

# **BALDWIN FOR OUR TIMES**

**WRITINGS FROM  
JAMES BALDWIN  
FOR AN AGE OF  
SORROW AND STRUGGLE**

**NOTES AND INTRODUCTION BY RICH BLINT**

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Struggle**

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## **Contents**

*Introduction by Rich Blint*

“A Lover’s Question”

*excerpt from “Many Thousands Gone”*

*excerpt from “Journey to Atlanta”*

“Staggerlee wonders”

*excerpt from “Stranger in the Village”*

“Amen”

## **Sufficiently Hungry to Be Dangerous**

## *James Baldwin and Race in Twenty-First-Century America*

There is a recurring phrase in James Baldwin's body of work that captures that moment of origin and nascent conscience when one "opens one's eyes on the world." The language is stark and irreducible, as he might note, a necessary, matter-of-fact description of so common and monumental an action. With characteristic rhetorical economy, Baldwin is able to conjure that moment when each of us opened our eyes dimly, in some corner of this increasingly troubled planet, before the magic and mystery of human living. That this deeply existential reality is, of course, common to us all is worthy of remark if only as a timely reminder that we are, in ways spiritual and actual, blood relations. But it is also useful emphasizing what strikes many as obvious: through the dramatic accident of time and space, we enter the world in particular places, bodies, and with varied relationships to the habits of power and social structures we inherit and invariably confront.

This fact is at odds with the ethos and tenets of the much-touted American democratic project, which still paradoxically and sentimentally pronounces its embrace of an expansive freedom and equity before the law—never mind our shared history of settlement, conquest, enclosure, enslavement, segregation, and ongoing dispossession. In "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin's second major essay (an excerpt from which is included in this volume), he argues, "The story of the Negro in America is the story of America." He reminds us that the story of this supposed ward of the nation is not very pretty since it conceals and contains so much of the history of our young republic, a violent tale that is revealed in "symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics," and has thus necessitated "a dangerous and reverberating silence." For too many, black people still haunt the national imagination in our post-civil rights climate of mass incarceration, state-sanctioned police violence, and a staggering wealth gap, as a "series of shadows, self-created [. . .] which we now helplessly battle [. . .] a social and not a personal or a human

problem; to think of [the black American] is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence.”

This impoverished moral posture is what gives rise to the likes of a Donald J. Trump at what Baldwin might refer to as this very late hour in America’s racial career. But there he stood, vile and desperately illiterate, as one of two candidates vying for the highest office in the land, asking black people what it was, precisely, they had to lose in voting for him since their neighborhoods are riddled with violence, an alarming number of “your” men are unemployed, and your houses are obviously filthy. As black people are being shot in the street (as “the corpses of your brothers and your sisters keep piling up around us,” as Baldwin said in 1968), Trump (and so many others of his tribe) is naked in his contempt and disregard for black lives. There is something disorienting if not clinical that black folks are to be rendered so easily invisible and hypervisible—and always viewed in the aggregate—on both the left and the right. This echoes Baldwin’s early and ongoing refusal of the easy and naturalized connection between black life and the social.

In this collection of selected poems and essays from *Jimmy’s Blues* and *Notes of a Native Son*, respectively, Baldwin’s words emerge less as prophecy concerning the ongoing racial nightmare in the United States and more like a secular gospel. James Baldwin, the little-boy preacher, left the church of his Harlem origins to spread the Word across the genres, to bear witness and testify to “what it is like for anyone who gets to this planet to survive it,” as he outlines in “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity.” He is remembered as a prophet simply because he unflinchingly and courageously told the unvarnished truth about American life no matter the consequences. “For,” as he writes in “Many Thousands Gone,” “it means something to be a Negro, after all, as it means something to have been born in Ireland or in China. [. . .] We cannot escape our origins.”

Baldwin’s decades-long insistence that we confront the myths and legends that confirm the lie of the American dream resonates now because, as he maintained, citizens and the truth can only be suppressed for so long. If during election proceedings, black people persist in conjuring for politicians of all stripes, “the rather

unfortunate image of bones thrown to a pack of dogs sufficiently hungry to be dangerous,” as he writes in “Journey to Atlanta,” then the visionary and love-filled movement for black lives that has emerged parallel to our country’s recent political theater is characterized by a hunger for a more complete and expansive picture of what it means to exist in relationship to white supremacy this long. For the generations of “born-frees” who opened their eyes on the Cape Flats or in Roxbury, the struggle is real, but their humanity is not in question. These young women and men are not easily catalogued in a roster of statistics or gazed upon as a “living wonder,” as Baldwin was in the Swiss Alps depicted in “Stranger in the Village.” And the reactionary or racist politicians remain mystified by their ever-growing presence. For as Baldwin lamented in “Many Thousands Gone,” “Wherever the Negro face appears a tension is created, the tension of a silence filled with things unutterable.” It is clear that although this is a tale “no American is prepared to hear,” it is beyond time to sound Gabriel’s horn again and truly examine what it means to exist as “a Negro in America,” which will necessarily teach us a great deal about ourselves.

The excerpts that follow offer an insightful and inevitably relevant introduction to the work of James Baldwin in two genres. The selections resonate now given his virtuosity as an essayist and, ultimately, what he fundamentally remains—a poet. But these writings also ring true given how much they still piercingly distill, with such clarity, wit, love and vulnerability, something of the story of the moral history of this country and its people. That moral pleas have done little to sway the politician or policeman never thwarted Baldwin. Here, we have his rare poetry, as well as a glimpse into the lasting concerns and preoccupations of one of the greatest essayists in modern literature at a time of spiritual and material anguish. At such periods his writings provide, for so many of us, more than a little sustenance for the journey.

—*Rich Blint*

*These poems, selected from Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems (which includes the full roster from Baldwin's little-known and limited-edition collection Gypsy), are stirring in their haunting and pointed consideration of the distinctly American connections between the man-made mysteries of race, love, and the terrors of our interior lives—at length, a stunning mediation on the very activity of human living.*

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## A Lover's Question

My country,  
'tis of thee  
I sing.

You, enemy of all tribes, known, unknown, past, present, or,  
perhaps, above all, to come:

I sing:

my dear,

my darling,

jewel

*(Columbia, the gem of  
the ocean!)*

or, as I, a street nigger, would put it—: (Okay. I'm *your* nigger baby,  
till I get bigger!) You are my heart.

Why

have you allowed yourself to become so *grinly* wicked?

I

do not ask you why you have spurned, despised my love as  
something beneath you.

