the sun
When it had no colour
I done seen the stars so close
(lifting her arms)
That I could have took me one
But I knew they belonged to God





Boy — have you ever seen them things?
I, knowing her all my life, replied
No, ma'am
She shook her head

Boy — she said,
How old are you?
I, knowing her all my life, replied
27 years, ma'am
She shook her head
You got time yet, son
She said





COLLAGE

In Way-Cross Georgia
Where the crosses still
Burn at night, mothers call out:
Y'all come on outta the front yard chillums
Sun fittin' to sit in them trees
'bout time to shut the door
Y'all can watch the sun sit
Through the keyhole

An old man
Who has lived beyond his fear
Stands on the front porch and shouts
into the night:

I won't see it
Time won't let me taste it
But it's coming
I ain't go'n rest in my grave
Until that day, it's coming

In Way-Cross Georgia
A white man stands on the front porch
Watching the sun coming up
Walking down the dirt road, racing the sun,
is Rebecca —

The cook/cleaning girl of 50 years
Two dead husbands, and neither has a headstone
She hopes one day to see her way clear
To put their names just above their heads
'Going to be a fine day, Becky'
The white man on the porch calls out
'If the Lord willing' she says

In Way-Cross Georgia
The word comes with new day —
Last night, last night, last night
They burnt a cross, they hung a man





A woman he took as his wife
Runs towards the tree hollering out:
Cut him down, cut him down,
Look where they have cut my man
Cut him down, cut him down.
Somebody help me close his eyes

Last night, last night, last night
They burnt a cross, they hung a man —
As the word came touching the living
The red clay road became a sea of black faces
From afar they came to gather, to gather
beneath the tree

A woman he took as his wife cries out:
Jes' you 'member, jes' you 'member
When God come — He go'n know
What they done to you
Somebody help me close his eyes
Till that day, till that day



In Way-Cross Georgia
Saturday night. Dance floor full,
everybody jumpin'
Shining black faces, young folks struttin'
B B King and Lucille talking about the rent ain't paid
And some fool of a woman done took his money
Done him wrong and took a Greyhound bus go'n North



In a red dress/high heels/a sunflower in her hair
Standing in the centre of the dance floor
Laughing a womanly laugh, she calls out
I go'n have fun tonight, honey
'Cause ain't no white man promised no nigger
a tomorrow

Girl, hush your mouth





In Way-Cross Georgia
Sunday morning. God's day
Standing in the pulpit
The preacher-man raises his arms —
 Welcome, Welcome
 To the house of the Lord, children
Amen





FINGERPRINTS

For James Baldwin

Besides lying with a beautiful woman who will grow old and die, what else is beyond the womb? Do not state: the graveyard. It is a part of birth.

Child, what you got on your mind so bothersome to you?

Mama, I don't have nothing on my mind so bothersome to me.

Child, I the one done birth you into this here world and I know when you got troubles in your life and when you ain't got none. I gave birth to that life you got, so I know, and don't you get to thinking that I don't know. So now go'n and tell me what I done ask you a minute ago and stop trying to fool your Mama.

Mama, is it true that before my father died he said:
Woman, give me a glass of ice cold water, I don't want to leave this world thirsty?

No answer. The birth is over. The child has his father's hands. Long dark fingers. And what will his last words in life be?

Child, before you go, take this:
There is nothing greater than time. Each day this side of the womb you become richer. But know too that each step is a part of the last step. And with that step, look back once, and whatever you see or don't see, blame no one.

Mama, before I go: Are we the victims of time?

No answer.
She kissed the tips of his fingers.





Place of birth

It is another country within America, and it has a whole set of complex unspoken deadly rules which either protect or destroy the souls of those who live there. It is a place where the words 'Law and Order' mean it's nigger-time again. Darwin was a white man who told the truth: Only the strong ...

Harlem

A different shade of the american dream, where the blue-black folks party soulfully from the eagle flies on Friday to Sunday morning — and then go to church all day Sunday, praying and telling God: Look, baby, don't send no boy to do a man's job, this time come yourself.

Home birth

The room of birth is more than Black on Black crime, the pimps and the hustlers, the bitter life and sweet death. It's more than just a place where the Harlem Renaissance went down and a white man called it Nigger Heaven. When will the blind of the world learn to see?

South-Africa-America

How many colours can a Black man be?

The image that scurries before your still-life eyes is not of me. My father's eyes were a dusty brown-red when he left this world. He kept staring until the fingertips of the undertaker closed his eyelids and I closed the coffin.

In this box is a life you did not see, but he was here when you came into the room. Open the lid. The undertaker could only partly close my father's eyes. He wants to see you who cannot see.

The Devil's eyes are not red. The Devil cannot see.

In the living room, where you never came, one learns to survive the man-made rules of birth.





The girl next door

In this house live the believers of God. The daughter is as fine as a brick shit-house in the winter time. Never mind that the toilet don't flush.

She walks through the living room. Sweet child evangelist plays the piano in the storefront church from the age of 13 to 44 and still believes in God. But the church closes down and the rent man takes the piano. Jesus lives in us all, but some of us keep him in the guest room.

The girl next door made love for the first time last night. That is, she got touched there. It wasn't me, but the neighbour across the street. I got to her knee once. But she's not in trouble, only the fingers touched her.

She's married now.

Had three children, one died and two got killed. One by a policeman who didn't like uppity niggers and the other one, well, some said he jumped and some said he was pushed (but he's still dead). It was a subway train near 125th Street. Nobody knew who he was until they checked his fingerprints.

Piano

She still plays the piano that the rent man never brought back. The eyes of the once God-Child look beyond the distance of the jungle. They seek a way to escape the white hand of man-made destiny. Yes. She plays the piano that only she can see. The blind would say she's mad. But they don't see that she's got red eyes.

Seasons

I'm growing old and my eyes are becoming a deeper dusty brown-red. My father has been dead for a generation and my fingers are being chilled by a westerly wind.

The voice of mother

Child, get up out of that bed. I know you sick and mad, but you ain't tired. I know you feeling old but you ain't.





You my son and now you got a son. You got to get up
'cause you got a whole lot more to do, and you ain't seen
the half of it yet. This is just one of them streets we got to
walk sometimes. Child, this ain't the end of life, what you
looking back for?

Walk with me Mama, just for a little ways, until I feel
stronger.

The day after
Woman, child, we gonna make it round this corner. Those
with the long black fingers before us made it and their
fingers shaped us. We are their prints.

The fire next time.
It is the blind of the world who will burn in the fire unless
they learn to see what their fingers have shaped.





