

Ishmael Reed: So did you write over there?

Lamont Steptoe: Oh, yeah. Right after the three letters I had nightmares and I wrote poems about them. There are three poems I wrote about them in Vietnam in 1969.

Ishmael Reed: You know, Lorenzo Thomas was writing over there. You know, Lorenzo Thomas was also in Vietnam.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, yeah, I met Lorenzo. We were in Paris together for that Baldwin thing. He sat next to me on the plane coming back. He was the one who leaned over and told me that Alex Haley had just died.

Ishmael Reed: Yusef was over there, too. Yusef Komunyakaa. Did you run into him?

Lamont Steptoe: No, I didn't run into him in the war. You know, I met him post war. I met him in the apartment of Etheridge Knight the night we came back from the cemetery after Etheridge Knight. That's where I met Yusef Komunyakaa.

Ishmael Reed: What was his position over there in Vietnam, do you know?

Lamont Steptoe: He was a correspondent for the "Stars and Stripes."

Ishmael Reed: And he didn't mention anything about what was going on back home?

Lorenzo Thomas: No. Not to my knowledge. No. No. You know he's a stroke victim now. He's paralyzed on the right side of his body.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, I know that. You know, he re-invited me to Boulder, Colorado years ago to read my work and the FBI tried to set me up during that visit. I was wondering about that. These real clean cut guys who were trying to behave like they were hip put me up in a fancy place and said, "You're going to be with these guys" and they had a bag of weed and asked me if I wanted to take it back to Oakland and I said, "I don't want to be getting on the plane with that shit." When I got to the airport they took me into a separate room and searched me. I was wondering if he was in intelligence over there or something. But I don't know.

Lamont Steptoe: Something similar like that happened to...well you know Louis Armstrong said he had to smoke weed almost everyday to deal with American racism. He wrote a letter to President Eisenhower asking him to legalize marijuana and after that the FBI followed him around for the rest of his life.

Ishmael Reed: He also called Eisenhower a coward.

Lamont Steptoe: The other thing is when they were killing (Patrice) Lumumba in the Congo the State Department had sent Louis Armstrong to another part of the Congo to perform to take attention away to what was being done to Lumumba. When Louis Armstrong comes back to America he has a suitcase full of weed and you know, he knew he had to go through customs and all that. President Nixon greeted him at the airport and he gave that suitcase full of marijuana to Nixon and said, "Would you carry this through for me?" So Nixon carried it through not knowing it was full of weed into the country.

Ishmael Reed: That's an incredible story. Let me ask you something. So when you got out of the service you began to experience the affects of serving in Vietnam...

Lamont Steptoe: No. Not immediately. The only thing I noticed when I got back was, "Why do I feel so tired all of the time?"

Ishmael Reed: I see. Okay.

Lamont Steptoe: So it was only Lamer...Lamer at age three was the first one to diagnose me. She looked at me one day and said, "Daddy, you have a serious problem." And then I remember you saying something to me, but what I was going to say about the soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan is that they are being debriefed before they come back.

Ishmael Reed: What do you mean debriefed?

Lamont Steptoe: They are being told, "You are going to have nightmares. You're going to have suicidal ideations. Homicidal ideations, and you're going to experience uncontrollable rage." So it took me ten years, Lamer was thirteen years old when I walked into the VA hospital here in Philadelphia to a psychiatrist's office who was retiring in fifteen minutes after thirty years. I said to him, "What's wrong with me?" and he looked me up and down and said, "You have PTSD," and I said, "What's that?"

Ishmael Reed: What year was that?

Lamont Steptoe: This would have been maybe 1993. So I left my job at the Painted Bride after eight years, you know it was a White institution. I had to deal with White institutional racism. I told my boss, the head of the Painted Bride, he was a mortician, you know, they have five funeral homes in Philadelphia. They bury all the cops and the firemen. So he set his salary at \$25,000 per year. I said, "This is a toy for you. How are the rest of us supposed to make a living when you set your salary that low?" and I also confronted him with the fact that...I said "It's okay for us to come here and sing and dance on the stage, but when you do capital improvements, carpentry, electricity and architecture, you don't hire anybody from my community." I was confronting him on these things and I was so enraged that I jumped three feet up into the air and the reason why I was jumping three feet up into the air was to keep myself from grabbing this man around the throat and strangling him with my bare hands. So after eight years I went across the river to Camden, New Jersey to work at the Walt Whitman Poetry Center, which was headed by a Black woman named Renee Huggins and in the office was a Black man who was darker than me who hated Black people and who would say terrible things to the staff and he would come to work drunk and say terrible things to the artists. So I told my boss, "You have to fire this guy." She's like, "I'm not going to fire him." See at the time he knew a lot about computers and we were switching him over to computers, so she said, "I'm not firing him; I'm not firing him." I said, "Okay, so here's what's going to happen. I'm going to come into work one day, he's going to say something to me, and I'm going to pick up that computer monitor and break it over his head. He'll be going to the hospital and I'll be going to jail." "I'm not firing him." So a few months later I resigned. Now at the same time my landlord, I lived on the third floor of his house said, "Lamont, you've got to move." So here I have no job, got to move...