We all have our ways and days

but my love has been as constant as the rays

coming from the earth or the sun,

which you have used to obliterate me,

and, now, according to your purpose, all mankind,

from the nigger, to you, and to your children's children.

I have endured your fire and your whip, your rope,

and the panic from your hip, in many ways, false lover, yet, my

love: you do not know how desperately I hoped that you would

grow not so much to love me as to know

that what you do to me you do to you.

No man can have a harlot for a lover  
nor stay in bed forever with a lie.  
He must rise up and face the morning sky and himself, in the mirror  
of his lover's eye.

You do not love me.  
I see that.  
You do not see me: I am your black cat.

*You forget  
that I remember an Egypt  
where I was worshipped  
where I was loved.*

No one has ever worshipped you, nor ever can: you think that love  
is a territorial matter, and racial,  
oh, yes,  
where I was worshipped and you were hurling stones, stones which  
you have hurled at me, to kill me,  
and, now,  
you hurl at the earth, our mother,  
the toys which slaughtered Cain's brother.

What panic makes you want to die?  
How can you fail to look into your lover's eye?

Your black dancer holds the answer: your only hope beyond the  
rope.

Of rope you fashioned, usefully,  
enough hangs from your hanging tree to carry you  
where you sent me.

And, then, false lover, you will know what love has managed here  
below.

*Published in Partisan Review in November 1951, and later included in Notes of a Native Son, James Baldwin's second major essay, "Many Thousands Gone," extends his early concern with the dishonest American depiction of the figure of "blackness" in the sentimental literature of Harriet Beecher Stowe and the realist, protest fiction of his one-time mentor, Richard Wright. Indicting Wright's 1940 novel, Native Son, for reproducing and consolidating "the American guilt and fear concerning [black people]," Baldwin's analysis discloses the national thirst for innocence and black forgiveness.*

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## *from* “Many Thousands Gone”

It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence; and the story is told, compulsively, in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics; it is revealed in Negro speech and in that of the white majority and in their different frames of reference. The ways in which the Negro has affected the American psychology are betrayed in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves. We cannot ask: what do we *really* feel about him—such a question merely opens the gates on chaos. What we really feel about him is involved with all that we feel about everything, about everyone, about ourselves.

The story of the Negro in America is the story of America—or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty. The Negro in America, gloomily referred to as that shadow which lies athwart our national life, is far more than that. He is a series of shadows, self-created, intertwining, which now we helplessly battle. One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds.

This is why his history and his progress, his relationship to all other Americans, has been kept in the social arena. He is a social and not a personal or a human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence; it is to be confronted with an endless cataloguing of losses, gains, skirmishes; it is to feel virtuous, outraged, helpless, as though his continuing status among us were somehow analogous to disease—cancer, perhaps, or tuberculosis—which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured. In this arena the black man acquires quite another

aspect from that which he has in life. We do not know what to do with him in life; if he breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him we are panic-stricken and we feel ourselves betrayed. When he violates this image, therefore, he stands in the greatest danger (sensing which, we uneasily suspect that he is very often playing a part for our benefit); and, what is not always so apparent but is equally true, we are then in some danger ourselves—hence our retreat or our blind and immediate retaliation.

Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his. Time and our own force act as our allies, creating an impossible, a fruitless tension between the traditional master and slave. Impossible and fruitless because, literal and visible as this tension has become, it has nothing to do with reality.

Time has made some changes in the Negro face. Nothing has succeeded in making it exactly like our own, though the general desire seems to be to make it blank if one cannot make it white. When it has become blank, the past as thoroughly washed from the black face as it has been from ours, our guilt will be finished—at least it will have ceased to be visible, which we imagine to be much the same thing. But, paradoxically, it is we who prevent this from happening; since it is we, who, every hour that we live, reinvest the black face with our guilt; and we do this—by a further paradox, no less ferocious—helplessly, passionately, out of an unrealized need to suffer absolution.

Today, to be sure, we know that the Negro is not biologically or mentally inferior; there is no truth in those rumors of his body odor or his incorrigible sexuality; or no more truth than can be easily explained or even defended by the social sciences. Yet, in our most recent war, his blood was segregated as was, for the most part, his person. Up to today we are set at a division, so that he may not marry our daughters or our sisters, nor may he—for the most part—eat at our tables or live in our houses. Moreover, those who do, do so at the grave expense of a double alienation: from their own people, whose fabled attributes they must either deny or, worse,

cheapen and bring to market; from us, for we require of them, when we accept them, that they at once cease to be Negroes and yet not fail to remember what being a Negro means—to remember, that is, what it means to us. The threshold of insult is higher or lower, according to the people involved, from the bootblack in Atlanta to the celebrity in New York. One must travel very far, among saints with nothing to gain or outcasts with nothing to lose, to find a place where it does not matter—and perhaps a word or a gesture or simply a silence will testify that it matters even there.

For it means something to be a Negro, after all, as it means something to have been born in Ireland or in China, to live where one sees space and sky or to live where one sees nothing but rubble or nothing but high buildings. We cannot escape our origins, however hard we try, those origins which contain the key—could we but find it—to all that we later become. What it means to be a Negro is a good deal more than this essay can discover; what it means to be a Negro in America can perhaps be suggested by an examination of the myths we perpetuate about him.

Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead, their places taken by a group of amazingly well-adjusted young men and women, almost as dark, but ferociously literate, well-dressed and scrubbed, who are never laughed at, who are not likely ever to set foot in a cotton or tobacco field or in any but the most modern of kitchens. There are others who remain, in our odd idiom, “underprivileged”; some are bitter and these come to grief; some are unhappy, but, continually presented with the evidence of a better day soon to come, are speedily becoming less so. Most of them care nothing whatever about race. They want only their proper place in the sun and the right to be left alone, like any other citizen of the republic. We may all breathe more easily. Before, however, our joy at the demise of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom approaches the indecent, we had better ask whence they sprang, how they lived? Into what limbo have they vanished?