THRESHOLD

Oceans in my head
Fireflies from my childhood
Are drowning out
The girl next door
Always was gay
And prince charles' father
Is the biggest pimp around
eric clapton would trade his dick for pigmentation
And mick jagger would do the same to his mama
All these ghosts
Want to suck on the dead tits of Mahalia Jackson
Dancing on Sunday morning
Following the slave ships
To the New World
And other ghosts telling Jesse Jackson
He would be better mayor of Black Washington DC
Than President of ghost white house america
Please let it be known

The Witch-Doctor is watching you

No
I don't want to burn the american flag
I want to wipe my ass on the confederate one
Bill Cosby is the best loved father in america
Fatherhood and Vietnam have become the offspring
Of hollywood
The girl next door to the next door girl
Is not gay
And she says
Inside her vagina
Is the residence of Roe versus Wade
And her next door neighbours
Are God's nine little supreme helpers
Better known as the U.S. Supreme Court
Please let it be known

The Witch-Doctor is watching you





In time
His running mate will be
Peter Pan —
Unless he gets busted
For flying high on cocaine
oliver north
Is the candy-man
The late Sammy Davis Jr was singing about
Please let it be known
 The Witch-Doctor is watching you

Casper, the friendly ghost
Is a political tool
Just like the man Bush kidnapped from Panama —
Noriega, Noriega, where are you?
The mafia — u.s. made
Every american president who stuck his dick in the Philippines
Should also be indicted
Israel

 Gas chambers
England offering Uganda
They refusing
Creating a state
Kidnapping Arabs
Drinking sand
 Calling it holy water

What is the difference between
Hitler's Germany
And
South Africa
The colour Black
Please let it be known
 The Witch-Doctor is watching you

Winnie, Winnie, Winnie
 We don't believe what they say about you
Please let it be known
 The Witch-Doctor is watching you





In another black land
Dreamtime
 A race of Black people
Are struggling to survive white genocide
The ghost-invaders who ride
On the backs of the kangaroo
Dreamtime
Dreamtime
Dreamtime
Two Namorodo Spirits and
A Rainbow Snake
Spirit of our people long ago
And spirit of our people now and coming

We are the tribes
Kamilaroi
 Wiradjuri
 Narrungdera
 Ngunawal
 We are more

But in Tasmania
 Almost gone
The hand of the ghost touched them
Many of them now live in
 Dreamtime
With those who have walked this land for 50,000 years
The ghosts who came in long tall ships
Are trying to change the meaning of time
The Rainbow Snake of the
 Dreamtime
 Namorodo
Spirit of the Crocodile
Will take them below the water
Please let it be known
 The Witch-Doctor is watching you





In another black land
Kanakya
 The colonial ghosts from france call it
new caledonia
They too
Will become rotten meat for the Crocodile
In another black land
Aotearoa
 The Maori call it
The ghosts from england renamed it
new zealand
 The voices of struggle say —
The ghosts will learn to drink salt water
As they make their way back to their burial lands
Please let it be known
 The Witch-Doctor is watching you





A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

*Nadia Messih, the Egyptian woman, speaking of James Baldwin,
said: He is the Fourth Pyramid*

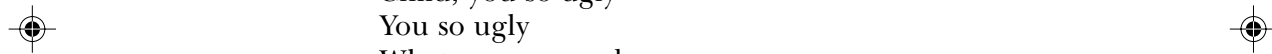
Go tell it on the Mountain
People, the rent has been paid
The landlord has collected the last dollar
The house is still unclean
And in the backyard
 (In the whiteout mind of the landlord)
A woman gave birth
Child —
Where were you born?
In a land that did not see the woman
Who carried me for nine months
In a land that did not search my afterbirth
For
Evidence of Things Not Seen
Two Sons:
Richard — Native Son
James — Notes of a Native Son
What truth, beyond death,
Do you now know in common?
The Black Boy came from Mississippi
The Black Boy came from Harlem


Voice One:
I smelt fear in my Mama's black belly
We slept on a pallet
In an unclean house
I know that God and the landlord
Are both without shadows
Their births were not recorded
They live without coming from seeds
As only filth can
God
Is being paid off
To look the other way —



Everyone knows
On Sunday morning at 11 am
Some go to church at the big house
Some go to the barn
Some go to the storefront
 What some should do
Get off your knees
Pull a gun and rob the church
See if God can bleed
Shoot


Voice Two:
Preacher-man, preacher-man, preacher-man,
What did you do to your child?
I took him to the storefront church
And said —
You so ugly, you so ugly,
Ain't nothing can save you but the Lord
Naked yourself, naked yourself,
I shall beat the hell out of you
Child, you so ugly
You so ugly
What you gonna do
On New Year's Eve
Child, what you gonna do
Speak child —
 I'll be at somebody's church
Until after midnight
Dancing on water, dancing on water,
Getting drunk on the flow of time
Knowing by morning
I'll be clean
 My father has ordained me
I am an evangelist child at the age of 12
The church I love
Harlem I love
The church songs
The jazz music






Walking on water
Blues for Mr Charlie
Another Black man going mad
In an unclean house
To save your mind
Shoot

Nobody Knows My Name
What's your mama's name?
Did you have a daddy?
What house did you live in?
I know death is not an act of love, but I should kill you before I
die. It is not right that children should come after my death
and have to kill something that already should be dead.
My rage
is not hate
but age
I can no longer believe
Fate
Will deal retribution



You cannot leave a madman
In the house with your children
He will drink their blood
(In the whiteout mind of the landlord)
Your children will have to pay the same rent
Old men must



Remember
They can kill
Before they go to sleep
And young men
Must learn before they are old
Landlord —
I know your name
Know who your mama was
My daddy knew your daddy
I know you
Know what unclean house you live in
Shoot



Another Country

My father's sperm was my first country
My mother's womb was my first world
In the backyard we gather
A family member has died
Don't forget to turn the head of the loved one
Toward the East

(In the whiteout mind of the landlord)

He wants to raise the rent
On the living and the dead
After the burial

We will deal with him
And tell the grandchildren
Why there was a burial and
A killing today

Tell the children

Don't let strangers
Throw the dirt on the loved one
It's not a part of our culture

Gather the family hands

Let us cover the dead one
And ask the gods for rain
For this new seed in the earth
When the day is over
And the sun is setting
Take aim, and in that direction
Shoot

Going To Meet The Man
On sight
Shoot

Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone
Child,
Can you hear it
Can you hear it
Way over there
Way over there
Where your grandfather
Used to sing





Way over there
Where your grandmother
Used to sing
Child,
Can you hear it
Way over there
Where your mama and daddy
Used to sing
Way over there
Where you came into this world
Child,
Can you hear it
Way over there

Tell me how long
Tell me how long
Nobody's in the station
But the ticket-man
Tell me how long

Child,
Can you hear it
Way over there
No need to worry
Train's been gone
No need

The Price Of The Ticket

Shoot

No Name In The Street
Out here in the street
You so ugly, child, can you be mine
And other folks speaking
With dangerous tongues
Whose little pretty boy are you?
And the girl around the corner
The same question in a different style:
Where did you stay last night
Before you came to church?
Out selling roses for Jesus
On the corner





Last spring
Through the fall
Standing through the winter
Near
The storefront church
Selling tickets to heaven
The safe house
Jesus I knew your last name once
The preacher-man said
But on the corner
Nobody knows your address
Nor your occupation
Your name is not out here
On the street
When I was 12
My father said
God is God
Take the plate, child
And pimp the old
Father
What did you say
About being an ugly child?
Some of the things you say
Come from a dark room



I ordained, I ordained, I ordained you,
In the name of your father
Out here, out here, out here,
Going through the seasons
Shoot

One Day When I Was Lost
I looked up
There I was, there I was,
Standing in front of my father's church
In my father's house
Shoot





Just Above My Head
Don't take me to no graveyard
Don't take me to no graveyard
 In exile
Don't take me to no graveyard
 Put my name
Just above my head
 Tell them, tell them,
Another native son
 Gone
Tell them
 Harlem Quartet
One more song

Tell them
I have paid
 The Price Of The Ticket
Tell them
I bear witness
 Evidence Of Things Not Seen
Shoot





