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by Nicole Ollier and Sophie Rachmuhl, edited by  
Sophie Rachmuhl and Kamau Daaood

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# Vision as Offering

## Interview of Kamau Daaood Monday April 9, 2012, by Nicole Ollier and Sophie Rachmuhl, edited by Sophie Rachmuhl and Kamau Daaood

Nicole Ollier and Sophie Rachmuhl

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### AUTHOR'S NOTE

The poems quoted are from DAAOOD, Kamau, *Notes d'un griot de Los Angeles, Griot Notes from L.A.*, Nicole Ollier and Sophie Rachmuhl, ed., Bègles, Le Castor Astral, 2012.

### The Journey into a Poem

Interviewers: Could you tell us how you work? There are several kinds of poems it seems, like the one about your father or the one about Lady Day, which are a bit more narrative than some others. And the one that you start your concerts with, "Liberator of the Spirit," (hear it on youtube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4btOXkGpwA8>) maybe that's less narrative.

Kamau Daaood: You know the writing process with me is different. There's no one set way that I write. I'm not a very disciplined person in terms of having a set routine or practice. A lot of poems come from pure inspiration where a thought or feeling comes and it's very clear there are lines immediately that begin the journey into a poem. Sometimes it comes all at once. But there are other times where just one line may come. I'm taken by the line and I don't know where it's going and I'll come back to it later. I'll start seeing other lines that I have written the same way, and then I'll see the connection. Or other times I have two different lines that I wrote at different

times and when I bring them together they create the space that opens up a whole journey into a poem. There are times when I have a specific assignment, like when writing for a performance that's thematic. I engross myself with things that relate to the subject, music, books, pictures anything that I can do to get inspiration.

NO & SR: So it's not that you write a poem but you write poetry, and entities can migrate from one to the other.

## Writing from the Intensity, the Magic or the Intimacy of the Moment, and Bringing Out the Universal

KD: Yes. What I am interested in now is writing from a more personal standpoint. Because much of my work before, it had me in it, but it had larger concerns and I think my growth will come with my work being involved in connecting my personal life with the larger concerns. And I think it has the ability to speak to people more, when you can write from the intensity, the magic or the intimacy of the moment, and bring out the universal in that moment. All of us have quiet time, and all of us have thoughts that no one else hears but us, those kinds of things. It's important for me to get to those kinds of things. When you're young, you preach, you teach, you got to let people know what you think you know. And as you grow older, you realize that you don't know what you thought you knew. And it's ok not to know. And you don't have to define everything, to label everything, and that's ok. So I think that's where I'm at now. Where I'm at now is I want to work more. But it's always been a process of how do I arrange my life in a way that I can do this.

It settles over a period of time. Usually it works out to be the last minute, where I have been working on something for sometime and it all comes together. I prefer writing that comes from inspiration, when the words come effortlessly and fill me up, than writing that is a labored mental process. The inspired writing is better. The majority of my pieces don't really take days and days to finish. There is very little revision. And then again there are poems I have written when I go back and look at them later, there are just a few lines I care about, I will actually extract those lines and trash the poem and they will end up in another poem later. There is no one set way.

## Music Is a Major Force in My Life

NO & SR: This book was called *the Language of Saxophones* originally. Do you get your inspiration mostly from music? Is the oral quality of music what inspires you, or could it have been anything else?