Ishmael Reed: Why did he want you to move?

Lamont Steptoe: He just wanted to take over the upstairs for himself. So I put in my paperwork for my PTSD a year and a half earlier, so I walked out of the house one day, looked up at the sky and said, "Send me a sign." I come home and there's a letter from the Veterans Administration saying that they rated me seventy percent disabled and that I would get a check on Friday for \$8,000. That's how I got into the apartment I'm in now. So this was VA math and the maximum payment was \$1900 a month, so I was getting something like \$900. So I lived on that for a year and I went to the VA hospital and this veteran said, "You're at seventy percent?" I said, "Yup." He said, "Do you know what that means?" I said, "What does that mean?" "That means you're unemployable. File this other paperwork, it will take three months to go through, and if it goes through they'll be able to pay you at the 100% rate and you'll still have to go in for a re-evaluation after four years." So I did that and they sent me a retroactive check for \$24,000.

Ishmael Reed: Well s\*\*\*, you've got to give me some money for my play though gofoundme. Listen one more thing. You got that award for \$50,000.

Lamont Steptoe: Yes. The Pew Fellowship.

Ishmael Reed: When did you get notice of that?

Lamont Steptoe: The year after you gave me the American Book Award. 2006.

Ishmael Reed: Okay, and so did they send you a letter?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, you had an application. Yeah. They send you a letter to tell you that you won. Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: You applied for it.

Lamont Steptoe: I had been applying for it for fourteen years.

Ishmael Reed: And it's called the Pew Fellowship.

Lamont Steptoe: It's called the Pew Fellowship for the Arts.

Ishmael Reed: Let me ask you something. The day that you got in the mail, looking at all the dues that you had to pay, all the misery, all the tragedy, all the work that you put it and all the writing that you had to put in, did you really feel that this was really a triumph?

Lamont Steptoe: Of course. I had a dream one time Ishmael...my late sister and her husband, they were not my best friends.

Ishmael Reed: What do you mean?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, my sister married a man whose attitude was...and my sister had an incredible artistic gift. She could paint you like a photograph and he had this attitude that all artists were bums and didn't want to work.

Ishmael Reed: Well, that's ethnicity. That's your ethnic group.

Lamont Steptoe: He also had destroyed all of my writings from 1963-1967 when I was in high school. I had left all of my journals behind at the their house when I went off to Vietnam. When I came back everything that was written on was torn out.

Ishmael Reed: Why did he do that?

Lamont Steptoe: They didn't like my truth telling about my growing up in Pittsburgh. They didn't like the truth telling.

Ishmael Reed: You were talking about the family and stuff and that old stuff?

Lamont Steptoe: Right, and so my sister was offended and she convinced him to destroy the writings.

Ishmael Reed: So what was your mother and your dad like?

Lamont Steptoe: I met my father for five minutes when I was four years old and he asked my mother, "What is he like?" and she said, "Just like you. Stubborn." So he wasn't there.

Ishmael Reed: And your mom, what kind of work did she do?

Lamont Steptoe: My mother was a domestic for a rich, White family in the Jewish neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Squirrel Hill. Her boss was the head of WestingHouse Laboratory in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and she worked for them for twenty years. I mean, I grew up on gefilte fish.

Ishmael Reed: Did he encourage you?

Lamont Steptoe: I never had any interaction with him.

Ishmael Reed: What about his wife?

Lamont Steptoe: Never had any interaction with her, either. My mom took me to work with her once. That was it.

Ishmael Reed: So your mom had to support you?

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, yeah. She raised us by herself.

Ishmael Reed: How many kids?

Lamont Steptoe: Four of us. My brother who was a lifer, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and a Ranger, he was sixteen years older than me, my sister was ten years older than me, and then I have a younger brother who is three years younger than me. Now my sister was a Scorpio and she was very combative. I remember running inside the house one time with my brother and my sister was having a furious argument with my mother and she turns around and looks at my brother and I and says, "Why don't you tell them you're not my brothers." Given we all had different fathers, but I didn't look upon her like that, you know, and that shocked me. She maintained that attitude right up until her death, you know.

Ishmael Reed: Your sister.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, my sister. My mom was my biggest fan. I was a very moody child and sometimes I wouldn't speak to anyone else in the house for three to four days and my mother used to say, "Leave that boy alone. Leave that boy alone."

Ishmael Reed: What did she think about your writing abilities?

Lamont Steptoe: My mother only read one piece that I wrote. It was a piece that I wrote when I was twenty-two years old and it was published in *Identity Lessons* published by Penguin edited by (Marie Gillian). It was a piece about her life as a domestic worker and I handed it to her, and she read it, and we just stared into each other's eyes. No words were spoken. But it's a very powerful piece about what it's like to work in the kitchen of the masters.

Ishmael Reed: So one more thing. What do you think of the current Black literary scene?