DISCIPLES OF THE BLACK CHURCH

Church

It is a well of sounds

A wet womb

Voice, seeds, fingerprints embedded

In mud walls

Souls glittering in a wooden dipped bucket

Being hauled to the surface

Making its own sound

Another history of the rope

Miss Billie Holiday's

Strange Fruit

Somebody take that body

Somebody take that man

Somebody take that body

Somebody take that woman

Somebody take that body

Somebody take that child

Somebody take that body

Down from that strange fruit tree

The Black Church

There are bones here — dry bones — bleaching

Bent over backs chasing the clouds

Trying to stay in the shade

Cotton fields

Dragging that sack toward Sunday

Saturday night is a bridge between heaven and hell

Take your shoes off

When you get to either place

Miss Bessie Smith

Blood, blood, blood everywhere on the road

Sing for us, honey

'Tain't nobody's business if I do

'Tain't nobody's business if I do

If'n I sing the blues, blue-black

'Fore church time





The Black Church
Mr Paul Robeson
Government
Taking your passport
Communist, communist,
Under the bed
Communist, communist,
All in their heads
Taking your passport
Thinking it had something to do
With the colour of your head
Blue-black
Prince
Time
Is on your side
Choir
Sing for Mr Robeson
That Ol' River Song



The Black Church
Precious Lord, take my hand,
Hear my song
Let the evangelist man-child sing
Mr James Baldwin
Witness, witness for us
People pay for what they do
and still more, for what they
have become. And they pay for
it simply: by the lives they lead.
Miss Maya Angelou,
Tell them to bring us another cool drink of water
And child, don't we know,
Why a caged bird sings
Mr Curtis Mayfield,
Bring us on home
People get ready
There's a train to Jordan





You don't need no money
You just thank the Lord
There ain't no room
For the worthless sinner
Who would turn on mankind
Just to save his own

Somebody
Pull the bucket from the well
We are thirsting
Miss Sarah Vaughan

We miss you
I just want to stand here
Until the flowers bloom
Come rain or come shine

The Black Church
Ella, Ella, Ella Fitzgerald
Scatting all across your hurt
Scatting across your pain

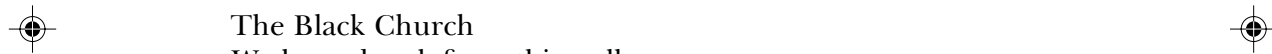
Then singing like that
At the Apollo Theatre
You didn't know if you wanted to sing or dance
And Harlem — the Mecca — took on another star
Scat scat scat scat
Scat back at you
Miss Fitzgerald

The Black Church
Mr Ellington
Mr Duke Ellington
Why are you standing over there smiling
On 125th Street
And then you go
Snap, snap, snap
You and Billy Strayhorn
Take the A-train to Harlem
Sitting next to a sophisticated lady
Love you madly
Snap, snap, snap





The Black Church
Some of us moved north
Didn't Sweet Jesus promise the Promised Land
 To the slaves?
The new plantations
 General Motors
 Ford Motor Company
 US Steel Corporation
 Basketball courts
And Berry Gordy
 Fathered Motown
Marvin Gaye asked the question
 What's goin' on?
 Tell me what's goin' on
Evil can be real
The father should not bury the son
I won't even mention the other
(What was asked of Abraham)
 Father, father, father
 There's too many of us dying



The Black Church
We have drunk from this well
 Throughout time
 slave
 nigger
 boy
 old boy
 coloured
 negro
 Black
 Afro-American
 African American
All the colours that speak of the water
 In the well
What makes you think
 Miss Mahalia Jackson
Could sing the way she did
If she hadn't seen
What the bucket pulled from the well?





In the church this morning, Lord
This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine
Let it shine
To save my soul
There have been lives upon the face of this here earth
Who didn't know nothin' but misery
And the shadow of that sin
Is still with us

Miss Mahalia Jackson
The choir is ready
I'm gonna lay down my burdens
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
I'm gonna lay down my burdens
Down by the riverside
And the children
Will be born again

The Black Church
Miss Dinah Washington
Take those sleeping pills out of your mouth
And sing for us who didn't make it to church
This Sunday
One more time
What a difference a day can make
Just twenty-four little hours
Thank you
Miss Washington
Rest yourself now

The Black Church
The dead have always heard the singing
The graveyard
Was never that far away
From the church door





The dead
Do not walk until after sundown
Pine trees
Adding to the shadows in the dark
Their roots drinking from the well
A womb made of water
And the chicken
Became known as the gospel bird
Cause everybody fed it
To the guest preacher on Sunday
Others who were not so spiritual
Call the other part of the chicken
The parson's nose
And after so many chicken dinners
Mr Charlie Parker
Became known as
Bird
Birdland
Bebop
bebop
bebop



The Black Church
Big meeting day
Coming to clean the graveyard
The women doing that

The elders of the church
The men
Drinking white lightning
Among the pine trees
I told you about before
And until you have seen the gathering of sunflowers
Near a graveyard
What sunsets could you have seen?
Don't put me in your bad dreams
I have enough of my own
A scarecrow dancing with whom?
Give me a sunflower
And I will dance with the moon





Miss Nina Simone
What did you say?
Here comes the sun, little darlin'
Here comes the sun, little darlin'
That's alright, that's alright

The Black Church
Can somebody say
Amen





AMERICA — A WALL OF WHITE

sitting on a toilet
smoking
taking a shit —
thinking about caucasians
pushing hard
to shit it out





NOTHING BUT A MAN

I'm not the shit
You shit
The stink is in your own nose
I'm not the come
You come
The questionable question
Is in your own man-not-hood

I'm not your son
You raped my mother
You called my sister wench
Your son raped her
Your wife wore a white hat and white dress
Made all the slaves call her Miss Ann
Looking the other way, believing
She had some self-respect

I'm not the sex
Between your woman's legs
I'm the fear in your mind
You made your daughter wear
A white hat and white dress too
Made all the slaves call her
Miss Southern Belle
She married your brother
From New England
Lord, the name of the plantation ain't
Never changed
Old Massa, Old Massa —
Look what slavery has done to you

I'm not the ivory white soap
That you use to try and whitewash
Your venereal
History of slavery





The ivory blue-black from the depth
Of my soul will stand before your eyes
And be-tell your guilt

I'm not the mad-dog-man in your house
Speaking of god and killing his imaginary children
Tho I am mad, I'm in your house I built, and
I've seen your god and I have learned
Killing the killer is an act of my God

I'm not the noose
Of hate around your neck
It's your own hate that has
Ensnared you in this death-trap
I'm the slip-knot
I tighten because my freedom is restricted
I'm pulling for freedom
You're hanging on
Because of your old/new ways



I'm not the cannon-ball
In the cannon
That was placed there by time
It is the distant drum beating
As time, fire and the cannon
Come into an act of freedom



There ain't no mo'e cotton to be picked
There ain't no mo'e fear to be feared
There ain't no mo'e time for waiting
There ain't no mo'e talk to be talkin'
The circle has come to meet its other end
You're standing in front of the cannon

Nothing but a man — I





RED

*there are no enemies here
the wind says through the trees
only the dead*







**ON THE EIGHTH DAY GOD MADE
ALL FOOLS**

September 13, 1967
I went to Vietnam to kill,
I did.
I didn't know better.
Since then I have learned — no less guilty today.
But time, time with its many faces has come after me.

Time came hunting time —
Who made the choice that I should live to speak of Vietnam.
Surely not I. For me, it was time, time came hunting time
Buddha sits under his tree.

I, like many American boys in my youth, played war games and
Cowboys and Indians. From what I recall of those times, I never
wanted to be anything but an American soldier or a Cowboy in a
white hat depending on what kind of war we were having that
day.