### Balm of Gilead

*for Lester Young and Billie Holiday*  
 she graced him with the title of Prez  
 he crowned her Lady Day  
 they stand together on the stage  
 these cousins of sorts and songs  
 holy water drawn from the same well  
 a common bond of knowledge

a raw nerve runs deep  
 so sensitive to the touch  
 overdose of feeling, life full and aching,  
 gardenia floating on a lake of tears  
 porkpie hat flattened by the weight of the world  
 this friendship sailing in a silver chalice of hemlock  
 pearl necklace of broken hearts  
 gold watch of shattered dreams  
 the saxophone turns sideways  
 smoke and warm fire oozing lava river  
 gazelle dance in Kansas City air  
 Lady Day's angelic satin whining secrets in your ear  
 the torn edge of raw silk surrounded by rainbows  
 from light filtered through a whiskey shot glass  
 the cool sound is pain shackled  
 and made to walk a straight line,  
 the pure tone of truth  
 the tongue full of Cupid's arrows  
 the language an army of bent blue notes  
 at the foot of the ear  
 there is little money for the players  
 only spirit and history  
 the sweat from hot light, the ocean of applause  
 shadows in lonely hotel rooms  
 the laughter and the smiles  
 of photographs  
 she graced him with the title of Prez  
 he crowned her Lady Day  
 and at the church  
 Lester laid out in a casket  
 like a saxophone in its case  
 Billie pleaded to sing  
 this offering, this final gesture  
 but they, the bloodsuckers  
 the holders of her cabaret card,  
 spit no on the purest request  
 shit on her gift and  
 stepped on her heart  
 once again  
 they carried her off to a saloon to sedate her  
 in four months she would follow Prez  
 off of the world stage  
 into the spotlight  
 seeking the balm of Gilead  
 you dig?

KD: Music has been a major force in my life. I love music. I've come up in the music. I'm constantly reading and listening about music, as well as working with musicians. It's an area I know and I am very comfortable in. So it comes out in my work. In another lifetime I would devote myself to music. But I'm more inspired by my visual artist friends than my musician friends. I can go over to their studio space, see their stuff, and leave there full. Maybe it's because it's imagery that I see and I feel what I see. I'm inspired by art, but I know music best. One of the things that I'm challenged with now is breaking away from imagery and words that are comfortable to me.

NO & SR: Like what? What would be an example?

**KD: Rainbows in that book.**

NO & SR: You mean rainbows are something that would be more conventional or is it just that you use it a number of times?

**KD: If you just look in that book, and believe me, it's been edited and edited and edited, there are certain terms, or certain expressions, or certain ideas, that have been approached, it's just the same idea. So now it's important for me to find ways to talk about other experiences.**

NO & SR: I find the rainbow very fascinating because you can't ever define a rainbow, in your work it comes in very different contexts. Does it have to do with a covenant?

## Finding Constant Balance

**KD: When I was a younger artist, I was very angry. As a young black man growing up in America I was very angry about social issues and the history of struggle and oppression of my people. I came up in the 60's and they were very militant times. So that fire came out in my work. I was in an acting workshop once, a community center. They had everyone doing these improvisational monologues, or skits. Everyone was going up doing monologues full of rage or sadness. The facilitator told us it was easy to express these things. Then she asked us to show happiness, to show joy. And that was enlightening to me because when you do art you make others feel what you project. So if you project pain and suffering, pain and suffering is what your offering will be. If it's joy and inspiration that you project; this is what you're offering. Sometimes you go into dark places to bring light. I had to do more than make people feel bad real good! So then I tried to find balance, constant balance in my work. When I talk about shit, I also had to speak of rainbows. I felt I had a responsibility as an artist. If I took up people's time, I had to strive to give them something of value. I look at the young rappers of today that live in bad conditions, and they're good reporters about the experience of what their day to day life is like, but they don't have the skill to see beyond reporting. What is the alternative, where is the vision. That's what I see is missing in many of their works. They get stuck, stuck in the pain. When I realized this about my own work, I started searching for words that were light, airy, lofty in concept and began to infuse them in my work.**

NO & SR: When you're talking about a baby's piss for instance, is it this kind of thing also? Do you find an excrement can be purifying?