Lamont Steptoe: I think it's very vital, but you know... Etheridge Knight and you mentored me. I first heard of your name in 1972. I was a student at Temple. I first heard your name out of the mouth of James Spady. I've had the incredible opportunity to sit at the feet of Gwendolyn Books, Sonia Sanchez, Baraka, you know, all of these people. So, I've been very blessed, but I am very disappointed in the Black critics, African American critics because I've had more interviews and more in depth studies of me as a Black soldier in Vietnam by White and Filipino critics. I have never been interviewed by a Black critic. The only person that talks about me on an academic level is Keith Gilyard. Keith Gilyard is the one Black academic...

Ishmael Reed: No, they turned the whole culture over to Skip Gates. They turned the whole thing over to him. You know in the old days it was the older writers who had the patronage to encourage the younger writers. I mean that's like Richard Wright mentored James Baldwin, right? And Gwendolyn Brooks and things like that and then they turned it over to Skip. He presides over a couple of foundations where the money's supposed to go to writers. He gives them to his colleagues at Harvard. That's what happened. They turned the responsibilities of the patronage to encourage younger writers over to critics like him. That's the problem.

Lamont Steptoe: Eugene Redmond has published me in *Drumvoices* several times. Keith Gillard has put me in a couple of anthologies. Of course you have published me in *Konch* and Haki Madhubuti because he brought me to Chicago to induct me into the International Hall of Fame for Writers. So my hats off to those folks, but as far as African American critics go, they're fifty years behind the times.

Ishmael Reed: Well, no, they have to go along with the stuff that comes down from their departments. They don't have any power. They have to follow all these fads, you know, the French theory and all that stuff. So they don't have any power and I remember years ago when somebody wanted to do a paper on my work and a couple members of the faculty said they would resign if they did that, so you know, they're under a lot of political pressure.

Lamont Steptoe: I understand. I understand. Well, you know, next time I see you, I need to get you to autograph a section of the anthology that Michael Warr did on poetry and prose. I'm in there with MFA types and I lay out my philosophy of writing.

Ishmael Reed: Well, you know, Elizabeth Nunez's work.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, she publicly berated Steve Cannon one time. I know who she is.

Ishmael Reed: There's a lot of rivalry at Medgar Evers. A lot of politics. There's a lot of tension between traditional African Americans and ones from the Caribbean. We got that over here at Berkeley, you know traditional African American fought for ethnic studies. They brought Caribbean people in to teach and to run the department. Cecil Brown has a book called "*Hey Dude, Where's My Black Studies?*" criticizing that arrangement. So anyway, she says the publishers want "girlfriend" books from Black authors.

Lamont Steptoe: Yeah, well, that's one of the reasons why I founded my own publishing company in 1987, Ishmael. I have published over a hundred anthologies both at commercial and university presses. I was not going to sit around and let some White folks make some decisions over my poetry because Paul Lawrence Dunbar self published, Walt Whitman self published...

Ishmael Reed: Well, you know who backed his newspaper in 1917.

Lamont Steptoe: Who?

Ishmael Reed: The Wright Brothers.

Lamont Steptoe: Oh.

Ishmael Reed: *The Dayton Daily* or whatever. Richard and Orville Wright. How do you like that?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, you know Eugene Redmond wrote me and said, "You know, Gwendolyn and I were talking about you the other day and Gwendolyn said 'Oh, he's one of those genius poets.'" So you know that was a great thing. I knew Gwendolyn for twenty years and I said, "Ms. Brooks, Ms. Brooks," and she said, "Call me Gwendolyn," and I said, "But Gwendolyn, you're my elder." She said, "I know that you've had good home training, but call me Gwendolyn. We're colleagues."

Ishmael Reed: So, listen, is there anything else you want to say before we wind up?

Lamont Steptoe: Well, just that fifty years after the war, the war hasn't gone away, I read with Pedro Pietre. You know Pedro Pietre."

Ishmael Reed: Sure did. Sure.

Lamont Steptoe: I asked Pedro... we were reading at Al Ginsberg's memorial picnic in Central Park and I said, "Pedro, why do you always dress in black?" He said, "They killed me in Vietnam and I'm mourning myself.

Ishmael Reed: Period. That's it. That's it. Right there. Right there. Right there. That's the end.

Lamont Steptoe: He pulled up his sleeves and showed me how his arms looked like elephant skin and he pulled up the back of his shirt and showed me his back and it looked like elephant skin from Agent Orange.

Ishmael Reed: Okay. Great. That's great. Okay, we're going to send this to you and you can edit.

Lamont Steptoe: Okay. Cool. Thanks, Ishmael. It was an honor. Thank you, Tennessee.

Ishmael Reed: Thank you for this. Thanks for writing the introduction to Tennessee's book.

Lamont Steptoe: I can't wait to see it. The book, I mean.

Tennessee Reed: Thank you.

Lamont Steptoe: Alright, peace, man.

Ishmael Reed: Bye.

Lamont Steptoe: Bye.