I never wanted to be a bad guy, for I had learned from television
that bad guys always got killed. I also recall that when I shot
one of the bad guys with my play-gun and he wouldn't play
dead, I would get mad as hell. I would get mad because I knew
and he knew (from watching the same bad guys on TV) that they
always got it in the end.

So who made the choice, that I should live to speak of Vietnam?
Surely not I. For I had long since learned in my youth that bad
guys always got killed in the end.

September 13, 1967, a bad guy went to Vietnam. The television
lied.





VALLE DE LOS CAIDOS

It has been said
The enemy and his enemies
Lie in silence in this valley
The valley of the fallen
The silence of the valley
Speaks not the cry of their war

Both sides
Who sent their enemies
Now speak of the beauty of this valley
That has become the graveyard
Common to both

There are no enemies here
The wind says through the trees
Only the dead

I see no beauty in this valley
Names on tombstones
Enemies and enemies alike
The valley is as the names they carry
It seems winter without a summer

Yet,
Both sides
Come and speak of the beauty here
Where those they sent now lie in silence

The wind speaks through the trees
There is no beauty
Only the dead
There is no honour here
Only the common graveyard
Of those who passed each other in war





I'm told it is peaceful
For those who now rest here
It is the living who come seeking
The beauty of the dead in this valley

The wind says through the trees
There is no beauty here
Only the dead





M.I.A.

Specialist Four David Munoz —
A man on my wrist
A faceless name

A man — a date, 5/13/69
A reason — Missing In Action
A state of animation
Between life and death
Reality unknown

He is the aftermath
Of peace with honour —
He was there — is
Not here after the honour
Address unknown
Between here and there

A man on my wrist
The war is over
David is not here
Life and death
A state unknown





**THE MANY WHO DIED AND THE FEW
WHO KNEW WHY**

It is a strange world we live in
We come just for a moment
We count it by the years
And we die forever

If we touch
As you and I have
At that moment
When the moment can no longer
Be counted as a part of your years
It becomes a timeless time
With only the moment
Being counted by me
And in the moment before
Which we both knew
Now only I —

It is a strange world
You gave your moments to





STARS AND STRIPES

US Army weekly newspaper in Vietnam

Reading the obituaries
Daily —
Being informed of long-lost friends
And the destiny of their lives

Playing a game of russian roulette
Each time I close my eyes
Awakening each morning to victory
Viciously bedamning it

A new state of death
Being defined when the mind is dead
Someone please be kind
And pronounce me dead —
Please

Reading the obituaries
Daily —
To see if I must accept a new state of reality





THE VIETNAMESE POET SAYS

The Vietnamese poet says:
That if life is so joyful —
Why is it that the first thing
A child does when it is born
Is to cry

The Vietnamese poet says:
That if life is so joyful —
Why is it
The first thing the newly born feels
Is pain to awaken it to life





STRANGER IN VIETNAM

The next time
You see a stranger
And the stranger reminds you of
Your image of God

Ask the stranger
To show you his passport

I was told
That God carries
An American passport





TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

To whom it may concern:
this telegram is to inform
you of the death of your son
in Vietnam

Please let us know if you have one more
Sincerely yours
The American People





MR UNDERTAKER — I WAS IN VIETNAM

Death —
Mr Undertaker
Don't let them look at me too long
Don't let them touch me at all
If one such as mother begins to cry
Don't let her cry too long but,
Don't let her touch me at all

Mr Undertaker
Don't let them put no Red/White/Blue
Over me at all
Don't let them speak no words of thanks
Don't let them speak no words at all
Don't let them look at me too long
If one such as mother begins to cry
Don't let her cry too long but,
Don't let her touch me at all

Mr Undertaker
Don't put no flowers to symbolise death for me
Don't let them put their names in any book
Near where I lie
Don't let them put no Red/White/Blue
Over me at all

Mr Undertaker
Don't wear no black suit for me
Take off that stone face of yours
Open up the windows in this dark place
Let some light shine where I lie

Mr Undertaker, Mr Undertaker,
Bury me today
I've been here too long already





GREY

*the surface of the water
cannot be dipped
and remains in deep colour*







AND THE WORLD WAS DARK

You and I, friend
You and I,
Let us dig up the dead
And force their eyes open
And if the dead's eyes
Have been eaten by worms
We will replace them
With the eyes of the freshly dead
So they will see
How we have survived the light





THIS BITTER EARTH

For Dinah Washington

This bitter earth
That man calls home
Is nothing short of
A blind man trying to find
His way out of a burning house
A child wakes in the morning
From the womb
And there was life
The earthly father says
Open your eyes child
For tomorrow you will be
Alone

In the world of man

The image of whiteness asks
Is the child of day or night?
It is a child of night
With that answer
Destiny in part
Has been written
Only the children of daylight
Will not suffer from the white hand
Of man-made fate
And death smiles knowing
That in the end
All children
Return to darkness

This bitter earth
That the remains of man
Become a part of
After death kisses life
Back to dust
I weep the tears of salt
Man
Is not the ideal of mankind
This bitter earth
Dust, clay, hand, birth, images of whom?





THREE SISTERS OF FATE

I, Clotho,
the source, a moment of the beginning moment
the spinner, I am Godlike
I seek no worship or praise
for my gift of thread
the spinning of the thread
is my source of being
you were meant to be
I, Clotho, the first sister of fate
the thread has been given

I, Lachesis,
the source of time, endless,
the gift of it to you is not,
it is timed
I do not oppose the will in the time given
as you should not oppose its length
I, Lachesis, the giver of time
the longevity
is determined by the giver
I, Lachesis, the second sister of fate
the thread has been given its length

I, Atropos,
the source of life and death
I have the power of neither
I give them both
I am the cutter of the thread
at the moment it is cut
you have received life
when it is cut again
you have received death
another has begun
I, Atropos, the third sister of fate
the blind one
have cut the thread
life and death have begun





When the ice melts
The first signs of life will be

Movement iii

Clay

Ungodly shape
Offspring from a big bang
Awaiting the carving fingers
Of the three goddesses

And Molech
God of sacrifice
Must touch the clay too
And within this substance
Of pre-humanism
Grey matter
Encircled (in time) by the body
Are the ribs of woman and man
Bone is

The only element
That is predestined

Movement iv

With the second rain
The sun god will come
The bones will dry
And rot

The afterbirth
Left in clay-mud
Will wrap them again
Beyond our understanding





WHO CRAWLED FROM WOMAN

Mother
open your legs
your child is trying to come home
he wants to go back
beyond the first nine months

Child
the mother says
closing her legs
I'm too old
to bear the pain again





BREAKING THE APRON STRINGS

When my grandmother died
I had to kiss her three times
(I was scared)
My mother said
Do not fear death
It is only the last stranger
You meet in life
When I was 13
My mother kissed me
Three times
(I thought I was going to die)
My mother said
Now, my child, you must carry
Your own sins





**THREE SETS OF PEOPLE LOOKING
AFTER EACH OTHER**

When I was a little boy
I was told by my Mama to watch
My grandmother and
My grandfather sitting under
The shade tree
And each time the sun moved
They moved
They went all around the tree
Me too
And when the sun set
They told me
It was time to go in the house





FEELING CLEAN

Gathering in the bathtub of your mind
Rain pouring down outside
Steam sweating your body with childhood memories
If you turn the bathroom light off
Close the window
The only thing you will hear
Is a child playing in a tin tub of water
Remembering the womb