**KD: The actual line in the poem you are referring to is "piss, fresh as a brand new baby's bladder". Now that's fresh! The more shocking an image can be, the more jarring to the consciousness. Sometimes, if you're able to have strong images in succession, it doesn't give people time to regroup, and it can open up a new door for their perception.**

NO & SR: You said something extraordinary about asphalt the other day. You said something about the asphalt meaning the urban environment of Los Angeles, where the asphalt was something hard, urban. Yet in the poem "Healer's Lament," there's a seed that bursts in the asphalt ("watermelon seeds swelling in asphalt"). It leaves room for some growth. You also mentioned asphalt about your vocal chords.

## There's No Set Way

KD: When you think about asphalt, the image of asphalt is a metaphor for life in the city environment and the hardness that goes with it. You relate to a city differently than the countryside. Life demands a certain amount of guardedness. You don't think of asphalt as nurturing. You think, bruises and scrapes and things that make it hard to move forward. One doesn't think of clear open space. It's like trying to be a Light-being in a prison cell. Sometimes it's the hardness of life that promotes the growth. That's the beauty of dealing with hardship as opposed to being in a space where everything is nice, everyone is nice and warm, very little friction. It is the conflict, the challenges, and going beyond where you're comfortable that deepens us. You go through this, and rise above it. There is no set way.

NO & SR: Does it signify also that you're a child of L.A., and that you're writing from L.A.?

KD: Yes, to a degree. That I'm a city boy. I come from a city, I come from Los Angeles. This is what I know. I know the streets there, I know that environment.

NO & SR: Would you say you're a community person?

KD: I think I have been an introvert all my life. There are times where I feel I'm a jokester, and a trickster. But for the most part I'm very sensitive to my surroundings. I think I have the feminine side, I have a lot of that. I think that's part of what's made me a poet. To be ok with that.

NO & SR: You also have a lot of compassion, and empathy. Would you say that you're an *engagé* poet? When you write about the world? The children being maimed in the streets? The war between Israel and Palestine?

## DAMAGE

there is a child's hand  
 in the street  
 it is small  
 it should be attached  
 to a three- or four-year-old  
 you cannot tell if it is the hand  
 of a Palestinian child  
 or Israeli child  
 you cannot tell if it was blown here  
 from a suicide bomb blast  
 or shelling from an Israeli tank  
 it's just a small bloody hand in the grey of the street  
 someone weeps  
 insane with the weight of this image  
 someone who has held that hand  
 taught the child to count the fingers on that hand  
 in Hebrew or Arabic  
 there is a baby's hand  
 in the middle of this Middle Eastern road  
 and you can't tell if the child's parents  
 read Quran or Torah  
 it's just there  
 small and bloody  
 without a smile and laughter attached to it  
 so look away

we are told  
it's just  
unfortunate  
collateral damage

## Feeling a Certain Responsibility

KD: When you become serious or when you accept this way that you view the world, you feel a certain responsibility. One role is that of witness. Another role is the broadcaster, or the messenger. There are probably other roles.

NO & SR: The prophet?

KD: That's the young stage. When you think you know everything and you have this message for the world.

NO & SR: So it's difficult to be a poet and not be *engagé*, not to be involved in the world, not to be politically committed, or just committed.

## Trying to Raise the Ideal without Losing Your Personal Identity

KD: There's a line in an earlier poem: truth is a line between sides on which you walk. Truth is the only side. It's that kind of thing. If you begin to take sides, based upon your tradition or some kind of belief system, you fall into a category that's very dangerous, you're not doing all you can do, because you're not open to other ideas. I'm very conflicted about what the reality is for African-Americans in America, and what you have to deal with everyday. The conflict lies in terms of what has to be done to survive. But then, what the ultimate ideal is for human life on the planet. So you find yourself with this dual thing, where you are trying to raise the ideal without losing your personal identity. I really think that all of us are on earth together and that we all have histories and we all have roles to play and things to offer, to the planet, everybody. This is very idealistic talk, I know. Our histories are important to bring to the table. And everyone should be able to bring what they bring without having to have to empty themselves completely. By the same token, the key is being able to identify personal backwardness and also on the flip side to embrace the concept of tolerance and difference. There's stuff in everybody's culture that's just backwards, that's just wrong. We're not perfect as groups. And the cultural arrogance that we bring to the table is something that is not going to be tolerated. People don't tolerate pride that is directed against others. In some way people feel they have something that others don't have and that makes them better. So, if you have that kind of thing happening, there's no growth. You have all these histories with bad blood, nations and histories, if we can't find the point of humility and tolerance, if we can't let go, we can't realize our highest potential, we just can't do it.

