



From the author of *'Autobiography of an American Orphan'*
- Walter James -

The People's Poet

Walter James



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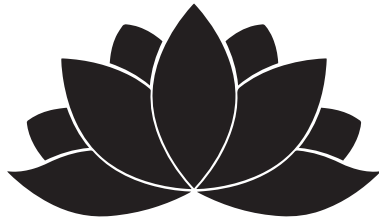
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*“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid
of the dark . . .*

*the real tragedy in life, is when men are
afraid of the light.”*

. . . Plato



Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	viii
Sweet Jesus!	1
Quick Religion	4
Streetwalking Prayer	8
In Spanish Harlem	11
Chicano Cooks	14
No Class!	17
China Eyes	20
Moving On!	24
The Slave Market	28
Happy Hallelujah!	31
Read all About it!	34
The Graveyard Shift	38
St. James, Missouri	42
Just a Junkman	45
On the Rack!	49
Uncle Sam's Eagle	52
Union Station	56
Gray Angel	59
Joan of Arc	63
Lady Gottrocks	67
Black and Blue Blonde	70
Bamboo Beauty	73
Orphan Andy	76

vi Walter James

In the Briar Patch	80
Fifty Cents	83
Honest Injun	87
Instead	90
L.A. Dawning	93
The Message	96
One Love Left	100

Preface

About seven years ago, towards the close of a New York City summer, I was sitting on a bus stop bench. An older man approached, and after identifying himself as a successful artist asked me to pose for a portrait. I told him that I had somewhere to go, but if he were there when I returned, and if he would let me keep the finished portrait I would pose.

Even though it was raining heavily when I got back, he was there waiting. He did it in a few sittings. It's the portrait of a young man with sharp features and wavy hair. However, when it was complete, he would not part with it. He offered to have a negative made for me. I refused, and wound up with neither. If you should happen to come across that head and throat portrait, please put the artist in touch with me. You'll be able to identify it by the two words that he wrote at the bottom. Even though I strongly objected, he would not change them. I'm hoping now, that he was right and I was wrong, and that you'll agree. He labeled it "The Poet."

Introduction

I was billed as “The People’s Poet” in 1980 for my showcase, which was held at the Wilshire Ebell Theater Concert Hall in Los Angeles. Please keep in mind that most of these poems came to me during the winter and summer of 1979–1980, more than thirty years ago, while I was working night shifts at local hospitals.

On my nights off, while walking or driving alone through the streets of Los Angeles, I encountered different scenes and situations and, after some time had passed and I was unable to get a particular scene or feeling out of my head, it would eventually crystalize into a poem. Sometimes a poem would just come to me due to events or situations in life that triggered remembrance of imposed impressions on my mind.

I’d rented a room to isolate myself, so that I might prepare for my national board examinations as a respiratory therapist. I studied alone in the back of coffee shops at night and trained with a Chinese Master in the arts of Tai Chi Chuan and Gung Fu. I believe my training, while relieving my anxiety over survival, deepened my perception of life around me and allowed previously suppressed scenes and incidents to surface into poetry.

Sweet Jesus!

*Talking all about Jesus,
in the middle of the heat . . .
a black woman shook her finger—
at the people in the street.*

*Enclosed in a black gown,
on that hot, august day . . .
she paused in the crosswalk—
to have her say.*

*Her forehead was dripping,
while her voice cleaved the air . . .
exhorting the people—
to prayer . . .*

*Some massive, black woman,
alone in the street . . .
in the midst of the smothering heat . . .
Sweet Jesus! . . .
Sweet Jesus! . . .
Sweet Jesus!!*

***T**here seem to be two different reactions to this poem. Some people find it amusing and laugh or smile; some people get quiet and pensive. Maybe one person can experience both reactions. When I first heard, then saw this lady, my initial reaction was to laugh, but I soon realized she was serious. As I passed her in the crosswalk, I said in a low voice, “Good morning, ma’am.”*

She replied in the same tone, “God bless you, son,” never missing a beat of her sermon in that booming voice. I doubt that anyone would’ve realized she’d replied, unless standing next to me. Maybe someone can experience feelings of amusement, and then pensive reflection.



Quick Religion

*I thought it had to be a bomb—
to make all those people run . . .
not a “Saturday Night Special,”
just a nickel-plated gun . . .*

*They ran on past my car all ducking—
they were crouching from his sight . . .
it was just past twelve o’clock,
that’s still a Saturday night . . .*

*Three barking flashes caught my eye—
I sat there . . . rooted to the spot . . .
but that was all it took last night,
to clear that parking lot . . .*

*He ran right up beside the car—
and not alone he’d come . . .
with that “Saturday Night Special,”
it was nickel-plated—
what a gun!*

*His hand jumped two more times—
The metal glinted in the light . . .
I fell across the car seat praying—
Jesus!— Just get me through tonight!*

*Those shots were answered right away,
Someone was shooting back . . .
And it felt like—just forever,
Waiting for the glass to crack . . .*

*I stayed down 'til it faded out,
There wasn't time to run . . .
From that "Saturday Night Special"—
It was nickel-plated,
pure nickel-plated . . . What a gun!!*

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