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# Family Business

## An Interview with Mark Scott and Three Poems

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### 1. Introduction

There are twice as many mentions of the word ‘family’ in *Balance Sheets*, Mark Scott’s latest collection of poems (Kingston UP, 2022) as in *Tactile Values*, his first, which came out for New Issues in 2000 (his second, *A Bedroom Occupation: Love Elegies*, was published in 2007 by Lumen Books.) We met him to discuss his relationship with the subject of his works, and how it has changed throughout his career as a poet and author.

Scott was born in what we might call a literary family: poetry, he states, was a “family inheritance.” His father recited him poems, which he had started committing to memory under the influence of his own mother. Commentaries about Scott’s work seem to be inescapably tied to the discussion of artistic creation and family as closely connected—which is why the questions accompanying these translations center on such a topic. Moreover, it is the reason why so many authors, writers and poets populate Scott’s answers and intertext.

Together with a short interview concerning Scott’s views of his own work, here we are presenting poems explicitly dedicated to or concerning members of the author’s family: “The Cave of AIDS,” “Sons and Fathers,” and “My Mother’s Garden.”<sup>1</sup>

The first one, devoted to the memory of Craig William Scott (1961-1984), marked Scott’s publication on *Poetry* in April 1991, and it painfully recounts the last days in the life of the poet’s younger brother. The epigraph, taken from W. H. Auden’s “Cave of Nakedness,” is productively reused in the text—one instance of the author’s rich intertext: “but all of us were out to annoy you / because it hurt that you didn’t speak.” The second, “Sons and Fathers,” reverses the archetypal (and archi-textual?) couple of Turgenevian inspiration made of parents and

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<sup>1</sup> Much like family ties, the conversations and exchanges which led to this commentary, questions and translations are the result of a combination of centripetal and centrifugal forces. I thus wish to express my gratitude to the poet himself, Mark Scott, who let me ask him questions even when they were not easy ones, and who sent me all sorts of ‘support materials’ when I asked him to.

children. Seemingly ‘set’ in the Scotts’ childhood and youth neighborhood, the poem is devoted to the memory of Craig William Scott, who is also explicitly addressed in the text through the eyes of a neighbor similarly involved in the son-father dynamic. The poem is uncollected. Finally, “My Mother’s Garden” botanically transfers a reflection on mortality in the image of a withering garden. The water fanned on the flowers and plants becomes a metaphor for poetry, reviving the life of a loved one through words.

## 2. Mark Scott: an interview

**SD:** In the foreword to *Balance Sheets* we read of how “Poetry is the temporary lending of significance, most of which it borrows from history, for lack of a better creditor” (v). This sounds particularly meaningful to me—I remember you telling me the anecdote of your uncle Chuck saying that your poem “Suicide of Europe” was actually dealing with “homicide,” and that it was “about your father.” Can you comment on this?

**MS:** As for the quote from my introduction to *Balance Sheets*, it may mean nothing more than that ‘life’ comes before literature, and that literature takes its intention to mean, to be significant, from a significance that the lived or past (and passed) experience was already felt to have had. And that may reduce to a boring expression of the Aristotelian idea of mimesis—that art imitates life, that the justification for literature or poetry lies in the pre-established value of life.

To the second part of your question, I should say that my uncle, the playwright and historian Charles L. Mee, had been deeply involved in psychoanalysis not long before he said that to me. He said he could tap into rage at his father in a fraction of a second at any time. I could probably do the same with my father right now. But I also feel great love and affection for him. He died in 2021 at age 90. On another occasion, my uncle told me that my father was “just another guy trying to make it through.” Both sayings made sense at the time. I think my father would have liked the obituary I wrote for him, which my brother and sister read and suggested edits to. And I’m glad to recall that my father liked a memoir I wrote called “Illinois Jacquet, Allen Ginsberg, Istvan Eörsi, and My Father.”<sup>2</sup>

**SD:** “The heart of it is a broken heart”: this line, in your poem “Family,” seems to establish an almost-immediate connection between love and grief, Eros and Thanatos. It is then said that

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<sup>2</sup> Here Scott is referring to Istvan Eörsi, who translated Allen Ginsberg’s poetry into Hungarian, and to the tenor saxophonist Illinois Jacquet, who figures in Ginsberg’s “Elegy for Neal Cassidy.” Eörsi was translating the “Elegy” when Scott visited him in Budapest in January 1983, while he was in Europe studying at the Università per Stranieri in Perugia.

