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## In Memoriam: Lorenzo Thomas (31 August 1944 – 4 July 2005)

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IN MEMORIAM  
**LORENZO THOMAS**  
(1944–2005)



photograph by Mark Hiebert

**Lorenzo Thomas**

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## LORENZO THOMAS

(1944–2005)

by John Gery

A great poet's death always comes prematurely, but the suddenness of Lorenzo Thomas's passing seems especially cruel, because his indispensable work was not nearly finished. Despite his valiant struggle with illness in recent years, he had just begun to reach a broader readership, mainly due to the recent publication of several significant books: first, his major critical work, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* which Kathryn V. Lindberg has called "an extraordinarily erudite addition to the ongoing global-local, nationalist-diasporic conversation among black poets and their readers, a remarkably scrappy and self-critical floating seminar" (24), and "a revelation of the depth and duration of African American literary theory and practice" (31); second, the revised and expanded version of his 1979 collection, *Chances Are Few* poems that Gwendolyn Brooks praised for their "wit, technical skill, [and] steady energy" (Thomas, *Chances* cover), and which had earlier launched Thomas's international reputation as a poet of sharp humor, edgy sophistication, pure candor, and syncopated music; and most recently, his new book of poems, *Dancing on Main Street*, a collection that displays not only the breadth and depth of Thomas's subject matter, but the sheer inventiveness and urbanity of his style—in my view the best book of poetry published in the United States in 2004. Together with the plethora of provocative essays, commentaries, poems, and interviews recently appearing in journals throughout the country, these works express the soul of Thomas's original thinking about life, literature, society, and art, thinking that is starting to shape twenty-first-century American culture at large.

Sadly, however, at the time of his death, not only was Thomas working on another groundbreaking critical study, this one of the African-American writers of the nineteenth century who had anticipated the modernist writers he discusses in *Extraordinary Measures*, but he had reached the height of his power as a poet. His death has stolen from us a literary voice no one else has, since no other living poet I know has the same searing intellect, the same steady compassion, the same fount of historical knowledge, the same unyielding grip on the illogic of much of American culture, the same abiding wit, and the same musical soul that Lorenzo Thomas had. His death leaves an unbridgeable abyss between us and the understanding we need to cope with the contemporary American ethos.

Born in Panama to Caribbean parents—his father was a native of Saint Vincent, his mother a Jamaican born in Costa Rica—Thomas immigrated with his family to New

York in 1948 and grew up in the Bronx and Queens. Spanish was his first language, but when he was five the other kids in his neighborhood beat him up because he “talked funny.” He explained that this drove him to become “extra-fluent” in English (Nielsen 146), an effort that led him to become an avaricious reader. He started to write and publish poems in high school, and in the early 1960s, while still a student at Queens College, Thomas sought out and became (undoubtedly) the youngest member of the progressive, experimental Umbra writers’ workshop in Manhattan. His involvement with the Umbra writers, and through them with the Black Arts Movement and other radical groups on the Lower East Side that were actively engaged in social protest and avant-garde art, brought Thomas into close contact with a host of young black writers, most of whom have since developed significant careers themselves, including Ishmael Reed, Tom Dent, Calvin Hernton, Joe Johnson, David Henderson, Amiri Baraka, and Lloyd Addison, among many others (Dent 318). From this early experience Thomas absorbed several important lessons that would guide his writing: Not only did he participate in the new black revolutionary social consciousness of the period but he gained a keen sense of the cultural and artistic diversity of those with whom he was working. Furthermore, he became acutely aware of how much music (especially jazz and the blues) and other arts intermingle with poetry. Far from being an isolated, private, or romantic enterprise, poetry for Thomas spoke directly to, from, and about the world around him. Most importantly, he also discovered the unacknowledged yet profound significance of the African-American intellectual heritage in American culture, a heritage to which he was to devote enormous energy for the rest of his life.

In 1968 Thomas joined the U.S. Navy, serving as a radioman, and he spent 1971 as a military adviser in Vietnam before returning to New York, where he worked as a librarian at Pace College. In 1973 Texas Southern University in Houston invited him to be a writer in residence for one year; Thomas decided to settle in Houston afterward. There he became highly active in a wide range of arts, humanities, and educational projects for more than a quarter century. Among his multifaceted endeavors, he conducted writing workshops at Houston’s Black Arts Center, worked with the Texas Commission on the Arts and Humanities, taught in artists-in-the-schools programs in Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, served on the board of the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, helped organize festivals, including the Juneteenth Blues Festivals throughout Texas, and taught writing and literature at the University of Houston–Downtown. Meanwhile, he continued steadfastly to write poetry, fiction, and critical essays, publishing and/or editing nine books between 1973 and 1982—most notably his poetry collections *Sound Science* (1978), *Chances Are Few* (1979), and *The Bathers* (1981). In a 1981 *Callaloo* interview by Charles Rowell, Thomas cites a fellow writer who warned him about Houston, “If you stay down here you’re not going to be a Southern poet; you’re going to be a forgotten poet” (31). Nonetheless, Thomas remained there until his death.

While residing in the South may have removed Thomas from the avant-garde scene in New York and other northern cities, his relative isolation provided him an autonomy with which to cultivate a truly singular vision. In recent years, in part because of the enthusiasm of poets such as John Ashbery and Charles Bernstein,

Thomas has been linked to the Language poets and other avant-garde writers. But he had always worked independently, always cultivated his own voice, persisting in publishing his poems and prose in as varied a range of journals as any American poet had. Despite living in an age of self-protecting poetry cliques and of sometimes classist behavior among writers and editors, Thomas appealed to readers from across a spectrum of tastes and ideologies. Furthermore, his specific contribution to fostering and challenging younger poets, especially black poets, is of particular note, as evidenced, for instance, in his edited anthology, *Sing the Sun Up: Creative Writing Ideas from African-American Literature* (Teachers & Writers Collective, 1998).

