

The Fiction of
LeRoi Jones/
Amiri Baraka

nal recklessness, and abiding presence in American letters, user read from contemporary rounded the author when the s should be able to give these ve always deserved.

Greg Tate
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Suppose Sorrow Was a Time Machine

Here is Dothan, Alabama, U.S.A. 1898. This is of value. What is to be said about the place, Dothan, and the time, 1898. It is of value, but it doesn't matter what becomes of the telling, once it is told.

Say that you are Tom Russ. It is Dothan, Alabama, U.S.A. 1898. You are a Negro who has felt the ground vibrate, and you are trying to interpret the vibration. You are trying to interpret the vibration, and what it means in 1898 Dothan. I know you Tom. You are my grandfather. I am not born yet but I have felt the ground vibrate too. And I too would like to know exactly what it means, here in Alabama 1898, 34 years before I am born. Fifty years before I realize you knew about the vibration, 50 years before I knew that I possessed the knowledge of your knowing. But now is what we are concerned with.

The store is burning, Tom. They have burnt your store, Tom. What does it mean? Is the burning another vibration? Interpret this one, Tom. Let your unborn grandchild know what his dead, whistling grandfather thought of the burning. If I were you, Tom, I would have cried. Did you cry, Tom? No, I suppose not. Not with the vibration still moving the ground in front of you. What was crying that it could erase a knowledge of what everything meant? How obscure is enlightenment? As obscure as dust kicked up on a path nobody walks on, as obscure as birds falling off trees with no god to catch them. All this is O.K., Tom, but what about the unholy bastards who are killing you? I hear they dropped a street-light on your bald head and scattered your brains. Is that true, Tom? That's the lie your wife told me when I watched you sitting by the wood stove, unable to make your hurts vocal. Rocking back and forth like the rocking chair would carry you clear to paradise, so you could finally find out about them 50 year old vibrations.

You built that store back up. You knelt down and scraped the black parts of the wood away and stuck them poles in the ground and got the thing up so fast folks thought you had hypnotized them, and there wasn't really any store at all, only the insane intensity of your vision. So they burned this one too, and said they were going to run you out of town.

And just to spite them you knelt back down in those ashes and scraped the black off again, and built again. "It's the biggest funeral parlor in the county. . .got 3 horse drawn hearses. . .belongs to that nigger Tom Russ." A vibration can carry a man a long ways. Fancy Tom Russ, funeral parlor so fancy, the niggers killing each other so they can get an excuse to go to it. But the other folks got tired of all that noise, and burned it again. What can a man do? One vibration ain't the world. Your unborn grandson says leave this pisshearted town, Tom. Pack up and move on, Tom. Vibrations are like anything else—there's more wherever you go. Goodbye, crackers, Tom Russ is leaving your town. His grandson'll be back to correct your grammar and throw stones in your wells. Fifty years ain't so long.

Here is Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, 1917. Tom and Anna Russ, son George age 20, daughter Anna Lois age 16. No vibrations here. Sell eggs, produce. Best liquor in the county. Send my grandson's mother to college. She's got to know 'bout them vibrations. Got to tell him when he gets here, write it down. We're going north, Anna. Got to hunt them vibrations down. Got to find out where the music goes when we don't hear it no more. Got to know about the silence at the top of our screams. Gonna find out what part of the world is fashioned in my image. Gonna make a myth for my unborn grandson, who'll surely like to know. The signs read "Goodbye Tom & Anna Russ." Goodbye and God bless you, sorry to see you go. Three Negroes, 2 with horns, the third with a battered drum. Tah, tah, tat, tah, yippeee, hoorah, Tom Russ, Tom Russ. Good ol' Tom Russ. Sure am sorry to see 'em go.

Here is Newark, New Jersey, 1925. Can't hardly walk for all the movement between me and the ground. This'll be good, Anna. "Russ Produce—Super General Store," "Music While You Shop," George Russ on the piano, rags and stomps, victrola requests played if possible. It's nice here, one vibration can carry a man a long way if he knows just how to handle it. Can make a man realize why there's such a thing as spring. I sit here and see Tom smiling at me, winking, knowing full well I hear everything he's saying. He stands there being sworn in to the Board of Elections, winking, grinning at me, daring me to understand what all this has got to do with the Dothan vibrations. And what it's all got to do with me. Tom Russ, standing there trying to remember some of his unborn grandson's poems. Hearing a few words and shaking his head up and down, staring me square in the eyes. He should only realize how

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beautiful he is. Although he probably does know that vibrations don't come to the unworthy. I hope he knew that.

1929, the streets of Newark are littered with tophats and striped pants and a few bankers with holes in their temples. Tom grins and closes the doors of "Russ Super General Store." The wind moves a few leaves down Boston Street as Tom goes to see his daughter and her husband. He is a quiet man, industrious, thin as a string and painfully shy. Tom looks him up and down and asks him is he a good man. This is my father who nods and slides his arm around Tom's daughter. Tom wonders will I look like him, and I nod yes, and he is satisfied and takes out his cigars and chats about the depression.

I hear they finally hit you in the head with a street lamp, Tom. Is that so? Gave you a cane and a wheelchair, and made you sit by the wood stove nodding and spitting, trying desperately to remember exactly when and where it was the ground vibrated. But do you realize that your unborn grandson has finally got here? Or is it that he's still unborn and only the body has managed to make it right now. Have you got time, Tom? Can you remember any of those lines, Tom? Tell the saucereyed boy at your feet. Maybe they'll do him some good.

Here is Greystone Sanatorium, 1943. Tired, eh Tom? Lying there so still and manageable. What's up there on the ceiling that you have to stare at it so hard? Is it written up there about the vibrations? Tell the 11 year old foot-sitter about them, Tom. Have you got time? Why are your hands so pale, Tom? You must be doing a lot of heavy thinking to be so quiet. Look how the boy looks at you, Tom. He looks scared. Smile at him, Tom. Just a tiny smile of recognition. Brighten this bleak rust room. Show him the suns you used to carry around in your pocket. Whisper something funny to him, Tom. Did you know he was your grandson, Tom. Did you know he fell down on the floor and screamed and kicked his feet when they said they were taking you to this loony pen. Did you know that in only a few years he'll recognize you as his "before everything conversationalist" and want to go to wherever it is you'll want to go after this short detour. Just a phrase, Tom. It'll make things better when your daughter cuts down your black overcoat so he can have something to wear at his grandfather's funeral. Tom, are you going to let him cry like that? Are you going to let the me that was, before the stoneage metamorphosis, suffer? Have you no feeling for the child? A sympathy for the post-prebirth enlightenment, the pre-promethean banality of

childhood? The boy is sensitive, Tom, say something before you move on to grounds more fertile for random vibrations. Tom, are you listening? Don't stare like that. Tom. Tom. O my god.