“sciences” have “failed it.” During our conversation, you mentioned poetry’s ability to immortalize people. Do you think literature, unlike science, has the chance of not failing broken hearts?

**MS:** “Family” was much longer at first. It’s elliptical now and maybe a failure, but I like the line, “Sciences younger than ichthyology have failed it.” I was thinking about psychology and psychoanalysis generally, but also of transactional analysis, family systems therapy, and Alcoholics Anonymous and its offshoots. I don’t think poetry has much of a chance of helping us mend our broken hearts. Maybe less than the Bee Gees’ song, “How Can You Mend a Broken Heart.” I think poetry offers a consolation that lasts a little bit longer than the poem you read at a funeral or a wedding, at a reading or to yourself. Pop music’s consoling effect might last longer than poetry’s, and be more sustainable. I think Nick Hornby touched on this in *High Fidelity*,<sup>3</sup> and Gwendolyn Brooks in *Maud Martha*.<sup>4</sup>

**SD:** You have written, though not always published, memoirs about your family members, as well as plays. Have you ever considered publishing a book with your family poems collected together in one place? Or do you reckon it makes more sense to see family as a karst river—always present, but not always resurfacing?

**MS:** Those two questions make me think of the difference between “The Cave of AIDS” and “Elegy for Craig.” The one is literary in a way that the other isn’t. When I finished the former, I was excited for myself as a poet. I read it to a friend, telling him that I’d finally gotten it right. As I came to the end—we were sitting in his kitchen in Princeton—I broke out crying, because there was my brother, suddenly dead. When I told Richard Howard that story, he said it meant that the poem wasn’t finished, as if a poet crying at his own poem were as bad as a comedian laughing at his own joke. But when it was published in *Poetry* magazine, the praise I heard for it was essentially that it wasn’t ‘sentimental.’ “Elegy for Craig” strikes me as sentimental and familiar, and I knew it wasn’t the kind of poem that any of the desirable poetry journals would be interested in. I wrote it the day before my brother’s memorial service and read it at the service. My father later memorized it, and told me several times that I ought to try to get it published. I included it in *Balance Sheets* partly in memory of my father’s wish, and partly because many friends on Facebook were moved by it when I posted it there last year. It embarrasses me a little still. And yet both poems might be dismissed as ‘personal’ or ‘confessional,’ and so might “My Mother’s Garden” and “Sons and Fathers.” Between 1979 and

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<sup>3</sup> First ed. Gollancz, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> First ed. Harper, 1953.

1989, I probably made up four manuscripts to send out to publishers that were dominated by family poems. I wrote *Make Us Immortal: A Family Memoir*, when I knew that *Tactile Values* was going to be published. One university press was interested enough to ask for revisions, but I didn't do them, and it functions as a kind of notebook now. Just the other day, I watched a Korean series on Netflix called *A Model Family*. It says again, and at times I think originally, everything that has been said about "family" since Sophocles, Confucius, Austen, Manzoni, and David Chase. In the end, I don't think there's an important or unimportant work of world literature, film, or television that, if you were asked what it's about, you'd be far wrong if you answered, "Family."

**SD:** From a perspective of a reader who got to know your work *a posteriori*, I feel like in your poems there is a marked insistence on spatiality, beyond a more explicit one on temporality. Defined places (and objects) carry a specific symbolic as well as literal meaning. Do you ever feel like the cartographer of your family, besides being the 'designated' historian? For someone who has lived all around the world like you, how important is connection to place?