However inaccurate our portraits of them were, these portraits do suggest, not only the conditions, but the quality of their lives and the impact of this spectacle on our consciences. There was no one

more forbearing than Aunt Jemima, no one stronger or more pious or more loyal or more wise; there was, at the same time, no one weaker or more faithless or more vicious and certainly no one more immoral. Uncle Tom, trustworthy and sexless, needed only to drop the title "Uncle" to become violent, crafty, and sullen, a menace to any white woman who passed by. They prepared our feast tables and our burial clothes; and, if we could boast that we understood them, it was far more to the point and far more true that they understood us. They were, moreover, the only people in the world who did; and not only did they know us better than we knew ourselves, but they knew us better than we knew them. This was the piquant flavoring to the national joke, it lay behind our uneasiness as it lay behind our benevolence: Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, our creations, at the last evaded us; they had a life—their own, perhaps a better life than ours—and they would never tell us what it was. At the point where we were driven most privately and painfully to conjecture what depths of contempt, what heights of indifference, what prodigies of resilience, what untamable superiority allowed them so vividly to endure, neither perishing nor rising up in a body to wipe us from the earth, the image perpetually shattered and the word failed. The black man in our midst carried murder in his heart, he wanted vengeance. We carried murder too, we wanted peace.

In our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny, not dead but living yet and powerful, the beast in our jungle of statistics. It is this which defeats us, which continues to defeat us, which lends to interracial cocktail parties their rattling, genteel, nervously smiling air: in any drawing room at such a gathering the beast may spring, filling the air with flying things and an unenlightened wailing. Wherever the problem touches there is confusion, there is danger. Wherever the Negro face appears a tension is created, the tension of a silence filled with things unutterable. It is a sentimental error, therefore, to believe that the past is dead; it means nothing to say that it is all forgotten, that the Negro himself has forgotten it. It is not a question of memory. Oedipus did not remember the thongs that bound his feet; nevertheless the marks they left testified to that doom toward which his feet were leading him. The man does not

remember the hand that struck him, the darkness that frightened him, as a child; nevertheless, the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him wherever he thinks to take flight.



*“Journey to Atlanta,” published in Baldwin’s first collection of essays, Notes of a Native Son, recounts a trip to the American South that his brother David embarked on with a singing group as entertainment for the Progressive Party and their candidate for president in 1948, former vice president Henry A. Wallace. The horrendous, if not unexpected, treatment of the band serves as backdrop and allegory for this pithy interrogation of the qualified nature of African American citizenship highlighted during every election season, when black votes are treated as cheap coin and “the trump card up the enemies’ sleeve.”*

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*from* “Journey to Atlanta”

The Progressive Party has not, so far as I can gather, made any very great impression in Harlem, and this is not so much despite as because of its campaign promises, promises rather too extravagant to be believed. It is considered a rather cheerful axiom that all Americans distrust politicians. (No one takes the further and less cheerful step of considering just what effect this mutual contempt has on either the public or the politicians, who have, indeed, very little to do with one another.) Of all Americans, Negroes distrust politicians most, or, more accurately, they have been best trained to expect nothing from them; more than other Americans, they are always aware of the enormous gap between election promises and their daily lives. It is true that the promises excite them, but this is not because they are taken as proof of good intentions. They are the proof of something more concrete than intentions: that the Negro situation is not static, that changes have occurred, and are occurring and will occur—this, in spite of the daily, dead-end monotony. It is this daily, dead-end monotony, though, as well as the wise desire not to be betrayed by too much hoping, which causes them to look on politicians with such an extraordinarily disenchanted eye.

This fatalistic indifference is something that drives the optimistic American liberal quite mad; he is prone, in his more exasperated moments, to refer to Negroes as political children, an appellation not entirely just. Negro liberals, being consulted, assure us that this is something that will disappear with “education,” a vast, all-purpose term, conjuring up visions of sunlit housing projects, stacks of copybooks and a race of well-soaped, dark-skinned people who never slur their R’s. Actually, this is not so much political irresponsibility as the product of experience, experience which no amount of education can quite efface. It is, as much as anything else, the reason the Negro vote is so easily bought and sold, the reason for that exclamation heard so frequently on Sugar Hill: “Our people never get anywhere.”

“Our people” have functioned in this country for nearly a century as political weapons, the trump card up the enemies’ sleeve; anything promised Negroes at election time is also a threat levelled at the opposition; in the struggle for mastery the Negro is the pawn. It is inescapable that this is only possible because of his position in this country and it has very frequently seemed at least equally apparent that this is a position which no one, least of all the politician, seriously intended to change.

Since Negroes have been in this country their one major, devastating gain was their Emancipation, an emancipation no one regards any more as having been dictated by humanitarian impulses. All that has followed from that brings to mind the rather unfortunate image of bones thrown to a pack of dogs sufficiently hungry to be dangerous. If all this sounds rather deliberately grim, it is not through any wish to make the picture darker than it is; I would merely like to complete the picture usually presented by pointing out that no matter how many instances there have been of genuine concern and good-will, nor how many hard, honest struggles have been carried on to improve the position of the Negro people, their position has not, in fact, changed so far as most of them are concerned.

Sociologists and historians, having the historical perspective in mind, may conclude that we are moving toward ever-greater democracy; but this is beyond the ken of a Negro growing up in any one of this country’s ghettos. As regards Negro politicians, they are considered with pride as *politicians*, a pride much akin to that felt concerning Marian Anderson or Joe Louis: they have proven the worth of the Negro people and in terms, American terms, which no one can negate. But as no housewife expects Marian Anderson’s genius to be of any practical aid in her dealings with the landlord, so nothing is expected of Negro representatives. The terrible thing, and here we have an American phenomenon in relief, is the fact that the Negro representative, by virtue of his position, is ever more removed from the people he ostensibly serves. Moreover, irrespective of personal integrity, his position—neatly and often painfully paradoxical—is utterly dependent on the continuing

debasement of fourteen million Negroes; should the national ideals be put into practice tomorrow, countless prominent Negroes would lose their *raison d'être*.

Finally, we are confronted with the psychology and tradition of the country; if the Negro vote is so easily bought and sold, it is because it has been treated with so little respect; since no Negro dares seriously assume that any politician is concerned with the fate of Negroes, or would do much about it if he had the power, the vote must be bartered for what it will get, for whatever short-term goals can be managed. These goals are mainly economic and frequently personal, sometimes pathetic: bread or a new roof or five dollars, or, continuing up the scale, schools, houses or more Negroes in hitherto Caucasian jobs. The American commonwealth chooses to overlook what Negroes are never able to forget: they are not *really* considered a part of it. Like Aziz in *A Passage to India* or Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they know that white people, whatever their love for justice, have no love for them.

This is the crux of the matter; and the Progressive Party, with its extravagant claims, has, therefore, imposed on itself the considerable burden of proof. The only party within recent memory which made equally strident claims of fellowship were the Communists, who failed to survive this test; and the only politician of similar claims was, of course, Wallace's erstwhile master, Roosevelt, who did not after all, now that the magic of his voice is gone, succeed in raising the darker brother to the status of a citizen. This is the ancestry of the Wallace party, and it does not work wholly in its favor. It operates to give pause to even the most desperate and the most gullible.