**'I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE KNOWN
YOUR FATHER'**

Said the part-time minister

The part-time minister
Looked into the faces of those who had gathered
There were too many flowers around the body
They smelled bad

I called the dead man father
The part-time minister called him a Child of God
There were too many flowers around the body
They smelled bad
There was no love

The part-time minister spoke his godly words —
Raising his hands
'We will now view for the last time this Child of God'

⊕ This body that I called father
The part-time minister was more kind
He called him a Child of God ⊕

I looked at his face — there was no peace
He was tired
Even in death, he was tired
Someone closed his eyes wrong
The skin was too tight
Will someone help this Child of God
There were too many flowers around the body
They smelled bad
There was no love

This body, this man, this father, this Child of God
They didn't do his face right
His face is still tired
They should have given him a peaceful face





The part-time minister spoke his good words
Told the living who had gathered around the dead body
That this man had fought his last fight in life
And that we who had gathered
Will some day have to do what he had done

He closed the service with a prayer to God
On behalf of the family

My brother paid the part-time minister 25 dollars
'I would like to have known your father'
He said as he took the money

There were too many flowers around the body
They smelled bad
There was no love





TANGI

So you died on me
like yesterday had no meaning
you left
winter time
summer time
two seasons in between
you felt like winter
and wouldn't open your eyes
I wanted to kiss you
but scared your season
would hold my kiss too long
I touched you, your face, with my fingers,
knowing now
cold burns more than fire
the last season





EQUILA

A woman in the Bible

The rain will wash the flesh
Sun will dry and rot it
Wind will blow it away
Children will make sandcastles
Challenging the water
And their children too will die
And sandcastles will be made again
When the sand blows away
God will not come
There is no dirt left to shape

Beyond the ultimate collage of life
Where clay meets paper
Humankind will be defined
By the bones that remain
And the animals of the deserts
Will carve their own songs of destiny through the bones

Woman
What you see, do not fret,
Your unborn is still beyond
 Water and fire
 And the rib you carry from man

In the womb
The eyes are not placed in
They are carried in the hands of the child
It is only with the first cry, free of the womb
The child begins to see
 And the sins of the child, woman,
Will be yours until the 13th year
 Beyond that time
The eyes cannot be returned to the hands
Child,
Your twin has been left in the afterbirth
You are alone
And the same fate





Will wrap the seedless words
Spoken by those over the dead
 In the graveyard
And even if the dead could believe
And hear, they are no longer with us
And I never could figure out
 Why
My grandmother wanted her teeth buried with her

 Ashes to ashes
 The hole is deeper
 Than from where the clay once came
When I was a child
They used to have funerals
On Sundays
 And it always rained





WHAT SHOULD BE IS REMEMBERED

Rain
The water is washing your face
It goes away
Nothing is left but your eyes
Can't remember the rest
The field is turning brown
A farmer walks away
All the horses are watching him
He will not close the gate
Can't remember the rest

Rain
The flowers are dead
Children are playing near the traintracks
Old women are refusing to dream
Old men are trying to find a way into them
Can't remember the rest

Rain
In a crystal ball
Faces smile upside down
Magic jar gone mad
Can't remember the rest

Rain
The air is percolating
There is the casual and the intense
Simplicity of illusions
Transfixed by the dying light
The past goes on beyond dreams
Sleepwalking backwards
A lonely man stands in the shower holding himself
Can't remember the rest





Rain
This is a long road
It does not end
Photographs always mock longevity
Strangers from a different generation
Telling who they are
Kissing the mirror in darkness
There is always a bridge
Don't know for you what's on the other side
But that's the way
Can't remember the rest

Rain
The river has taken many children
Women standing on the bridge with their legs open
The water doesn't stop
What side of the river-bank did you cross from?
Your name is on the water
Drinking from it is your birthright
I liked the promise before birth
Scarecrows waiting to ambush your life
These are not strangers asking you to dance
Closing your eyes won't break the spell
Yesterday's shadows whopping your mind
Can't remember the rest

Rain
How many times have you loved?
Two dress rehearsals
Dreams walking backwards
Looking for darkness
Words don't die when they sleep
Shadows dancing on a flame
Can't remember the rest





Rain
In the middle of nowhere
God knows the blues
Stoned on Sunday morning
Waiting for you to come to church
To pass the collection plate
What else do you do with your hands?
There are still parts of human life
Where nobody don't love nobody
Disowning memories is an ugly act of self-mutilation
Can't remember the rest

Rain

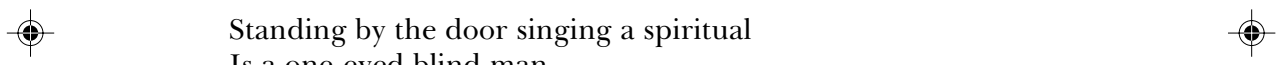




A POEM FOR GOD

I've lain with the preacher-man's wife
I've lost my innocence
She sings in the United Methodist Church
My grandmother once said from the good book
The sins of the father will visit the son
There ain't no God if this is true

A letter from a long-lost friend came
Telling me and asking me, did I remember
Patricia Strongman? — she's dead
Her mouth is full of dirt
Her face is dissipating
My childhood was yesterday
My grandmother still reads from the good book
And in the graveyard
So many of my friends no longer speak to me
As cold, as cold as a winter's windowpane



Standing by the door singing a spiritual
Is a one-eyed blind man
Talking about all God's children
But he doesn't say what

Perhaps he could say:
*In my father's house
there are many mansions
if it were not so
I would have told you
I am getting away
to prepare a place for you
that where I am
there ye may be also
In my father's house*



Standing by the door singing a spiritual
Is a one-eyed blind man
Talking about all God's children
But he doesn't say what

Day before, when I was nothing but a snotty-nosed child
Your Mama used to whop me for doing wrong
Gave me a note to take home and
My Mama whopped me again
The preacher-man has died in my life
And I'm still being whopped
I've been a long Baptist all my life
Did Mary feel good when she conceived?
In other words, an orgasm
Did Jesus Christ ever shit when he walked
The earth?
In the wintertime if you don't mind cold
You can walk on water
A miracle is nothing more than a season in your life



In front of the church, near the pulpit
The fat women sit
Swaying and sweating
Bright red nail polish
Who wants to be born again





THROUGHOUT LIFE

As I go through life
I will at least make six friendships
So when I die
I will not have to walk to my grave
With six strangers complaining about
The heavy load





BLUE

*so much to hear
so much to deny*







THIS POEM MAY NOT BE FAIR

I spoke to some older men today
Men who talk like you wouldn't like
But they had something to say
They told me a story about this man
Who went out of his head
When his wife left him ...
They said, you don't wanna do that
No, I thought, I don't wanna do that
I said, what about hope that she'll change her mind?
They said, yeah, but sometimes something is dead,
So there ain't no air for hope to travel on
How will I know this? I asked, with fear
One old man got up and walked away
And the other stayed with the answer
It's like this, when the hope hurts more than what you did





SOUNDS

Every sound has something to do with you
Waking
Wind shaking the door
Window curtains slightly moving
Water running somewhere
Airplanes
Laughter on the streets
A car door being closed
Everybody saying, it'll be better in a few months
I hear everything but the movement of time





WOMAN

Woman,
I look at you
And my mind swallows
Your whole liquid frame
I come in you
Like water
 Swim deeper
You say
 I go under you
Everything is wet
We did come from water





SOME KINDA BLUE

Going to India, January 1995

So you take this offer of love
For 365 days
Leaving your clothes on
Undressing your face into a smile
And your eyes don't dance
There is a desert between
Your legs and eyes
And only a fool in love
Would go into the desert
Without water
Drinking sand, calling it love





SO

So much to hear
So much to deny
So much to swallow
So long to endure
So little time left
Scratching around in this cage





KISSING

So we live
Not for the mountain top
But some sense of retribution
From those who live with us
When the exchanging of tongue touching
Is over
And wetness dries
We extract from that moment of liquidity
A desert of sand





THREE WOMEN

For Ollie Mae Perry-Scott

And there you go
Not long after the last glass of wine
You turned your back and did a skip
Had taken your red dress off
So it was a step — however sassy,
And I remember the promise of your dress
Woman,
I knew you three times ...