**MS:** I can't read maps or follow them easily, and I can't draw them. I rarely think of place first. Usually it's a person, or something said or written. I think of myself as time-obsessed. But your question makes me realize that I almost always account for place, and try to describe it briefly and concretely—but because it's there, not because I want to invent a scene-act ratio, as Kenneth Burke would say. In 1979, in a room at the Warburg Institute in Woburn Square in London, I started writing by placing myself at the corner of Lafayette and Layton Street in Cherry Hills Village, Englewood, Colorado, the corner where my brother was hit by a car in June 1969. I tried to recall everything that happened at that corner, which was also our school bus stop and, later, the place where a babysitter would leave the beer he bootlegged for us. "Still Life," in *Balance Sheets*, is really about one steel cocktail mixer that I called my "loving cup" and drank with in high school and college. The lawns I worked on as a landscaper are still vivid to me, as are the suburbs of Denver and the part of Greenwich Village and Chelsea where my uncle and aunt lived. I was going to call a memoir "From Snowmass to Shanghai." But it's really only a small area I get to know anywhere, like the part of Nara City I go back and forth in every day. For me, massive Tokyo is Kanda Jinbocho, the book neighborhood. If asked, it strikes me, I could describe the places I've lived in some detail, one 'block' at a time. Fortunately, I'm asked to talk about my connection to place as rarely as I'm asked to talk about poetry.

### 3. Three translations

#### “The cave of AIDS”<sup>5</sup>

It annoys him to speak  
And it hurts him not to  
(Auden, “The Cave of Nakedness”)

It was when you were dying and you  
couldn't speak, that we loved you the most.

Mom and Dad were still doing  
the wrong things the best they knew how.  
Again you couldn't use the kind of  
attention that they gave;  
but all of us were out to annoy you,

because it hurt that you didn't speak.  
Maybe there were forty words from you  
in what was to be the last week  
you breathed, sipping at the surface

like a trout when it feeds.  
Drop by drop, the morphine  
let us all go on. Into your arm  
it went, and it held our tongues.

It got beyond what was healthy,  
your keeping to yourself,  
our ancient live and let live,  
each of us safekeeping. Your privacy's  
blank as your diary now.  
What annoyed you and hurt you,

you held until you couldn't eat,  
you couldn't walk, you couldn't speak.  
So we started talking. We left you  
the room to die in, and went into the hall.  
We said: he will die when he is ready.

And I think you did.  
You yellowed and smelled  
like the salamanders we used to catch  
in the pool before we'd swim,  
and then you went in.

*In memory of Craig William Scott (1961-1984)*

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<sup>5</sup> Republished with permission by the author.

**“La grotta dell’AIDS”**

It annoys him to speak,  
And it hurts him not to  
(Auden, “The Cave of Nakedness”)<sup>6</sup>

È stato quando stavi morendo e  
non riuscivi a parlare, che ti abbiamo amato come non mai.

Mamma e Papà continuavano a fare  
le cose sbagliate nel modo migliore che potevano.  
Ancora una volta tu non sapevi che fartene di quel tipo  
di attenzioni che ti stavano dando;  
ma tutti noi ci davamo da fare per darti fastidio,

perché ci faceva soffrire che tu non parlassi.  
Avrai detto forse quaranta parole  
in quella che sarebbe poi stata l’ultima settimana  
che hai respirato, boccheggiando sulla superficie

come una trota quando si nutre.  
Goccia a goccia, la morfina  
ci ha fatto andare avanti. Andava a finire nel tuo  
braccio, e teneva a freno le nostre lingue.

È andato ben oltre al salubre,  
quel tuo startene per i fatti tuoi,  
il nostro antico vivi e lascia vivere,  
ognuno di noi in custodia di se stesso. La tua riservatezza vuota come  
adesso il tuo diario.  
Ciò che ti dava fastidio e che ti faceva male,

L’hai tenuto stretto fino a quando non hai potuto più mangiare,  
più camminare, più parlare.  
Così abbiamo cominciato noi a dire qualcosa. Ti abbiamo lasciato  
la stanza in cui morire, e ce ne siamo andati in sala.  
Abbiamo detto: morirà quando sarà pronto.

E penso che tu l’abbia fatto.  
Sei ingiallito e avevi l’odore  
delle salamandre che catturavamo  
in piscina prima di nuotare,  
e poi sei entrato.