It is, however, considered on one level, the level of short-term goals, with approval, since it does afford temporary work for Negroes, particularly those associated in any manner with the arts. The rather flippant question on 125th Street now is: "So? You working for Mr. Wallace these days?" For at least there is that: entertainers, personalities are in demand. To forestall lawsuits, I must explain that I am not discussing "names"—who are in rather a different position, too touchy and complex to analyze here—but the

unknown, the struggling, endless armies of Negro boys and girls bent on, and as yet very far from, recognition. A segment of this army, a quartet called *The Melodeers*, made a trip to Atlanta under the auspices of the Progressive Party in August, a trip which lasted about eighteen days and which left them with no love for Mr. Wallace. Since this quartet included two of my brothers, I was given the details of the trip; indeed, David, the younger, kept a sort of journal for me—literally a blow-by-blow account.

Harlem is filled with churches and on Sundays it gives the impression of being filled with music. Quartets such as my brothers' travel from church to church in the fashion of circuit preachers, singing as much for the love of singing and the need for practice as for the rather indifferent sums collected for them which are then divided. These quartets have "battles of song," the winning team adding, of course, immensely to its prestige, the most consistent winners being the giants in this field. The aim of all these quartets, of course, is to branch out, to hit the big time and sing for a livelihood. The Golden Gate Quartet, judging at least from its music, had its roots here, and out of such a background came Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whom I heard, not quite ten years ago, plunking a guitar in a storefront church on Fifth Avenue. *The Melodeers* have not been singing very long and are very far from well-known, and the invitation to sing on tour with the Wallace party in the South seemed, whatever their misgivings about the Mason-Dixon line, too good an opportunity to pass up.

This invitation, by the way, seems to have been the brainstorm of a Clarence Warde, a Negro merchant seaman once employed as a cottage father in a corrective institution up-state; it was he in New York who acted as a go-between, arranging, since *The Melodeers* are minors, to be their legal guardian and manager on the road. An extended tour, such as was planned, met with some opposition from the parents, an opposition countered by the possible long-term benefits of the tour in so far as the boys' careers were concerned and, even more urgently, by the assurance that, at the very least, the boys would come home with a considerably larger sum of money than any of them were making on their jobs. (The political

implications do not seem to have carried much weight.) A series of churches had been lined up for them presumably throughout the South. “The understanding,” writes David, “was that we were supposed to sing”; after which the party was to take over to make speeches and circulate petitions. “The arrangement,” David notes laconically, “sounded very promising, so we decided to go.”

And, indeed, they traveled South in splendor, in a Pullman, to be exact, in which, since what David describes as a “Southern gentleman and wife” took exception to their presence, they traveled alone.

## Staggerlee wonders

1

I always wonder  
what they think the niggers are doing while they, the pink and  
alabaster pragmatists, are containing  
Russia  
and defining and re-defining and re-aligning China,  
nobly restraining themselves, meanwhile, from blowing up that  
earth which they have already blasphemed into dung:  
the gentle, wide-eyed, cheerful ladies, and their men,  
nostalgic for the noble cause of Vietnam, nostalgic for noble causes,  
aching, nobly, to wade through the blood of savages— ah—!  
Uncas shall never leave the reservation, except to purchase whisky  
at the State Liquor Store.  
The Panama Canal shall remain forever locked: there is a way  
around every treaty.  
We will turn the tides of the restless Caribbean,  
the sun will rise, and set on our hotel balconies as we see fit.  
The natives will have nothing to complain about, indeed, they will  
begin to be grateful, will be better off than ever before.  
They will learn to defer gratification and save up for things, like we  
do.

*Oh, yes. They will.  
We have only to make an offer  
they cannot refuse.*

This flag has been planted on the moon: it will be interesting to see  
what steps the moon will take to be revenged for this quite  
breathtaking presumption.  
This people  
masturbate in winding sheets.  
They have hacked their children to pieces.

They have never honoured a single treaty made with anyone,  
anywhere.

The walls of their cities are as foul as their children.

No wonder their children come at them with knives.

Mad Charlie man's son was one of their children, had got his shit  
together by the time he left kindergarten, and, as for Patty,  
heiress of all the ages, she had the greatest vacation of any  
heiress, anywhere: *Golly-gee, whillikens, Mom, real guns!*

*and they come with a real big, black funky stud, too:*

*oh, Ma! he's making eyes at me!*

Oh, noble Duke Wayne,

be careful in them happy hunting grounds.

They say the only good Indian is a dead Indian,

but what I say is,

you can't be too careful, you hear?

Oh, towering Ronnie Reagan, wise and resigned lover of redwoods,  
deeply beloved, winning man-child of the yearning Republic,  
from diaper to football field to Warner Brothers sound-stages, be  
thou our grinning, gently phallic, Big Boy of all the ages!

Salt peanuts, salt peanuts, for dear hearts and gentle people, and  
cheerful, shining, simple Uncle Sam!

Nigger, read this and run!

Now, if you can't read, run anyhow!

From Manifest Destiny

*(Cortez, and all his men*

*silent upon a peak in Darien)*

to A Decent Interval,

and the chopper rises above Saigon, abandoning the noble cause

and the people we have made ignoble and whom we leave there,

now, to die, one moves, With All Deliberate Speed, to the South

China Sea, and beyond, where millions of new niggers await glad  
tidings!



No, said the Great Man's Lady, *I'm against abortion.*  
*I always feel that's killing somebody.*  
Well, what about capital punishment?  
*I think the death penalty helps.*

That's right.  
Up to our ass in niggers on Death Row.

*Oh, Susanna,*  
*don't you cry for me!*

## 2

Well, I guess what the niggers is supposed to be doing is putting themselves in the path of that old sweet chariot and have it swing down and carry us home.

That would *help*, as they say, and they got ways of sort of nudging the chariot.  
They still got influence with Wind and Water,  
though they in for some surprises with Cloud and Fire.

My days are not their days.  
My ways are not their ways.  
I would not think of them, one way or the other,  
did not they so grotesquely block the view  
between me and my brother.

And, so, I always wonder: can blindness be desired?  
Then, what must the blinded eyes have seen to wish to see no more!

For, I have seen,  
in the eyes regarding me, or regarding my brother, have seen, deep  
in the farthest valley of the eye, have seen  
a flame leap up, then flicker and go out, have seen a veil come  
down, leaving myself, and the other, alone in that cave

which every soul remembers, and out of which, desperately afraid, I  
turn, turn, stagger, stumble out, into the healing air,  
fall flat on the healing ground, singing praises, counselling my  
heart, my soul, to praise.