Once

Through the keyhole
As a child
I watched you

You danced

Everything was red
Or near sunset

You were strong

Your ears could hear music

And dance

Was at the snap of your fingers

And there you go

Woman,
Again

I saw you

You were a different colour

Didn't notice the sunset

Your ears heard another music


Jehovah, Jehovah, Jehovah,

Let me sing your song

In the kingdom of your hall

Surrendering all earthly things

And there you go





Woman,
Once again
I saw you
You had no colour
Sunset had stopped for you
Jehovah's song was still being sung
You had turned sideways
I was trying to see your face
So I could make you laugh
Knowing your God would forgive you
For having a glass of wine
Then you smiled
I saw all of you
Then you were gone





EARLY SLEEP

to sleep
an hour before midnight
they say
is better than two after
it depends on who
the dream visitors are
before dawn





TO THE MORNING LIGHT

I know you
We met yesterday
I'm glad a night
Is between us
To the morning sun
I spoke
Memories and rage





BONE TO BONE

After making love
lying in my mind
watching the clouds
making skeletons
the earth is full of mirrors





OFFSPRING OF ANARCHY

The sexual moans
of each woman
are different

 mercy's friend
 or mercy's foe

old men eating young girls
and their counterparts
bathing toy boys

 what woman opens her legs for
 and what she gives birth to
 are not the same

the future
will shape itself
from this mud
in an increasingly savage revenge
full harvest belongs only to those
in graveyards

 the secret of emptiness
 will be your grave
 your physical space is nothing more
 than a self-conspired
 self-imposed dream
 that slept in you yesterday

The sexual moans
of each woman
are different

 in the leaving of the graveyard
 an old woman told somebody
 and nobody in particular
 any death that has shame to it
 slows the dryness of dust





the vatican is in search of a pope
who hasn't tasted flesh
 the last woman
 us made love to
 will give birth
 in the season of the snowman
 and the children will not be named
 as they march an invisible line
 towards their madness

so many dead people
have given us their bones
do you know the fear of the sound
of your teeth eating meat
your face is changing with each swallow
your bones will disappear
and mad children will come
in search of you with fire
you must remember
children have lived too long
away from the sea

to understand their act of killing you
a child by any other name
is your offspring

blame the rot on the undertaker
she was late in claiming you

 how many butterflies
 have you known
 since birth
 only those behind glass
 and their lives being held
 by a pin

when I was a child
I used to wake up in the morning laughing
believing the gods could not find me in my sleep
I no longer have such a hiding place
only the gods are invisible
as they carry childhood away from the playground





The sexual moans
of each woman
are different

bodies dancing on water
peeling off flesh
images turning into stone
ethnic cleansing has become a part of rape
it always was
mothers of the world
lock up your daughters
there are madmen
holding their penises
seeking a reason to be
wanting to impregnate the world
in their own mind image

The sexual moans
of each woman
are different

something as powerful as this
the devil is lurking
bring on the dancers
let them retell the myth
that good shall prevail over evil

in a dream you open your eyes
to see where you are
faith-healers are moving from congregation to cult
around your bed
you have not been asleep

The sexual moans
of each woman
are different

as liquid as rainbows
you cannot close your eyes
and make love
hoping not to go crazy
your penetration cannot be a door
leading to sanctuary
your orgasm cannot be your god





The sexual moans
of each woman
are different
when the spider dances
the act is over





THE LAST REQUEST

To spend one's leftover life
unmolested by friends and dreams
come for a moment
to the playground
and remember yourself





INTERVIEW AND INDEX







MARK PIRIE AND PAUL WOLFFRAM
INTERVIEW L E SCOTT (1996)

WOLFFRAM: Did you read a lot as a child and what books were you reading?

SCOTT: I didn't read a lot as a child 'cause where I was born in Cordele, Georgia segregation was still goin' on very heavily. So, I went to a Church school. It was a Black baptist Church. That was my first experience in terms of schooling. And there was no supply of books, and the person who was the teacher may not have been qualified as a teacher. That person could read and write, so she became the teacher. My father was also a sharecropper, and so we went to school when there was no firewood to cut. So, that stuff about: *'I started reading at five, and I knew I was going to be a writer.'* That stuff didn't happen. That wasn't my introduction in to becoming a poet.



WOLFFRAM: When did you first start writing?




SCOTT: When I went from Cordele, Georgia to Trenton, New Jersey. That was also the first time I went to a proper school, where you had a teacher for Maths, a teacher for Science, a teacher for English — and it was the first time I went to school with Black kids as well as white kids. I was different from the Northern Black kids because I was a Southern Black boy, and certainly different from the white kids. I think the school was 60% Jewish and 40% Black. So, I was caught in another two different worlds. For one, I didn't relate to the Northern Black kids, and two, I didn't relate to the Jewish kids 'cause they were simply white. I never dealt with anyone equally, so it became a familiar world in my head.

WOLFFRAM: So, from birth, you were immediately aware of being Black.

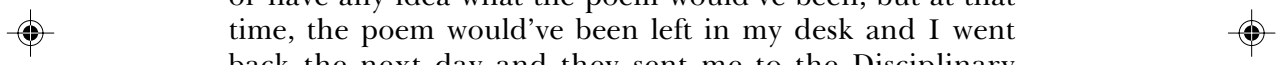
Oh, probably from the moment of conception. You know, when we talk about how a mother can convey something to





that child in the womb. Black parents, particularly at the period of time when I was born in Cordele, Georgia, had to teach their kids some way of how to survive in a very racist world. So, I think subconsciously, even while you're in the womb of your mother who's out there dealing with the world, you just know. And when you come into this world, there are just little things which happen, that, as a child, you just know. Like you teach a child: if you put your hands in fire, that will burn you. Or, you teach a child that if they're not careful around white folks, they'll burn you. So, you teach your child to be careful of fire, and to be careful of white people.

PIRIE: In the biographical note to *Nothing But A Man* (1981), it says you were suspended from school for writing poetry, under racist circumstances. How has this affected your writing?



SCOTT: I don't know whether it was. It was racist in one sense, but this is when I first went to New Jersey as a child and I'm in this very strange environment. I don't remember or have any idea what the poem would've been, but at that time, the poem would've been left in my desk and I went back the next day and they sent me to the Disciplinary Officer, and I didn't even know what the hell that was, 'cause at the age of 12, I could barely read or write. So we're talking about coming out of Cordele at 12-years-old, having an extremely poor introduction to education, and arriving in New Jersey at the bottom of the heap. So, the poem would've been: *'Who are these people? Are they gonna hurt me? Am I gonna hurt them?'* Then they sent me to a school psychiatrist, and that person wanted to know: *'Were my hands cold? Did I masturbate more than three times a week? Did I have sexual feelings for my mother?'* So, a 12-year-old Southern boy being exposed to that sort of craziness, how does it affect my writing? It pushed me further in. It pushed me further in. So, writing for me became a subjective war, that whatever happened to me out there, I came home and wrote. And when I wrote, it was like crawling in to a closet in the corner with the door closed.



