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EULOGIES

Jimmy!

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Abstract

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We know, or ought to know by now, that what we call “reality” exists independent of any of the multivisioned subjectivisms that nevertheless distort and actually peril all life here. For me, one clear example of the dichotomy between what actually is and what might be reflected in some smeared mirror of private need, is the public characterization of the mighty being for whom we are gathered here to bid our tearful farewells!

You will notice, happily, or with whatever degree of predictable social confusion, that I have spoken of *Jimmy*. And it is he, this Jimmy, of whom I will continue to speak. It is this Jimmy, this glorious, elegant griot of our oppressed African American nation who I am eulogizing. So let the butchering copy editors of our captivity stay for an eternal moment their dead eraser fingers from our celebration.

There will be, and should be, reams and reams of analysis, even praise, for our friend but also even larger measures of non-analysis and certainly condemnation for James Baldwin, the Negro writer. Alas we have not yet the power to render completely sterile or make impossible the errors and lies which will merely be America being itself rather than its unconvincing promise.

But the wide gap, the world spanning abyss, between the James Baldwin of yellow journalism and English departments (and here we thought this was America), and the Jimmy Baldwin of our real lives is stunning! When he told us *Nobody Knows My (he meant Our) Name*, he was trying to get you ready for it even then!

For one thing, no matter the piles of deathly prose citing influences, relationships, metaphor, and criticism that will attempt to tell us about our older brother, most will miss the mark simply because for the most part they will be retelling old lies or making up new ones, or shaping yet another black life to fit the great white stomach which yet rules and tries to digest the world!

For first of all Jimmy Baldwin was not only a writer, an international literary figure, he was man, spirit, voice—old and black and terrible as that first ancestor.

As man, he came to us from the family, the human lives, names we can call David, Gloria, Lover, Robert ... and this extension is one intimate identification as he could so casually, in that way of his, eyes and self smiling, not much larger than that first ancestor, fragile as truth always is, big eyes popped out like righteous monitors of the soulful. The Africans say that big ol eyes like that means someone can make things happen! And didn't he?

Between Jimmy's smile and grace, his insistent elegance even as he damned you, even as he smote what evil was unfortunate, breathing or otherwise, to stumble his way—He was all the way live, all the way conscious, turned all the way up, receiving and broadcasting, sometime so hard, what needed to, would back up from those two television tubes poking out of his head!

As man, he was my friend, my older brother he would joke, not really joking. As man he was Our friend, Our older or younger brother. We listened to him like we would somebody in our family—whatever you might think of what he might say. We could hear it. He was close, as man, as human relative, we could make it some cold seasons merely warmed by his handshake, smile or eyes. Warmed by his voice, jocular yet instantly cutting. Kind yet perfectly clear. We could make it

sometimes, just remembering his arm waved in confirmation or indignation, the rapid fire speech, pushing out at the world like urgent messages for those who would be real.

This man traveled the earth like its history and its biographer. He reported, criticized, made beautiful, analyzed, cajoled, lyricized, attacked, sang, made us better, made us consciously human or perhaps more acidly prehuman.

He was spirit because he was living. And even past this tragic hour when we weep he has gone away, and why, and why we keep asking. There's mountains of evil creatures who we would willingly bid farewell to—Jimmy could have given you some of their names on demand—We curse our luck, our oppressors—our age, our weakness. Why & Why again? And why can drive you mad, or said enough times might even make you wise!

Yet this why in us is him as well. Jimmy was wise from asking whys giving us his wise and his whys to go with our own, to make them into a larger why and a deeper Wise.

Jimmy's spirit, which will be with us as long as we remember ourselves, is the only truth which keeps us sane and changes our whys to wiseness. It is his spirit, spirit of the little black first ancestor, which we feel those of us who really felt it, we know this spirit will be with us for "as long as the sun shines and the water flows." For his is the spirit of life thrilling to its own consciousness.

His spirit is part of our own, it is our feelings' completion. Our perceptions' extension, the edge of our rationale, the paradigm for our best use of this world.

When we saw and heard him, he made us feel good. He made us feel, for one thing, that we could defend ourselves and define ourselves, that we were in the world not merely as animate slaves but as terrifyingly sensitive measurers of what is good or evil beautiful or ugly. This is the power of his spirit. This is the bond which created our love for him. This is the fire that terrifies our pitiful enemies. That not only are we alive but shatteringly precise in our songs and our scorn. You could not possibly think yourself righteous, Murderers, when you saw or were wrenched by our Jimmy's spirit! He was carrying it as us, as we carry him as us.