What is it that this people cannot forget?

Surely, they cannot be so deluded as to imagine that their crimes  
are original?

There is nothing in the least original about the fiery tongs to the  
eyeballs, the sex torn from the socket, the infant ripped from the  
womb, the brains dashed out against rock, nothing original about  
Judas, or Peter, or you or me: nothing: we are liars and cowards  
all, or nearly all, or nearly all the time: for we also ride the  
lightning, answer the thunder, penetrate whirlwinds, curl up on  
the floor of the sun, and pick our teeth with thunderbolts.

Then, perhaps they imagine that their crimes are not crimes?

Perhaps.

Perhaps that is why they cannot repent, why there is no possibility  
of repentance.

Manifest Destiny is a hymn to madness, feeding on itself, ending  
(when it ends) in madness: the action is blindness and pain, pain  
bringing a torpor so deep that every act is willed, is desperately  
forced,

is willed to be a blow: the hand becomes a fist, the prick becomes a  
club, the womb a dangerous swamp, the hope, and fear, of love  
is acid in the marrow of the bone.

No, their fire is not quenched, nor can be: the oil feeding the flames  
being the unadmitted terror of the wrath of God.

Yes. But let us put it in another, less theological way:  
though theology has absolutely nothing to do with what I am trying  
to say.

But the moment God is mentioned theology is summoned

to buttress or demolish belief: an exercise which renders belief irrelevant and adds to the despair of Fifth Avenue on any afternoon,  
the people moving, homeless, through the city, praying to find sanctuary before the sky and the towers come tumbling down, before the earth opens, as it does in *Superman*.  
They know that no one will appear to turn back time, they know it, just as they know that the earth has opened before and will open again, just as they know that their empire is falling, is doomed, nothing can hold it up, nothing.  
We are not talking about belief.

### 3

I wonder how they think the niggers made, make it, how come the niggers are still here.  
But, then, again, I don't think they dare to think of that: no: I'm fairly certain they don't think of that at all.

Lord,  
I watch the alabaster lady of the house, with Beulah.  
Beulah about sixty, built four-square, biceps like Mohammed Ali, she at the stove, fixing biscuits, scrambling eggs and bacon, fixing coffee, pouring juice, and the lady of the house, she say, she don't know *how*  
she'd get along without Beulah and Beulah just silently grunts, *I reckon you don't*, and keeps on keeping on and the lady of the house say, *She's just like one of the family*, and Beulah turns, gives me a look, sucks her teeth and rolls her eyes in the direction of the lady's back, and keeps on keeping on.

While they are containing Russia  
and entering onto the quicksand of China  
and patronizing  
Africa,  
and calculating

the Caribbean plunder, and the South China Sea booty, the niggers are aware that no one has discussed anything at all with the niggers.

Well. Niggers don't own nothing, got no flag, even our names are hand-me-downs

and you don't change that by calling yourself X:

sometimes that just makes it worse, like obliterating the path that leads back to whence you came, and to where you can begin.

And, anyway, none of this changes the reality, which is, for example, that I do not want my son to die in Guantanamo, or anywhere else, for that matter, serving the Stars and Stripes.

(I've *seen* some stars.

I *got* some stripes.) Neither (incidentally) has anyone discussed the Bomb with the niggers: the incoherent feeling is, the less the nigger knows about the Bomb, the better: the lady of the house smiles nervously in your direction as though she had just been overheard discussing family, or sexual secrets, and changes the subject to Education, or Full Employment, or the Welfare rolls, the smile saying, *Don't be dismayed.*

*We know how you feel. You can trust us.*

Yeah. I would like to believe you.

But we are not talking about belief.

#### 4

The sons of greed, the heirs of plunder, are approaching the end of their journey: it is amazing that they approach without wonder, as though they have, themselves, become that scorched and blasphemed earth, the stricken buffalo, the slaughtered tribes, the endless, virgin, bloodsoaked plain, the famine, the silence, the children's eyes, murder masquerading as salvation, seducing every democratic eye,

the mouths of truth and anguish choked with cotton, rape delirious with the fragrance of magnolia, the hacking of the fruit of their

loins to pieces, *hey!* the tar-baby sons and nephews, the high-yaller nieces, and Tom's black prick hacked off to rustle in the crinoline, to hang, heaviest of heirlooms, between the pink and alabaster breasts of the Great Man's Lady, or worked into the sash at the waist of the high-yaller Creole bitch, or niece, a chunk of shining brown-black satin, staring, staring, like the single eye of God: creation yearns to re-create a time when we were able to recognize a crime.

Alas,  
my stricken kinsmen,  
the party is over:  
there have never been any white people, anywhere: the trick was  
accomplished with mirrors— look: where is your image now?  
where your inheritance, on what rock stands this pride?

Oh,  
I counsel you,  
leave History alone.  
She is exhausted,  
sitting, staring into her dressing-room mirror, and wondering what  
rabbit, now, to pull out of what hat, and seriously considering  
retirement, even though she knows her public dare not let her  
go.

She must change.  
Yes. History must change.  
A slow, syncopated  
relentless music begins suggesting her re-entry, transformed,  
virginal as she was, in the Beginning, untouched, as the Word  
was spoken, before the rape which debased her to be the whore  
of multitudes, or, as one might say, before she became the Star,  
whose name, above our title, carries the Show, making History  
the patsy, responsible for every flubbed line, every missed cue,  
responsible for the life and death, of all bright illusions and dark  
delusions,

Lord, History is weary  
of her unspeakable liaison with Time, for Time and History  
have never seen eye to eye: Time laughs at History  
and time and time and time again Time traps History in a lie.

But we always, somehow, managed to roar History back onstage to  
take another bow,  
to justify, to sanctify the journey until now.

Time warned us to ask for our money back, and disagreed with  
History as concerns colours white and black.  
Not only do we come from further back, but the light of the Sun  
marries all colours as one.