PIRIE: Do you feel it is still difficult for African-American writers to have a voice in the current American society?

I think that the major publishing companies have an itinerary about what type of Black writers they want to publish. In the last twenty years the major Black writers have been women: Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, and Rita Dove. And at the same time this is happening there is also conflict between Black men and Black women. So you're getting the Black female voice, and a lot of those voices are talking about the relationship between Black men and Black women.

This all fits in with the current thing that is happening in terms of women. People are talking about Affirmative Action in America. Affirmative Action affects more white women than Black people. It certainly helped Black people, but it has also helped white women. When we talk about Affirmative Action, we say how Affirmative Action has helped white women in their struggle for equality, but then we tend to focus purely on Black people and say that Affirmative Action is reverse discrimination at the same time. So, Affirmative Action has helped Black people and white women, but we hear the negative thing being applied to Black people. That Affirmative Action is negative reverse discrimination. I don't believe that there is such a thing as reverse discrimination.

PIRIE: Which writers have influenced your writing over the years?

There's only one. Well, when I say there's only one, there's been many, but there's only one that if you said to me: *'We're gonna put you on an island and you can select one writer. Who would that writer be?'* I'd say James Baldwin. If you said: *'You're on death row, you're allowed to read one last book. Who would you read?'* James Baldwin. If you said to me: *'You're gonna get married, and there's only one gift you're gonna get — what do you want?'* James Baldwin. The man is absolutely beautiful. James Baldwin is ... he dances on water. He is a preacher. Not only did he try and tell the Black people how we was gonna have to survive white people. He also tried to tell black people that





the only thing they need to survive is love. If they could not learn how to love themselves, then they were gonna die. And I believe that if white people are not gonna learn to love themselves, then they are going to die. Spiritually you look around and they are dying. The thing that has saved Black people has been there undeniable spirituality. The Black church. When you talk about Louis Farrakhan, he's still coming from a religious base. If you're talking about Jesse Jackson or Martin Luther King, whatever Black leader you look at came out of the church, or out of spirituality. And for me that was Baldwin. He was the closest thing to a human god. That's not to say he was not fallible. But he was just so incredibly fair. So open, so prepared to learn, prepared to forgive. People tried to play with the fact that he was gay, a homosexual. He said: *'I told you, you didn't tell me!'* Baldwin said, *'the only time somebody can either, what I call whitemail you (as opposed to blackmail you) is when they think they know something about you that you don't want to become public.'* So when they tried to play with his homosexuality, he said *'Hey, you didn't tell me, I told you!'*



WOLFFRAM: When did you first get interested in jazz?



SCOTT: Again, I think that this is just something that was part of my environment. The blues, soul, if you want to call it that — jazz. It was just there. I guess if you grew up in a house that listened to opera, there is a great chance that you would love opera. I grew up around African-American music. So I prefer Stevie Wonder to Eric Clapton. I think that if you said to me: *'You're gonna be on an island. Who would you take?'* Stevie Wonder and wish Eric Clapton well.

WOLFFRAM: So it's more blues and soul than jazz?

SCOTT: No, the thing about me is that I'm a jazz poet. What I do is I try to impose a sound on top of the word. So, I may do a stanza and incorporate spirituality in the poem like *'I told Jesus it would be alright to change my name (L E sings 'I TOLD JESUS IT WOULD BE ALRIGHT TO CHANGE MY NAME' in gospel style hitting some damn fine high notes).'*





Whereas if you do it normally it's just: 'I told Jesus it would be alright to change my name.' So what I do with the jazz part of it, as a jazz poet, is to make words become the sound of an instrument. What is a voice, but an instrument.

WOLFFRAM: What do you see your relationship as a writer is to jazz?

SCOTT: Oh, they complement each other if you're lucky enough to be able to, and I'm very lucky enough in that sense, because I went to church so much. You see jazz is a church. Jazz is picking cotton. Jazz is picking a water melon. Jazz is cooking black-eyed peas. Jazz is the colour of foods. Jazz is the substance of the earth. Cause that's who we are. I mean, Black people walk differently from white folk.

WOLFFRAM: So, you can't ignore your race, or culture?

SCOTT: Yeah, it's a natural area. I mean, when your mother is breast-feeding you, she's humming Billie Holiday. When milk comes into your mouth, so are the sounds of Billie Holiday. When you make love, you don't make love as a Black person to Frank Sinatra, you make love to Al Green, Sammy Davis Jr, and Ella Fitzgerald — you know, with soul baby! Get down with it! Cause people speak from their culture. They think from their culture. They project their lives from their culture. They, as a people, in many cases even eat from their culture base. But that doesn't mean to say you won't like Italian cooking.

WOLFFRAM: How have your experiences in the Vietnam war affected you?

SCOTT: In the sense that the line between civilisation and being civilised, and being really capable of doing some incredible harm is just very sublime. It is very sublime. The Vietnam experience probably added to that early feeling of mistrust. I guess I felt trapped. My people should've been looking after me 'cause I was a youth, so I felt my Government lied to me. I felt that my Government was prepared to





use and abuse me, which is one of the reasons why I left the States. I couldn't trust America not to continue to abuse me, not just as a Black person, but even on a different level. They were prepared to use me to kill other people.

PIRIE: When you were in Africa, what were some of the things you discovered and learnt there?

SCOTT: Well, I went first to Europe to see James Baldwin, then I went and worked my way down to West Africa. What I learnt in Africa is that I'm not African, I am an African-American. I have a spiritual and historical connection. Africa is the land of my ancestors. There are things that Africa needed from me. They didn't need a poet. They needed an electrician, a doctor, a nurse, or a teacher. So, when I was in Africa, I thought I had come back to my homeland, but the question was: *'What tools can you bring back? What can you give to your homeland?'* And that was a great shock for me. I realised I had to be practical, as opposed to going back and saying: *'I am not that practical.'*



WOLFFRAM: When and why did you decide to come and live in New Zealand?



SCOTT: Lust for a woman here. Pure and simple. Lust in every sense. (He laughs.)

WOLFFRAM: Never developed in to love?

SCOTT: Yeah, but love is fleetin' these days. I was actually in Greece, and Shona Laing was singing with a group called Manfred Mann at the time. They had come to Greece, and at the time a woman who had grown up with Shona was there, and they were all hangin' out. So, I met this whole group of New Zealanders, and this particular woman said: *'Hey babe, come on back to Eastbourne!'* So I came.

But also these people were telling me that New Zealand was a multicultural society that worked. And I said, *'This I have to see!'* And then my first introduction to New Zealand in 1976 was that they were gonna take all the overstayers out. The cops and immigration people were raidin' people's homes





at five in the morning looking for people who didn't look like New Zealanders. So how do you define someone who doesn't look like a New Zealander. They didn't have blue eyes. So check this out, when in '76 they started out to get their living and economic recovery under way, they didn't need manual labour workers or factory workers any more. So what they did was, the immigration people raided the homes where they thought the overstayers would be and that was in the areas of colour. So they knocked on the door without search warrants 'cause immigration/customs didn't need warrants, and asked you if you were a New Zealander. If you're white they ain't gonna ask you if you're a New Zealander, and whether you're an overstayer. You could be German for all they knew. So that thing was based on racism, on people not looking like they were New Zealanders. They had to justify it, and say, well, the people who were overstayers were the people from the Island Nations. But I knew, and everyone else knew, that these Germans lurking around the countryside were overstayers too. So when I came to this multicultural society that was supposed to work, that was my first introduction.