Jimmy will be remembered, even as James, for his word. Only the completely ignorant can doubt his mastery of it. Jimmy Baldwin was the creator of contemporary American speech even before Americans could dig that. He created it so we could speak to each other at unimaginable intensities of feeling, so we could make sense to each other at yet higher and higher tempos.

But that word, arranged as art, sparkling and gesturing from the page, was also man and spirit. Nothing was more inspiring than hearing that voice, seeing that face, and that whip of tongue, that signification that was his fingers, reveal and expose, raise and bring down, condemn or extol!

I had met him years before at Howard, when Owen Dodson presented his *Amen Corner* there. But it was not until later confined by the armed forces that I got to feel that spirit from another more desperate angle of need, and therefore understanding.

Jimmy's face, his eyes, the flush of his consciousness animating the breath of my mind, sprung from earlier reading of his early efforts in literary magazines, and the aura those created—stretched itself, awakened so to speak, when I stared newly arrived in New York from my imprisonment and internal confusion to see this black man staring from the cover of *Notes of a Native Son* at me unblinking. I looked at that face, and heard that voice, even before I read the book. Hey, it was me—for real! When I read those marvelous essays, that voice became part of my life forever. Those eyes were part of my instruments of judgment and determination. Those deliberations, that experience, the grimness and high art, became mine instantly. From the moment I saw his face, he was my deepest hero, the agent of consciousness in my young life. Jimmy was that for many of us.

What was said of him, the so-called analysis, often reeking of the dead smell of white supremacy and its non-existent humanity, made no difference. All of that did not really register, except as recall for dull conversations with fire plugs or chairs or stone steps when abroad in the practiced indifference called US society.

What he gave me, what he gave us, we perceived instantly and grew enormous inside because of it. That black warm truth. That invincible gesture of sacred human concern, clearly projected—we absorbed with what gives life in this world contrasted as it is against the dangerous powers of death.

Jimmy grew as we all did, but he was growing first and was the measure, even as we claimed understanding and transcendence. Just as he wanted to distance himself from a mentor like Richard Wright, better to understand more clearly where he himself, his own self and voice began and Richard's left off.

Happily for some of us, when we distanced ourselves from Jimmy, it turned out that this not only let us understand ourselves more clearly, but it allowed us finally to come to grips with the actual truth power and beauty of this artist and hero.

It was Jimmy who led us from Critical Realism to an aesthetic furthering of it that made it more useful to the still living. He was like us so much, constantly growing, constantly measuring himself against himself, and thus against the world.

It was evident he loved beauty—art, but when the Civil Rights movement pitched to its height, no matter his early aestheticism and seeming hauteur, he was our truest definer, our educated conscience made irresistible by his high consciousness.

Jimmy was a “civil rights leader” too, *at the same time!*, thinkers of outmoded social outrage. He was in the truest tradition of the great artists of all times. Those who understand it is beauty AND TRUTH we seek, and that indeed one cannot exist without and as an extension of the other.

At the hot peak of the movement Jimmy was one of its truest voices. His stance, that is our judgment of the world, the majority of us who still struggle to survive the bestiality of so called civilization, (the slaves) that is true and not that of our torturers, was a dangerous profundity and as such fuel for our getaway and liberation!

He was our consummate & complete man of letters, not as an unliving artifact, but as a black man we could touch and relate to even there in that space filled with

black fire at the base and circumference of our souls. And what was supremely ironic is that for all his aestheticism and ultra sophistication, there he was now demanding that we get in the world completely, that we comprehend the ultimate intelligence of our enforced commitment to finally bring humanity to the world!

Jimmy's voice, as much as Dr. King's or Malcolm X's, helped shepherd and guide us toward black liberation.

And for this, of course, the intellectual gunmen of the animal king tried to vanquish him. For ultimately, even the rare lyricism of his song, the sweeping aesthetic obsession with feeling could not cover the social heaviness of his communication!

The celebrated James Baldwin of earlier times could not be used to cover the undaunted freedom chants of the Jimmy who walked with King and SNCC or the evil little nigger who wrote *Blues For Mr. Charlie!*

For as far as I'm concerned, it was *Blues For Mr. Charlie* that announced the black arts movement, even so far as describing down to minute fragments of breath, the class struggle raging inside the black community. Even as it is menaced by prehuman maniacs.