Kinsmen,  
I have seen you betray your Saviour (it is *you* who call Him  
Saviour) so many times, and  
I have spoken to Him about you, behind your back.  
Quite a lot has been going on behind your back, and,  
if your phone has not yet been disconnected, it will soon begin to  
ring: informing you, for example, that a whole generation, in  
Africa, is about to die, and a new generation is about to rise, and  
will not need your bribes, or your persuasions, any more: nor  
your morality. Nor the plundered gold— Ah! Kinsmen, if I could  
make you see the crime is not what you have done to me!  
It is you who are blind, you, bowed down with chains, you, whose  
children mock you, and seek another master,  
you, who cannot look man or woman or child in the eye,  
whose sleep is blank with terror, for whom love died long ago,  
somewhere between the airport and the safe-deposit box,  
the buying and selling of rising or falling stocks, you, who miss  
Zanzibar and Madagascar and Kilimanjaro and lions and tigers  
and elephants and zebras and flying fish and crocodiles and  
alligators and leopards  
and crashing waterfalls and endless rivers, flowers fresher than  
Eden, silence sweeter than the grace of God,

passion at every turning, throbbing in the bush, thicker, oh, than  
honey in the hive, dripping  
dripping  
opening, welcoming, aching from toe to bottom to spine,  
sweet heaven on the line to last forever, yes,  
but, now,  
rejoicing ends, man, a price remains to pay, your innocence costs  
too much and we can't carry you on our books or our backs, any  
longer: baby, find another Eden, another apple tree, somewhere,  
if you can,  
and find some other natives, somewhere else, to listen to you  
bellow till you come, just like a man, but we don't need you,  
are sick of being a fantasy to feed you, and of being the principal  
accomplice to your crime:  
for, it is *your* crime, now, the cross to which you cling,  
your Alpha and Omega for everything.

Well (others have told you) your clown's grown weary, the puppet  
master is bored speechless with this monotonous disaster, and is  
long gone, does not belong to you, any more than my woman, or  
my child, ever belonged to you.

During this long travail our ancestors spoke to us, and we listened,  
and we tried to make you hear life in our song but now it matters  
not at all to me whether you know what I am talking about—or  
not: I know why we are not blinded by your brightness, are able  
to see you, who cannot see us. I know why we are still here.

Godspeed.

The niggers are calculating, from day to day, life everlasting, and  
wish you well:  
but decline to imitate the Son of the Morning, and rule in Hell.

*“Stranger in the Village,” also included in Notes of a Native Son, is a powerful meditation on human difference in modern life. Baldwin recalls his three-month stay in the Bernese Alps in 1951–1952, where he was recovering from nerves and completing his first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain. The absolute whiteness of the village (in every way) and the villagers’ reaction to Baldwin as something other than human compel this classic essay on Western racial “rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the pathological.”*

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*from* “Stranger in the Village”

From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came. I was told before arriving that I would probably be a “sight” for the village; I took this to mean that people of my complexion were rarely seen in Switzerland, and also that city people are always something of a “sight” outside of the city. It did not occur to me—possibly because I am an American—that there could be people anywhere who had never seen a Negro.

It is a fact that cannot be explained on the basis of the inaccessibility of the village. The village is very high, but it is only four hours from Milan and three hours from Lausanne. It is true that it is virtually unknown. Few people making plans for a holiday would elect to come here. On the other hand, the villagers are able, presumably, to come and go as they please—which they do: to another town at the foot of the mountain, with a population of approximately five thousand, the nearest place to see a movie or go to the bank. In the village there is no movie house, no bank, no library, no theater; very few radios, one jeep, one station wagon; and, at the moment, one typewriter, mine, an invention which the woman next door to me here had never seen. There are about six hundred people living here, all Catholic—I conclude this from the fact that the Catholic church is open all year round, whereas the Protestant chapel, set off on a hill a little removed from the village, is open only in the summertime when the tourists arrive. There are four or five hotels, all closed now, and four or five *bistros*, of which, however, only two do any business during the winter. These two do not do a great deal, for life in the village seems to end around nine or ten o’clock. There are a few stores, butcher, baker, *épicerie*, a hardware store, and a money-changer—who cannot change travelers’ checks, but must send them down to the bank, an operation which takes two or three days. There is something called the *Ballet Haus*, closed in the winter and used for God knows what, certainly not ballet, during the summer. There seems to be only one schoolhouse in the village, and this for the quite young children; I

suppose this to mean that their older brothers and sisters at some point descend from these mountains in order to complete their education—possibly, again, to the town just below. The landscape is absolutely forbidding, mountains towering on all four sides, ice and snow as far as the eye can reach. In this white wilderness, men and women and children move all day, carrying washing, wood, buckets of milk or water, sometimes skiing on Sunday afternoons. All week long boys and young men are to be seen shoveling snow off the rooftops, or dragging wood down from the forest in sleds.

The village's only real attraction, which explains the tourist season, is the hot spring water. A disquietingly high proportion of these tourists are cripples, or semicripples, who come year after year—from other parts of Switzerland, usually—to take the waters. This lends the village, at the height of the season, a rather terrifying air of sanctity, as though it were a lesser Lourdes. There is often something beautiful, there is always something awful, in the spectacle of a person who has lost one of his faculties, a faculty he never questioned until it was gone, and who struggles to recover it. Yet people remain people, on crutches or indeed on deathbeds; and wherever I passed, the first summer I was here, among the native villagers or among the lame, a wind passed with me—of astonishment, curiosity, amusement, and outrage. That first summer I stayed two weeks and never intended to return. But I did return in the winter, to work; the village offers, obviously, no distractions whatever and has the further advantage of being extremely cheap. Now it is winter again, a year later, and I am here again. Everyone in the village knows my name, though they scarcely ever use it, knows that I come from America—though, this, apparently, they will never really believe: black men come from Africa—and everyone knows that I am the friend of the son of a woman who was born here, and that I am staying in their chalet. But I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived, and the children shout *Neger! Neger!* as I walk along the streets.

It must be admitted that in the beginning I was far too shocked to have any real reaction. In so far as I reacted at all, I reacted by trying to be pleasant—it being a great part of the American Negro's

education (long before he goes to school) that he must make people “like” him. This smile-and-the-world-smiles-with-you routine worked about as well in this situation as it had in the situation for which it was designed, which is to say that it did not work at all. No one, after all, can be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be, or has not been, admitted. My smile was simply another unheard-of phenomenon which allowed them to see my teeth—they did not, really, see my smile and I began to think that, should I take to snarling, no one would notice any difference. All of the physical characteristics of the Negro which had caused me, in America, a very different and almost forgotten pain were nothing less than miraculous—or infernal—in the eyes of the village people. Some thought my hair was the color of tar, that it had the texture of wire, or the texture of cotton. It was jocularly suggested that I might let it all grow long and make myself a winter coat. If I sat in the sun for more than five minutes some daring creature was certain to come along and gingerly put his fingers on my hair, as though he were afraid of an electric shock, or put his hand on my hand, astonished that the color did not rub off. In all of this, in which it must be conceded there was the charm of genuine wonder and in which there was certainly no element of intentional unkindness, there was yet no suggestion that I was human: I was simply a living wonder.