But one of the lovely things I liked about this country when I first came here is that everyone likes and buys flowers. You see people here buy flowers. I buy flowers, I love having flowers in my house.

But I'm only here about six months of the year. I'm in and out of here every year. I can't stay 'cause it's not big enough for me, and also the writing community is a little bit petty OK. And you have to be out of that shit, or you get mad. You get mad at the magazines who play these silly ass games with their funds, and these silly ass magazines who decide to publish whoever they think they should publish. New Zealand writers need to grow up, and start sharing with each other. You know they get a magazine going and publish whoever they think they should publish. Open that shit up!

PIRIE: Have you been involved with any writing groups since your arrival in New Zealand?

SCOTT: I used to go every year to the Maori artists/writers conference — that's the only group. Other than that when I





first came here, I met Sam Hunt. Sam Hunt out of all the writers I've met here seems less threatened by anyone else. I was hitchhikin' one time coming from Hamilton and the cat picked me up. This is when he still had the dog with him. The only thing I didn't like about the trip was that Sam had that nasty old dog of his kissing me.

Another writer is Alistair Paterson. Sam Hunt and Alistair Paterson are writers that have always been accessible and easy to deal with. You know, if you see Sam today, he's the same, as if you see him six months from now. If he can help you, he'll help you. He's not threatened. Other than that, the Maori writers, 'cause I wanted to know what the indigenous people here were all about. I also did a book with Apirana Taylor and Lindsay Rabbitt called *3 Shades*, and then we toured schools as a multicultural poetry group. There was a Maori poet, a African-American poet, and an Irish poet. And we did that for a couple of years. So, I've probably had more to do with the Maori writers than the white writers. I find white writers in this country ... they're too locked up, they're too threatened.

I mean if you're published in a magazine with a circulation of 250, that's all right! You don't need 8000 copies to get a message across. If you're sayin' something, someone's gonna read it, and they're gonna pass it on. I mean, if I read something I like I'm gonna photocopy it and send it to people and say: 'Check this shit out! Who's this cat?' That's what writing's about. It's not some exclusive shit! If you read something you pass it along. You know, damn, I'm gonna pass this book on to this person, or that person! That's what writing's about. Not some magazine that says: 'We only publish names'. That kind of shit.

PIRIE: Tell us about the concept behind *Black Family Letters from Boston* (1994)?

SCOTT: That was a change for me 'cause I find it hard to write short stories in either first person or third person. It was easier to write a letter. I had to imagine writing that letter to that person and at the same time you're writin', you're imagining that person's response to what you've said. That's the concept behind *Black Family Letters from Boston*. It was



'stream of consciousness' in one sense, and I like that.

PIRIE: Isn't *Black Family Letters* also about keeping in contact with your family and what's going on in America?

SCOTT: It was that. It wasn't one dimensional as to why I did it though. It was keeping in touch, it was also staying in tune with political events that were going on there, and it was about family. I have a niece over there, a brother, and also a sister who's a Jehovah Witness. There is one letter which deals with a young girl who says, '*This is not America!*' And the letters also deal with that whole concept of white folk/Black folk thing, and a spirituality runs through it.

WOLFFRAM: What do you think is important when poetry is read to an audience?

SCOTT: I guess I want something extra. I don't want you to stand there and say 'Um, ah, oh, which one should I select ... yeah I know I was supposed to do this reading six months ago, but I haven't quite had the time' You're wastin' my time. When I go to a reading, I want something extra. I want the poet to put as much to memory as possible, so I get an additional element on the poem. I don't want you to get up and dance. I want you to make eye contact with me when you do your reading, and I want you to give me something more — a nuance more on the poem — so when I read it myself I get a little bit more. So that's what I want from a reading, I want the person to give me something extra! That's what reading's all about!

WOLFFRAM: Finally tell us a bit about your recent collection, *A Woman Called Maasumaa*?

SCOTT: The end of a marriage. *A Woman Called Maasumaa* is about a funeral and a birth, and also to remind people to be careful with love. It's as Moira [Wairama] says: 'With the publication of these poems, Scott provides a warning for those who may be careless with love.' So yeah, I've been careless with love. I've been careless in a very destructive way. I no longer wish to be guilty of that again. That's finished. That's

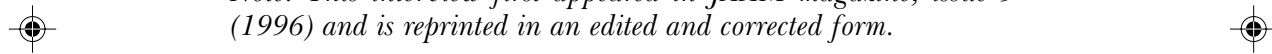




a one-off. That's it. That's my gift to her. And now I'm back working with ***Black Family Letters***, and this will come up in a letter. One of those letters will be about that whole concept of love.

I've also reached the point where I don't recover so quickly from pain. The older you get, you don't bounce back so quickly from pain. And that human pain where you are in love with another human being, and somewhere or another that love goes wrong — that's an incredible pain! It's a pain no one can help you with. It's the kind of pain that when you're having a shower, it'll grab you. When you try to eat, it grabs you. When you try to sleep, it grabs you. You wake up in a dream, and it grabs you. You walk down the street, and it grabs you. And also you know you're not going to find anyone like that person ever again. It doesn't mean you're not going to love again. It just makes you think you've got to be a better person. You just have to say I'm gonna be better than that. So yeah, that's what ***A Woman Called Maasumaa*** is about — the end of a marriage. That's what it's about.

Note: This interview first appeared in JAAM magazine, issue 3 (1996) and is reprinted in an edited and corrected form.





INDEX

A Death In The Family	52
A Poem For God	102
America — A Wall Of White	66
And The World Was Dark	83
Bone To Bone	117
Born Into It	20
Breaking The Apron Strings	91
Burning Fingers	28
Collage	40
Disciples Of The Black Church	59
Early Sleep	115
Equila	97
Eulogy To Elvis	27
Feeling Clean	93
Fingerprints	43
Grandma	38
I Been There Child	37
'I Would Like To Have Known Your Father'	94
Kissing	112
M.I.A.	74
Mr Undertaker — I Was In Vietnam	80
My Father — The Great Poet	34
Nothing But A Man	67
Offspring Of Anarchy	118
On The Eighth Day God Made All Fools	71
Perry Street — Black Wasteland	25
Reflections On A Father	18
Seeking Answers Before The First Nine Months And Then Beyond	87
Shades Of Two Brothers	29
Sharaqa	17
Skeletons	89
So	111
Some Kinda Blue	110
Sounds	108
South Africa Election Day	32
Stars And Stripes	76
Steve Biko	31



Stop Sign	36
Stranger In Vietnam	78
Street Corner In America	24
Tangi	96
The Last Request	122
The Making Of A Child	21
The Many Who Have Died And The Few Who Knew Why	75
The Vietnamese Poet Says	77
This Bitter Earth	84
This Poem May Not Be Fair	107
Three Sets Of People Looking After Each Other	92
Three Sisters Of Fate	86
Three Women	113
Threshold	47
Throughout Life	104
To The Morning Light	116
To Whom It May Concern	79
What Should Be Is Remembered	99
Who Crawled From Woman	90
Woman	109
Valle De Los Caidos	72