NO & SR: Do you mean to say the middle passage is not something that interests you?

## Getting Other Communities to See the Commonness and the Humanity

KD: No, but this is a good example. You have the middle passage, this journey and all its horrors and the African's relationships with colonizer and enslavers. All the attitudes, prejudices, social positions, complex pain and suffering magnified for over four hundred years. I understand the anger, the historical baggage, and the major roadblocks to growth. How do we move past the middle passages, the racism and the after effects of slavery? How does this change? It changes from a shift in the consciousness of humanity, a deep desire to move in a different direction. We have these strong allegiances to our tribes, right or wrong, that keep us stuck. The only way these deep-rooted fears and prejudices can be overcome is by the inner-work of individual people. When people change the world changes. As an artist this is my work: to open people up; to point to our commonness; to inspire growth, tolerance, love, vision; and the good stuff. At the same time, constantly working on me. Fighting the backwardness and ignorance within me. I know this is very idealistic, but that's what artists do; they dream.

NO & SR: You're talking about the reality of potential, and about vision. Your poetry is very dialectical, like other Los Angeles poets, who deal with opposites coming together.

KD: And I really don't think that this is any different than any other time period in human history. I think you have these dynamics going, you have this class thing and people with and those without. But there's so much other stuff happening now in terms of what's happening with our planet now. Where things are getting to the point now where if we don't change it's going to be a very, very different kind of place for us to live, just on a physical level. And we're going to have to learn how to cooperate or we're just going to do ourselves in.

NO & SR: It's also very elegiac poetry. Your poetry is very much about you talking about people who are unsung. It's as if you wanted to sing these people who left a heritage. You want their memory to keep. All these people you want to keep on this earth through people's memory because your poems keep them alive.

KD: I think it's because of what lived in the people, that they were examples of certain principles, and certain concepts and that's why I was drawn to writing about them, not because of the quality of their voice, it's because of the quality of their stories.

NO & SR: Your poetry celebrates your community a lot, the different people, the different ways. It's a celebration of your community's vitality, its history and its richness. The group of translators who translated your poetry from English to French had to research quite a bit about your culture and ways in order to translate properly. And one thing we had to be careful about was how you relate to spirituality, things of the soul, what is God to you. Are you concerned with God, spirituality, religion, or are you more an atheist or a natural believer in God?

## This Life and this World Are Divine

KD: I believe in spirituality; I'm cool with the God concept. I acknowledge the divine. This life and this world are divine. People bring their various mythologies, stories and practices based upon their culture, histories and experiences. There are many different approaches from the dogmatic religionist of many faiths to the dogmatic



atheist, to everything in between. I think there is a center ground for people to stand on that provides tolerance, understanding and room for difference. People are killing one another over their concept of God. I think there is something very wrong with that.

NO & SR: Do you give grace when you eat?

KD: Yes. When I am with my family, we bow our heads to acknowledge the divine and give thanks. The names or the tradition is not as important as the essence of the act. The concept of reverence is what is important. If someone from a specific faith is praying, I can be with him or her without getting hung up on the names or the language. To me it's about the reverence for the Oneness.

NO & SR: Have you traveled to many places?