*In memoria di Craig William Scott (1961-1984)*

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<sup>6</sup> Gli pesa parlare/e gli fa male non farlo. (My translation).

**“Sons and Fathers”**

Schuyler Grey told me the summer after my brother died,  
how brave he always thought Craig was.

Craig used to say that Schuyler was handsome enough  
to do whatever he wanted, implying that he did.

And more than once Craig told me how much he wished  
Schuyler’s father, Big Sky, could have been his.

But Craig never let either father know that.

And Schuyler never told Craig he was afraid  
to ride his bike downtown, with or without

his father’s permission. It was Craig’s freedom  
Schuyler admired, that needed no permission.

Anytime he wanted to, Craig told me, Schuyler  
could go and talk with his father. Did he? When  
Big Sky wasn’t selling insurance, coaching soccer,  
practicing martial arts, collecting Hopi artifacts,  
giving motivation seminars. Did he go and talk?

Did Craig? Did I? Did any of us go and talk with our fathers?

No more than Schuyler ever dared to ride where Craig rode.

No more than our fathers ever came and talked with us—  
and made us wish they hadn’t.

**“Figli e padri”**

Schuyler Grey mi ha detto, l’estate dopo la morte di mio fratello,  
che aveva sempre pensato che Craig fosse molto coraggioso.

Craig era solito dire che Schuyler era abbastanza bello  
da poter fare qualsiasi cosa volesse, sottintendendo che lo faceva.

E più di una volta Craig mi aveva detto che avrebbe voluto  
che il padre di Schuyler, Big Sky, fosse suo padre.

Ma Craig non disse mai nulla a nessuno dei due padri.

E Schuyler non disse mai a Craig che aveva paura  
di andare in centro con la bici, con o senza  
il permesso di suo padre. Era la libertà di Craig  
che Schuyler ammirava, perché non aveva bisogno di alcun permesso.

Ogni volta che ne aveva voglia, mi diceva Craig, Schuyler  
poteva andare a parlare con suo padre. Davvero? Quando  
Big Sky non era occupato a vendere assicurazioni, allenare la squadra di calcio,

praticare le arti marziali, collezionare manufatti Hopi,  
 tenere seminari motivazionali. Andava e gli parlava?  
 Craig lo faceva? Io lo facevo? Chi di noi lo faceva, prendere e parlare coi propri padri?  
 Non più di quanto Schuyler osasse andare dove andava Craig.  
 Non più di quanto i nostri padri mai prendessero e venissero a parlarci –  
 facendoci poi desiderare che non lo avessero fatto.

### **“My Mother’s Garden”**

The redwing blackbirds lift,  
 the cattails in the gulch ooze shift.  
 What the scent is I can’t quite say—  
 lawn, linden, Russian olive?  
 My mother’s garden in the summer sun.  
 Mine, too, for the weeding I had done,  
 for the water I would fan across it  
 when the vinca withered in the afternoon,  
 and the lilac sagged, and the honeysuckle;  
 when petunias wilted and tulips splayed,  
 and the root-beer irises like poodles’ heads  
 began to lose their groom; when pansies  
 shriveled and daisies drooped,  
 and the skin puckered on the Newport plums.  
 From inside, my mother would call:  
 “And don’t forget the geraniums.”

### **“Il giardino di mia madre”**

I merli dalle ali rosse si librano in volo,  
 i giunchi nel burrone stillano cambiamento  
 Non saprei dire con certezza quale sia il profumo...  
 prato, tiglio, oliva russa?  
 Il giardino di mia madre sotto il sole d’estate.  
 E anche il mio, per via della sarchiatura, e dell’acqua che  
 vi riversavo quando la pervinca appassiva nel pomeriggio,  
 e i lillà si afflosciavano, e il caprifoglio;  
 quando le petunie avvizzivano e i tulipani si distendevano  
 e le alte iris barbute, come teste di barboncini, cominciavano a spettinarsi;  
 quando le viole del pensiero si seccavano e le margherite ciondolavano,  
 e la buccia raggrinziva sulle prugne Newport.



Da dentro mia madre chiamava:

“E non dimenticare i gerani.”

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