As with most prominent poets, Thomas's character exhibited vibrant paradoxes. For instance, while his early poems often reveal a voice wise beyond its years, Thomas never really aged, never grew cynical or disdainful, so there is a consistent tone from his early to his late poems. Written when he was only 20, for example, the poem "Toil" speaks in the self-assured, even disaffected voice of one who has been around, as he dismisses his antagonists:

I has taken all that I can stand  
And now it is heroism

Someone to tell you my story  
The NEWS photographers crowd  
Across the lonely Hudson pier  
Shouting interviews,

Ta ta. I'm going to swim to Greece  
Who am I trying to impress  
You burst into tears late!  
My lips gargle "Goodbye"  
The rosy sunrise envelops me,  
My arm hooks into the night (*The Bathers* 22)

On the other hand, the poem "Tirade," composed some 35 years after "Toil," though it bears the unmistakable signature of the same iconoclastic poet, expresses far more trepidation, almost a tone of innocence, almost, about what the poet doesn't know, despite (and perhaps because of) his long experience:

Now I know old age is cruel  
It brings fears you never knew

There is a hazard in the morning sun,  
A thirty percent chance  
This day will pass without  
The birth of a regret  
Or the blossoming of a sorrow  
So well behaved and mild

Shyly, patiently  
 Gaining courage all these years  
 Blurting into the bliss  
 You've sown around you

These passions make your life last longer  
 Waiting for the day  
 You can no longer push them away.  
 Arms weakened,  
 Your heart grows stronger  
 And wisdom clinging to you like a child  
 To her broken doll,  
 You may finally sort everything out  
 And end with nothing  
 Left to fear tomorrow (*Dancing* 60)

Indeed, uncertainty, or a profound ambiguity, dwells at the center of another of Thomas's seeming contradictions: For a writer of such precision, care, and authority, he is repeatedly surprising in the ways he expresses self-doubt, even as he exposes to scrutiny the troubling phenomena of the contemporary world. Yet this ironic vision suggests not just skepticism, not the easy pose of the disaffected, but a sublime deference to the mysteries of injustice or hypocrisy. Thomas's brand of satire may be unflinching, but it is never cruel or gratuitous. As Aldon Lynn Nielsen has noted, "Throughout his published works, Thomas can be seen subjecting the literary heritage of English poetics to a transfiguring interrogation" (147). This scrupulous questioning of both others and self in everything Thomas has written creates the basis of his work's multicultural character, revealed through his deep engagement in American and African-American history, linguistic experimentation, jazz and the blues, English and American idioms, global poetics, surrealism and popular culture—all of which he delicately weaves together with understated insight and subtle humor.

Concerning his poetry's musicality, what Thomas noted about the "musician's way" in a *Callaloo* interview with Hermine Pinson in 1999 may best convey his own artistry: "The musician's way," he said, "is to write down the notes, and if you collate all those pieces of paper that say 'This is the piano part, this is the banjo part, this is the violin part,' all those little pieces of paper eventually come together in one moment and the audience hears all that at the same time. And I think the same is true about poetry" (299). Whether in his early poem, "The Bathers," a tour de force that simultaneously echoes Melvin B. Tolson and Ezra Pound in the way it combines Egyptian hieroglyphs and surrealist imagery to depict the hosing of the Civil Rights protesters in Birmingham, or in his nineties poem "The Marks Are Waiting," a work reflecting on the impact of military intelligence on culture and race, or in "Ailerons & Elevators," a complex poem written in response to the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, Thomas refuses to compromise, refuses to polarize. Instead each poem manages to portray the multiple voices the poet hears outside and inside his head. In the end it is his ability to combine "all those little pieces of paper . . . in one moment,"

to express his distrust of both the world and himself, to entangle ideology and self-disclosure, that gains his readers' trust. What has caused me, in times of social and personal trauma, to turn to Lorenzo Thomas for guidance has not been a need for obvious pronouncements or slogans but a need for candor and ingenuity in responding to conditions about which all the obvious responses have been too well exercised or exploited.

While in his life Thomas was a highly private individual who often kept his personal affairs quiet and was not known for long confessions, he was nevertheless fully engaged in public life—not only in politics but in popular media and culture, community action, art, music, and even fund-raising. This was yet another contradiction in his character, to be both outspoken and understated, aggressive and graceful. Still, above all else, what motivated Thomas was nothing less than a generous (dare I say “moral”?) impulse to enrich American life. Whether driven by what he calls “positional” Afrocentricity (*Extraordinary* 100) in articulating the inequities in American literature or just piqued by the barbarism of ordinary people, his work constantly reminds us, “We need to be thinking in words / To tell our hearts and minds / Which way to flutter” (*Dancing* 88), for therein lies our singular *raison d'être*. Despite the fact that he died before his work was completed, Thomas's own words, however ironically, inspire us with their subtle power and eloquence to carry on:

This useless clairvoyance  
is embarrassing  
What good is it to know  
The motives behind manners

And worse, the so what stares  
Of those upon whom you manage  
To inflict this wisdom

There is more space  
Awaiting exploration  
More clouds of gas  
That need their picture took (“Flash Point,” *Dancing* 133)

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