I knew that they did not mean to be unkind, and I know it now; it is necessary, nevertheless, for me to repeat this to myself each time that I walk out of the chalet. The children who shout *Neger!* have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in me. They are brimming with good humor and the more daring swell with pride when I stop to speak with them. Just the same, there are days when I cannot pause and smile, when I have no heart to play with them; when, indeed, I mutter sourly to myself, exactly as I muttered on the streets of a city these children have never seen, when I was no bigger than these children are now: *Your mother was a nigger*. Joyce is right about history being a nightmare—but it may be the nightmare from which no one *can* awaken. People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

There is a custom in the village—I am told it is repeated in many villages—of “buying” African natives for the purpose of converting them to Christianity. There stands in the church all year round a small box with a slot for money, decorated with a black figurine, and into this box the villagers drop their francs. During the *carnaval* which precedes Lent, two village children have their faces blackened—out of which bloodless darkness their blue eyes shine like ice—and fantastic horsehair wigs are placed on their blond heads; thus disguised, they solicit among the villagers for money for the missionaries in Africa. Between the box in the church and the blackened children, the village “bought” last year six or eight African natives. This was reported to me with pride by the wife of one of the *bistro* owners and I was careful to express astonishment and pleasure at the solicitude shown by the village for the souls of black folk. The *bistro* owner’s wife beamed with a pleasure far more genuine than my own and seemed to feel that I might now breathe more easily concerning the souls of at least six of my kinsmen.

I tried not to think of these so lately baptized kinsmen, of the price paid for them, or the peculiar price they themselves would pay, and said nothing about my father, who having taken his own conversion too literally never, at bottom, forgave the white world (which he described as heathen) for having saddled him with a Christ in whom, to judge at least from their treatment of him, they themselves no longer believed. I thought of white men arriving for the first time in an African village, strangers there, as I am a stranger here, and tried to imagine the astounded populace touching their hair and marveling at the color of their skin. But there is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned; whereas I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a sense, created me, people who have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know, who yet do not even know of my existence. The astonishment with which I might have

greeted them, should they have stumbled into my African village a few hundred years ago, might have rejoiced their hearts. But the astonishment with which they greet me today can only poison mine.

And this is so despite everything I may do to feel differently, despite my friendly conversations with the *bistro* owner's wife, despite their three-year-old son who has at last become my friend, despite the *saluts* and *bonsoirs* which I exchange with people as I walk, despite the fact that I know that no individual can be taken to task for what history is doing, or has done. I say that the culture of these people controls me—but they can scarcely be held responsible for European culture. America comes out of Europe, but these people have never seen America, nor have most of them seen more of Europe than the hamlet at the foot of their mountain. Yet they move with an authority which I shall never have; and they regard me, quite rightly, not only as a stranger in their village but as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credentials, to everything they have—however unconsciously—inherited.

For this village, even were it incomparably more remote and incredibly more primitive, is the West, the West onto which I have been so strangely grafted. These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York's Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it. Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.

The rage of the disesteemed is personally fruitless, but it is also absolutely inevitable; this rage, so generally discounted, so little understood even among the people whose daily bread it is, is one of the things that makes history. Rage can only with difficulty, and never entirely, be brought under the domination of the intelligence and is therefore not susceptible to any arguments whatever. This is a

fact which ordinary representatives of the *Herrenvolk*, having never felt this rage and being unable to imagine it, quite fail to understand. Also, rage cannot be hidden, it can only be dissembled. This dissembling deludes the thoughtless, and strengthens rage and adds, to rage, contempt. There are, no doubt, as many ways of coping with the resulting complex of tensions as there are black men in the world, but no black man can hope ever to be entirely liberated from this internal warfare—rage, dissembling, and contempt having inevitably accompanied his first realization of the power of white men. What is crucial here is that, since white men represent in the black man's world so heavy a weight, white men have for black men a reality which is far from being reciprocal; and hence all black men have toward all white men an attitude which is designed, really, either to rob the white man of the jewel of his naïveté, or else to make it cost him dear.

The black man insists, by whatever means he finds at his disposal, that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being. This is a very charged and difficult moment, for there is a great deal of will power involved in the white man's naïveté. Most people are not naturally reflective any more than they are naturally malicious, and the white man prefers to keep the black man at a certain human remove because it is easier for him thus to preserve his simplicity and avoid being called to account for crimes committed by his forefathers, or his neighbors. He is inescapably aware, nevertheless, that he is in a better position in the world than black men are, nor can he quite put to death the suspicion that he is hated by black men therefore. He does not wish to be hated, neither does he wish to change places, and at this point in his uneasiness he can scarcely avoid having recourse to those legends which white men have created about black men, the most usual effect of which is that the white man finds himself enmeshed, so to speak, in his own language which describes hell, as well as the attributes which lead one to hell, as being as black as night.

Every legend, moreover, contains its residuum of truth, and the root function of language is to control the universe by describing it. It is of quite considerable significance that black men remain, in the

imagination, and in overwhelming numbers in fact, beyond the disciplines of salvation; and this despite the fact that the West has been “buying” African natives for centuries. There is, I should hazard, an instantaneous necessity to be divorced from this so visibly unsaved stranger, in whose heart, moreover, one cannot guess what dreams of vengeance are being nourished; and, at the same time, there are few things on earth more attractive than the idea of the unspeakable liberty which is allowed the unredeemed. When, beneath the black mask, a human being begins to make himself felt one cannot escape a certain awful wonder as to what kind of human being it is. What one’s imagination makes of other people is dictated, of course, by the laws of one’s own personality and it is one of the ironies of black-white relations that, by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is.

I have said, for example, that I am as much a stranger in this village today as I was the first summer I arrived, but this is not quite true. The villagers wonder less about the texture of my hair than they did then, and wonder rather more about me. And the fact that their wonder now exists on another level is reflected in their attitudes and in their eyes. There are the children who make those delightful, hilarious, sometimes astonishingly grave overtures of friendship in the unpredictable fashion of children; other children, having been taught that the devil is a black man, scream in genuine anguish as I approach. Some of the older women never pass without a friendly greeting, never pass, indeed, if it seems that they will be able to engage me in conversation; other women look down or look away or rather contemptuously smirk. Some of the men drink with me and suggest that I learn how to ski—partly, I gather, because they cannot imagine what I would look like on skis—and want to know if I am married, and ask questions about my *métier*. But some of the men have accused *le sale nègre*—behind my back—of stealing wood and there is already in the eyes of some of them that peculiar, intent, paranoiac malevolence which one sometimes surprises in the eyes of American white men when, out walking with their Sunday girl, they see a Negro male approach.