KD: I did some traveling. I traveled to Egypt twice as a young man. I traveled to Somalia. I worked at this place called the Franz Fanon Research and Development Center, it was in Los Angeles in Martin Luther King Hospital. They put on a conference in Somalia about Human Development Models in Action. It was in 1979. They still had a country and a government. They were going through changes with Ethiopia and the government took us around and they showed us how they were trying to fight the desert by planting cactus. They have a large nomadic population and there's one of the largest coastlines. But the nomadic people did not eat fish, they called it the snake of the sea. So they were trying to educate them, trying to get them to change and relate to the sea. It was very interesting. I was 28 years old, I did not know what the heck I was looking at! After I lived there, went to Egypt, the pyramids, and did that whole thing. I went there twice. I've been to the Netherlands about four times. This is my first trip to France.

NO & SR: Do you think it will inspire you with some poetry?

## Silence to Dwell In

KD: This residency in Bordeaux has been very rich to me. For one, the environment is so different visually. In California, there are billboards everywhere. The bombardment of advertising and corporations is constant. You get up in the morning, turn on the television, and download what they want you to think, who's killing who, what you should buy. What is supposed to be important to you? You go through the day with this message in your head, spreading this message to others. You come home and upgrade a new program. The opportunity of this residency created a space where the lack of bombardment from the day to day of home was minimized. No phone calls. All we did was check our email, and even did that less. And then the language; the fact that I don't speak French created a cocoon around me, even though there was sound all around me it was more like silence to dwell in. My wife became more present to me and I was able to hear my thoughts more clearly. One other thing, in America I wake up and travel the day as a black man. You wear race like a suit to keep you in your place. I experienced a lot less of that here. And that was refreshing.

NO & SR: You're talking like Richard Wright in the 1950s and 1960s. Plus, you're not so black. Does it mean you have a dual identity in the States?

## So I Am a Black Man

KD: To be black is a lot of things. It is ancestry, but it is also a way white culture keeps people in their place with labels. Obama has a white mother and black father. Why then is he considered black? Racial labels do more than establish origins. What about being a human being or a soul? What about a spiritual being, a fellow traveler, where we find our commonness? This is how we are brought up; this is how society is structured for us. So I am a black man, even though I have Native American, Irish, and Filipino as well as African ancestry. That is the kind of world we live in.

I didn't feel that race mattered in Bordeaux as much as in the States. It was refreshing here to see how different cultures interact. But I know there's a flipside to that here. I haven't been here long enough to experience everything. This is not a utopian society. It has its stuff to deal with. I know there's an immigrant situation that's causing tension in French society. Black people in America constantly acknowledge each other's presence in public. In Bordeaux everyone stays to himself or herself no matter what race they are. I found them to be very helpful if you engaged them. I've had strangers help with my bags or young folks offer their seat on the tram. You don't see a lot of that where I'm from.

NO & SR: Apart from your mother, you're talking about blacks only, aren't you?

KD: Basically, I write from my experience. The people that are going to show up in my work are the people I know best. Just because I write through my black experience doesn't mean that my concerns are not humanistic or universal. White writers can write from their experience and not have to worry about the confines of labels. So no, I am not only speaking about or speaking to blacks only. I use the images that I know best to speak to life.

## THE WATCH

in the hospital  
 you horizontal, me vertical  
 i not wanting to know the time  
 you handed me your watch and ring  
 you had never done that before  
 i sensed mother's breeze in the room  
 they said you had congestive heart failure  
 they told me it was like breathing underwater  
 you said you were tired  
 mother silently chanting in my ear  
 "tell your father you love him, tell your father you love him"  
 my vocal cords hardened asphalt  
 a mute saxophone  
 in this silence  
 this perfect space between us  
 i would like to think you heard me  
 gone from the body  
 that carried the song

NO & SR: There's one thing that comes to my mind when I read your poetry, it's the word redemption. There is something like redemption in most of your poems. Even "The Watch" is remembrance which is painful but joyous, or moving at the same time. You sing the words that you could not say, so at least you are saying them, but in a poem, after the fact,

but they have been said. And about your mother. As if, there was always something to save, or something that could save the moment or save you. The moment is something that you talked about in the concert, saying you had to live in the moment. But here, you're picking up the moment that is lost, in a way.

