

## Introduction

by Aldon Lynn Nielsen

“We did them a fortune,” wrote Lorenzo Thomas. “We did / them a favor just being / Ourselves inside of them.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s how I first knew him, reading him as his words crossed the horizon into me. It was, just as he’d said, a favor, a fortune, a fortune you had to keep reading as it turned in your hand. Lorenzo’s words became a talisman I held against the confusion, and there is, as always, confusion. You had to step carefully in those times; it helped if you had a good time step. Lorenzo’s poems had that knack, that way of getting inside your time, of making you step differently.

It was later that I met Lorenzo Thomas, introduced, of course, by another poet, Charles Bernstein. Lorenzo came to be a friend and a generous supporter of the work I was trying to do, following along, humbly stumbling, in the territories traversed by his timely steps. We came to be something of a tag team on the odd circuit of conference life we both traveled as wandering scribes and scholars. I thought often of those learned bards who fell into step with one another on the road to Timbuktu. I would have liked to have traveled the paths of Mali with Lorenzo.

We wound up in Boulder instead. My wife, Anna Everett, and I more than once made a point of arriving in Boulder when we knew Lorenzo would be there. We’d have dinner, spread a blanket on the ground outside Naropa, and watch the Fourth of July fireworks from the lawn. The fireworks always burned brighter, in keener demarcations measured to the meters of Lorenzo’s voice. I was thinking of that on the Fourth of July, 2005, when word reached me that Lorenzo had at last achieved escape velocity, followed that arc of ascent, traveling the space ways.

The first poem of a chapbook Lorenzo published just a year before his

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passing closes on a question that could serve as summary of everything he ever wrote: "But which way is redemption?"<sup>2</sup> It was a favor he did us just by asking that question. He did us a favor by being, and each of us is better for having been beside him, for having fallen into step with him on the journey toward whatever imaginable redemption. He did us a fortune, and because of him we are the more fortunate travelers.

And, as one last fortune, he left us yet more books. In the weeks before his death, Lorenzo sent an email to me and to his brother, Cecilio, whose artworks accompanied several of Lorenzo's volumes of verse. Lorenzo asked the two of us to serve as his literary executors. It was not a request I had anticipated, and I rushed to assure Lorenzo that he should be doing me that service long before it would become necessary for me to live up to the task he had bequeathed me. Only days later I received the phone call from Houston telling me of Lorenzo's end. I sat down and read "God Sends Love Disguised as Ordinary People," and then the whole of "Euphemysticism," but then I circled back inevitably to "Fit Music" and "Walking Vicksburg Blues." "History is still ephemera," that last begins. And then:

I walked along the dark lonely  
Road

I walked beside the fields of Dudley Pillow  
I walked in Mississippi and Louisiana  
And felt the negro terror of a moonless night  
Baptized in more history than I wanted<sup>3</sup>

But none of us has to walk that lonesome valley, in the lengthening shadow of our own histories, by himself, no matter what that song says. There are always other songs, and you can sing them. "I went to the valley," Paul Robeson used to sing:

I didn't go to stay.  
But my soul got happy  
and I stayed all day.

That's how it was to be with Lorenzo's songs. Whether the "Progressive Reggae" of one of his poems or the "Morning Raga" of another; whether the "Country Song" of *Dancing on Main Street*, the urban soul of that same collec-

tion's "Low Rider" or even the British Invasion blues of "Please, Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood." That poem, whose title could be the title of all books of poetry of all times and all places, says everything poets in America find at their fingertips:

You vex me so  
Impatient sigh,  
Land whose liberation waits  
In my own breath<sup>4</sup>

It was the breath that came with difficulty in Lorenzo's final times. The land he sang of, the land of the blues, waited breathlessly, attending him. He intended it. The blues tends to be that way.

Much was left pending in July 2005, including the texts of two books Lorenzo had submitted to the University of Michigan Press. One of them, this one, had already passed through that initial stage of peer reviewing so familiar to those of us in the academy. I know this because my eyes were among those peering in review at that first draft. No doubt Lorenzo would have added to this collection. He left notes to himself, and to us, here and there throughout the text, pointing toward things he wanted to look up, to find out, address himself to. In the end, I felt it would be unseemly to add words to this text that were not Lorenzo's own, to make of myself an interstitial coauthor, and I so staved off the temptation to fill in the gaps. Instead, while I have edited for errors and elisions, tracked down those tantalizing but unsourced quotations, this is wholly Lorenzo Thomas's book. And it is a blues book.

Some years ago, one of the many conferences at which both Lorenzo and I spoke was a sixtieth birthday tribute to Amiri Baraka hosted at the Schomburg library in Harlem. Typically for the world of poetry, the financing for this event hadn't fallen into place in time for Baraka's actual birthday, and he had already hit sixty-one by the time we all convened to honor those first six decades. It was a deeply emotional event for me, as it brought me together with so many long-term friends, such as Billy Joe Harris, Kalamu ya Salaam, and Lorenzo Thomas, to mount a series of explorations of the works and career of Baraka, who had been one of my teachers when I was a graduate student. Each of us took up a different segment of Baraka's enormous body of work, saying a few words to set a critical frame and then sitting down to a

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conversation with Baraka on the Schomburg's stage. Lorenzo Thomas drew Baraka's landmark writings on music as his lot, and I couldn't help recalling his talk that day as I reread this book on words, music, and the black intellectual tradition. Lorenzo began by pointing to the obvious, that before *Blues People* there had not been a book-length study of blues-based musics available to a wide audience of American readers from a black author. Lorenzo paused and looked around as he pronounced this fact. Much as my students now sometimes find it difficult to credit that segregation, at least of the de jure stripe, ended so recently that I witnessed the somewhat premature declarations of its final days, so it is hard for younger readers now to grasp what it meant that as recently as the March on Washington, any book about this foundational African American cultural form you picked up in a retail book store would likely have been by a white author. Which is not to say that any number of black music historians and critics hadn't been doing the work and doing it phenomenally well. The pathbreaking projects of Fisk University's prodigious, too often unsung, and intriguingly named Professor John Wesley Work III are well worth considering in this context. But it is to say that America's official publishing culture throughout most of the twentieth century said to black America a version of what some Abolitionists had tried to say to Frederick Douglass: you just tell your story and leave the theory to us. Baraka's *Blues People* put an end to that once and for all, and the audience in the Schomburg could hear in Lorenzo Thomas's voice what it had meant to him to read that book when it appeared in his youth, which was always just a few well-placed time steps ahead of my own.