There is a dreadful abyss between the streets of this village and the streets of the city in which I was born, between the children who shout *Neger!* today and those who shouted *Nigger!* yesterday—the abyss is experience, the American experience. The syllable hurled behind me today expresses, above all, wonder: I am a stranger here. But I am not a stranger in America and the same syllable riding on the American air expresses the war my presence has occasioned in the American soul.

For this village brings home to me this fact: that there was a day, and not really a very distant day, when Americans were scarcely Americans at all but discontented Europeans, facing a great unconquered continent and strolling, say, into a marketplace and seeing black men for the first time. The shock this spectacle afforded is suggested, surely, by the promptness with which they decided that these black men were not really men but cattle. It is true that the necessity on the part of the settlers of the New World of reconciling their moral assumptions with the fact—and the necessity—of slavery enhanced immensely the charm of this idea, and it is also true that this idea expresses, with a truly American bluntness, the attitude which to varying extents all masters have had toward all slaves.

But between all former slaves and slave-owners and the drama which begins for Americans over three hundred years ago at Jamestown, there are at least two differences to be observed. The American Negro slave could not suppose, for one thing, as slaves in past epochs had supposed and often done, that he would ever be able to wrest the power from his master's hands. This was a supposition which the modern era, which was to bring about such vast changes in the aims and dimensions of power, put to death; it only begins, in unprecedented fashion, and with dreadful implications, to be resurrected today. But even had this supposition persisted with undiminished force, the American Negro slave could not have used it to lend his condition dignity, for the reason that this supposition rests on another: that the slave in exile yet remains related to his past, has some means—if only in memory—of revering



and sustaining the forms of his former life, is able, in short, to maintain his identity.

This was not the case with the American Negro slave. He is unique among the black men of the world in that his past was taken from him, almost literally, at one blow. One wonders what on earth the first slave found to say to the first dark child he bore. I am told that there are Haitians able to trace their ancestry back to African kings, but any American Negro wishing to go back so far will find his journey through time abruptly arrested by the signature on the bill of sale which served as the entrance paper for his ancestor. At the time—to say nothing of the circumstances—of the enslavement of the captive black man who was to become the American Negro, there was not the remotest possibility that he would ever take power from his master's hands. There was no reason to suppose that his situation would ever change, nor was there, shortly, anything to indicate that his situation had ever been different. It was his necessity, in the words of E. Franklin Frazier, to find a "motive for living under American culture or die." The identity of the American Negro comes out of this extreme situation, and the evolution of this identity was a source of the most intolerable anxiety in the minds and the lives of his masters.

For the history of the American Negro is unique also in this: that the question of his humanity, and of his rights therefore as a human being, became a burning one for several generations of Americans, so burning a question that it ultimately became one of those used to divide the nation. It is out of this argument that the venom of the epithet *Nigger!* is derived. It is an argument which Europe has never had, and hence Europe quite sincerely fails to understand how or why the argument arose in the first place, why its effects are so frequently disastrous and always so unpredictable, why it refuses until today to be entirely settled. Europe's black possessions remained—and do remain—in Europe's colonies, at which remove they represented no threat whatever to European identity. If they posed any problem at all for the European conscience, it was a problem which remained comfortingly abstract: in effect, the black man, *as a man*, did not exist for Europe. But in America, even as a

slave, he was an inescapable part of the general social fabric and no American could escape having an attitude toward him. Americans attempt until today to make an abstraction of the Negro, but the very nature of these abstractions reveals the tremendous effects the presence of the Negro has had on the American character.

When one considers the history of the Negro in America it is of the greatest importance to recognize that the moral beliefs of a person, or a people, are never really as tenuous as life—which is not moral—very often causes them to appear; these create for them a frame of reference and a necessary hope, the hope being that when life has done its worst they will be enabled to rise above themselves and to triumph over life. Life would scarcely be bearable if this hope did not exist. Again, even when the worst has been said, to betray a belief is not by any means to have put oneself beyond its power; the betrayal of a belief is not the same thing as ceasing to believe. If this were not so there would be no moral standards in the world at all. Yet one must also recognize that morality is based on ideas and that all ideas are dangerous—dangerous because ideas can only lead to action and where the action leads no man can say. And dangerous in this respect: that confronted with the impossibility of remaining faithful to one's beliefs, and the equal impossibility of becoming free of them, one can be driven to the most inhuman excesses. The ideas on which American beliefs are based are not, though Americans often seem to think so, ideas which originated in America. They came out of Europe. And the establishment of democracy on the American continent was scarcely as radical a break with the past as was the necessity, which Americans faced, of broadening this concept to include black men.

This was, literally, a hard necessity. It was impossible, for one thing, for Americans to abandon their beliefs, not only because these beliefs alone seemed able to justify the sacrifices they had endured and the blood that they had spilled, but also because these beliefs afforded them their only bulwark against a moral chaos as absolute as the physical chaos of the continent it was their destiny to conquer. But in the situation in which Americans found themselves, these beliefs threatened an idea which, whether or not one likes to

think so, is the very warp and woof of the heritage of the West, the idea of white supremacy.

Americans have made themselves notorious by the shrillness and the brutality with which they have insisted on this idea, but they did not invent it; and it has escaped the world's notice that those very excesses of which Americans have been guilty imply a certain, unprecedented uneasiness over the idea's life and power, if not, indeed, the idea's validity. The idea of white supremacy rests simply on the fact that white men are the creators of civilization (the present civilization, which is the only one that matters; all previous civilizations are simply "contributions" to our own) and are therefore civilization's guardians and defenders. Thus it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men. But not so to accept him was to deny his human reality, his human weight and complexity, and the strain of denying the overwhelmingly undeniable forced Americans into rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the pathological.

## **Amen**

No, I don't feel death coming.  
I feel death going:  
having thrown up his hands,  
for the moment.

I feel like I know him  
better than I did.  
Those arms held me,  
for a while,  
and, when we meet again,  
there will be that secret knowledge  
between us.

## About the Author

**James Baldwin** (1924–1987) was a novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic, and one of America's foremost writers. His essays, such as "Notes of a Native Son," explore palpable yet unspoken intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in Western societies, most notably in mid-twentieth-century America. A Harlem, New York, native, he primarily made his home in the south of France. He is the author of the novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room*, and of the poetry collection *Jimmy's Blues*.

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