**KD:** I don't know if I'm answering your question, but the writing is much more for me than anyone else, and it is here that I can try and bring out my conflict and resolve my conflict, or at least put myself in a direction, or to be able to see my ideals, to make them more real in front of me. I want to be better, that's the goal.

NO & SR: Is it healing for you?

**KD:** It can be catharsis, yes.

## The Emotion and Passion of Reading

NO & SR: What you're saying here does not involve an audience. So where does the audience come in?

**KD:** It's something that I do. There's a certain amount to share with others, that is the next step. Like I said earlier, I do realize that I'm not a plumber, I'm a poet. I've accepted that. In accepting that, I'm not writing to keep this for myself. I'm trying to get to the best part of what I see, and use that to grow from it and at the same time share with others.

NO & SR: Who do you think is your audience?

**KD:** It depends on the piece. The main audience can vary from time to time. Hopefully, if you write well enough and the work is strong enough, it can have a very, very wide audience. How would I ever know that my audience would expand to France?

NO & SR: The performance aspect is really important, it gives a whole other dimension to the work.

**KD:** In France, they're not used to the emotion and to the passion of reading, and some said that most poets don't read their own work! That's almost like egotistical to read your work.

NO & SR: Beside Bob Kaufman, what are your writing influences?

## My Biggest Influences Have Been My Older Friends

**KD:** I think really the biggest influences have been my older friends. Names like Ojenke, Eric Priestley, K. Curtis Lyle, to a degree Quincy Troupe, I didn't really know Quincy as well as I know the others.

NO & SR: From criticism or from just being with them?

**KD:** From being with them, from hearing them. And I guess the other two poets that strongly affected me were of course Bob Kaufman and Pablo Neruda.

NO & SR: No other American poets?

**KD:** Poet Amiri Baraka aka Leroi Jones, he had a very strong effect on me too.

NO & SR: As a poet, or as a writer in general?

KD: As a poet and as an activist. He was very much involved in music also and in performance style. There were other people, like Jayne Cortez, she was a very surreal writer.

NO & SR: Someone else at the concert the other day asked if you were some kind of surreal poet.

## The Literal Mixed In with the Out

KD: I think it had a lot to do with my imagery. When I was younger, I wrote a lot more literal poems. The change in imagery, learning that from a lot of my friends and these other writers like Bob Kaufman. It makes the imagery more musical and it opens up the imagination. I think my writing is a combination of both. Where you have the literal mixed in with the more out imagery. I try to combine it in such a way that, I love imagery that's very out, but it's very clear what you're talking about.

## THE LIVING WATERS

the living waters upon the lips  
 at the center of the concept is life  
 if the earth had breasts they could be here  
 if the world had a womb it would be here  
 in this place of beginnings  
 the idea of race as a misnomer  
 the world is One  
 divided into many  
 the breath and the landscape of possibilities  
 the cleansing thought of circles  
 our seamless existence, cause and effect  
 the blindness of bad thinking  
 dressed in a suit of dogma  
 thought that makes things ugly  
 an evil twist of nature,  
 a false belief  
 drive the hands to act  
 upon the earth improper  
 a stray note in a song  
 in a perfect moment we could be one  
 the richness in this moment,  
 more than drums and stale rituals  
 more than flag waving and staking claims  
 a family regrouping for joy of the planet  
 a school of perfecting the soul,  
 we memorize the words to the human song  
 heart beating as common music  
 the breath and the land that connect us  
 excuses are the links to our chains  
 we could dance  
 on a dirt floor  
 of color and splendour  
 each fingerprint makes its contribution  
 if the earth had breasts they should be here  
 the world's children nourished

from wisdom of oneness  
hear the rhythms of light  
shed your chains and dance  
drink of the living waters  
wash your face in the tears of humanity  
with mind, hand and heart  
will a new world  
into being

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