But attacked or not, repressed or not, suddenly unnewsworthy or not, Jimmy did what Jimmy was. He lived his life as witness. He wrote until the end. We hear of the writers' blocks of celebrated Americans, how great they are so great indeed that their writing fingers have been turned to checks, but Jimmy wrote. He produced. He spoke. He sang, no matter the odds. He remained man, and spirit and voice. Ever expanding, ever more conscious!

Gratifying to me in the extreme was that each year we grew closer, grew to understand each other even more. Ultimately I did understand, as I feel I always did, but now consciously, that he was my older brother—a brother of the communal spirit!!

One day I took him to Newark's Scudder Homes, the toilet bowl of the world, with a film crew. Seemingly deserted at first, the streets, once the vine got to grapping, filled quickly and Jimmy found himself surrounded by black people eager only to look at him, ask him questions, or tell him he was still their main man. At the nadir of social dislocation one young brother his hat turned half way around said, "I just read *Just Above My Head*, Mr. Baldwin. It's great! How you doing?" Jimmy's smile of recognition alone would have lit up even the darker regions under the earth.

We hung out all night one time lurching out of Mikell's after talking to David, and the next morning, Jimmy still leading and gesturing, clear as a bell, was still telling me some things I really needed to know, and I was still giving him feedback that yes there were a bunch of us who knew who he was, and loved him for it, since it was one of the only ways we could ever really love ourselves!!

Jimmy was one of those people whose celebrity is recognized whether by name or not, by the very aura that accompanied him. Whose intelligence is revealed in the most casual gesture or turn of apparel and bearing. We were aware at once that such dignity was the basis and result of great achievement of serious regard for the deep, the heavy, the profound.

Yet because of this deep and deeply felt by us integrity Jimmy carried like his many hats, his film of Malcolm X was rejected, reviews of his later works began to appear on page 2 because he could not be permitted to tell the truth so forcefully. Finally, great minds even forbade him to publish his last work, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, exposing the duplicity of the legal machinations obscuring the real killers of the black Atlanta children. He had to sue the publisher in order to get the book out. When he told me this last outrage, I remember the word *Weimar* flashed through my head. Reading this formidable completely mature and awesome work I could understand the terror of White Supremacy and its worshippers at its appearance. It is important that I include this quote from the work as his man, spirit voice, flesh of his soul speaking to us with the clarity of revelation

The Western world is located somewhere between the Statue of Liberty and the pillar of salt.

At the center of the European horror is their religion: a religion by which it is intended one be coerced, and in which no one believes, the proof being the Black/White conditions, or options, the horror into which the cowardly delusion of White supremacy seems to have transformed Africa, and the utterly intolerable nightmare of the American Dream. I speak with the authority of the grandson of a slave, issue of the bondswoman, Hagar's child. And, what the slave did—despised and rejected, *'buked and scorned*—with the European's paranoid vision of human life was to alchemize it into a force that contained a human use. The Black preacher, since the church was the only Civilized institution that we were permitted—separately—to enter, was our first warrior, *terrorist*, or *guerrilla*. He said that freedom was real—that we were real. He told us that *trouble don't last always*. He told us that our children and our elders were sacred, when the Civilized were spitting on them and hacking them to pieces, in the name of God, and in order to keep on making money. And, furthermore, we were not so much permitted to *enter* the church as corralled into it, as a means of rendering us docile and as a means of forcing us to corroborate the inscrutable will of God, Who had decreed that we should be slaves forever.

The Evidence of Things Not Seen, pp. 82–3¹

But it was Jimmy's life that puts such demonic tragedy in ever tightening jeopardy worldwide. He would not be still, he would not and never could be made to be just a mouthpiece for the prettily obscene. He sang of our lives and our needs and our will to triumph, even until his final hour.

Jimmy always made us feel good. He always made us know we were dangerously intelligent and as courageous as the will to be free!

Let us hold him in our hearts and minds. Let us make him part of our invincible black souls, the intelligence of our transcendence. Let our black hearts grow big world-absorbing eyes like his, never closed. Let us one day be able to celebrate him like he must be celebrated if we are ever to be truly self-determining. For Jimmy was God's black revolutionary mouth. If there is a God, and revolution his righteous natural expression. And elegant song the deepest and most fundamental commonplace of being alive.

If we cannot understand our love of Jimmy Baldwin it is too late to speak of freedom or liberation, it has already been lost!

But it is his life that was confirmation of our love, and our love that is continuing proof that Hey, did you see Jimmy last night ... you hear what he told so and so ... part of our long slave narrative—
as we speak to ourselves from within ourselves
and it is Jimmy's voice we hear,
it has always been!

Note

- 1 James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York, Henry Holt, 1985) [Editor's note].