Reading *Blues People* simply was part of the "Black Intellectual Tradition," and the book itself was a way of saying to the world what Lorenzo Thomas's title says again, "Don't deny my name." In this book, Thomas again and again checks those original sources, cites those half-remembered foretastes. From Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal's *Cricket*, Thomas elicits Albert Ayler's "To Mr. Jones—I Had a Vision." Readers are recalled to the *Black World* of 1973 for Marion Brown's "Improvisation and the Aural Tradition in Afro-American Music." In sharpest contrast to so many of those white writers prior to Baraka's *Blues People*, Thomas himself attends to the thoughts of the musicians. Whether citing the published writings of composers Ayler and Brown, reciting the lyrics of The Whispers, or talking all day with Juke Boy Bonner, Thomas gives us colloquy with the great thinkers who are his subject. For generations now, critics have written of the conversation that is the blues, but

how many of them actually, acutely, listened; didn't just outline call and response, but answered the call? It is one thing, as so many presenters do at academic conferences, to argue that there is theory to be found in the cultural productions of everyday people; it is another entirely to act as if you really believe that. Thomas never doubted.

Thomas sets out upon his great migration, a man from farther south whose father took him north to New York, now transplanted himself not just into the American South, but into that particular *mélange* of South and West known as Texas, a land of grits and groceries where a Mance Lipscomb played guitar with a pocket knife even as Ornette Coleman was marching in the school band. It is in the endless circuits of his own intellectual travel that Thomas finds the blues a body of literature, one that, as he writes here, "explicitly confronts the situation of" the African American migrants to the urban North and the new western territories. But explicit is as explicit does, and sometimes the blues, if it is to serve, as Thomas has it, "as an ameliorative agency in the transaction from rural to urban," sometimes the explicit explodes with the implicit. "Sometimes I wonder, can a matchbox hold my clothes."

One of those in whose footsteps Thomas follows is Sterling Brown, among the first poet-critics to examine the blues explicitly as literary form. Brown inhabited a popular culture in which, as Thomas reminds us, *George White's Scandals* was a Broadway smash, with songs like (after all, his name was "White") "That's Why Darkies Were Born." Brown was having no truck with White, and had a few things to say in the *Opportunity* of 1932<sup>5</sup> about what led lyricists of the day to such dizzy excitements over the "startling rediscovery of Alabammy" as a rhyme "for their key word" (one that appears nowhere in Raymond Williams's *Keywords*) *mammy*. "It is against this kind of doggerel," observes Thomas, "that Brown built a levee of authentic African American folksong." Brown's levee, it has to be said, has held, and it was in Brown's basement that Howard University student LeRoi Jones, having adopted a poetic "I" but not yet "Amiri Baraka," listened to Muddy Waters and began to think the thoughts that led to *Blues People*.

Like some cosmic Exoduster, Lorenzo Thomas follows those thoughts from Brown to Brownsville, from the second Sonny Boy Williamson to the first Eric Dolphy, from Langston to LeRoi and back to Lorenzo. He pauses to talk along the way, and in this his book is closer in spirit to Baraka's *Black Music* than to *Blues People*, close cousin to A. B. Spellman's *Four Lives in the BeBop*

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*Business*. There is a day spent with Juke Boy Bonner and Peppermint Harris. And, not content simply to look at photos of Sonny Boy Williamson from his days on the King Biscuit Time radio broadcast (there is something oddly satisfying about photographs of radio programs, but it's not enough), Thomas interviews Sam Anderson, the school superintendent who decided to open the legendary station KFFA in Helena, Arkansas, and then he talks with the Moore brothers, whose King Biscuit flour became the sponsoring vehicle by which Sonny Boy Williamson reached out to the whole delta and beyond. These conversations come from fieldwork, from a trip Lorenzo Thomas made to Arkansas in the early eighties in the company of filmmaker Louis Guida, who later published the volume *Blues Music in Arkansas*.

And always, Thomas is thinking through the manifold implications of poets' responses to the music. By the time his itinerary brings us to the Black Arts era, Thomas is no longer an engaged interviewer but is a participant observer. In much the way that he follows the evolution of the music from the blues, through the work of the territory bands and onto the terrain of bop, Thomas pursues the poetics of the blues and the blues of poets from the thoughts of Hughes and Brown through to the musical engagements of Baraka, Larry Neal, Henry Dumas, and into the studio trackings of the grandchildren of the blues, tracking their treatment of what all of them see as the redemptive powers of jazz.

## NOTES

1. Lorenzo Thomas, *The Bathers* (New York: I. Reed Books, 1981), 59.
2. Lorenzo Thomas, *Time Step* (East Bay, Calif.: Kenning Editions, 2004), n.p.
3. Lorenzo Thomas, *There Are Witnesses/Es Gibt Zeugen* (Osnabrück, Germany: OBEMA, 1996), 32.
4. Lorenzo Thomas, *Dancing on Main Street* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2004), 14.
5. Sterling A. Brown, "Weep Some More My Ladie," *Opportunity* 10 (March 1932): 87.