I

LETTERS TO JAMES BALDWIN

Dear James,

I wish I could call you Jimmy, the way that woman you described as handsome and so very clever – Toni Morrison – always called you Jimmy, which meant that she loved you, and you her, and that in the never-ending Christmas of your meetings (this is how she described it) you sat, both of you, in the same room, the ceiling tall enough to contain your great minds, drinking wine or bourbon and talking easily about this world. I wish that I could sit with you now and talk that easy talk about difficult things – the kind of talk that includes our shoulders, and our hands on each other's shoulders, the way we touch each other, unconsciously, as if to remind ourselves of our bodies and that we exist in this world. But here is the rub, this awful fact – that you do not exist in this world, not any more – at least, not your body; only your body of work, and I can only write back to that and to the name that attached itself to those words rather than the name that attached itself to your familiar body. Not Jimmy then, but James – a single syllable that conjures up kings and Bibles – appropriate in its own way, except it does not conjure your shoulders

or your hands which I imagine as warm and which I never knew but somehow miss, and I am writing to you now with the hope that you might help me.

Dear James,

I read your review of Langston Hughes. 'Every time I read [him],' you wrote, 'I am amazed all over again by his genuine gifts – and depressed that he has done so little with them.' 'The poetic trick,' you went on to say, moving from review to sermon (because there was never a pulpit you could refuse, and never a pulpit you did not earn), 'is to be within the experience and outside it at the same time.' You thought Hughes failed because he could only ever hold the experience outside, and you understood the why of this – the experiences that we must hold outside ourselves if we are ever to write them and not be broken by them.

But you were never able to do that. You were never able to write anything that did not implicate your own body.

James, here is a truth: I do not think much of your poems, and I suspect you will not think that a cruel way to start this exchange, and that it says more about me and my insecurities that I must begin in this way of making you fallible, approachable. To read you as I have been reading you all these years is, quite frankly, to encounter majesty – something enthroned, something that can only be approached on one's knees, with one's eyes trained to the floor. I know that image would bring you no comfort or pride, to have a black man so stooped, so lowered before you. Forgive me

then my truth. I read *Jimmy's Blues* and was struck by your genuine gifts and how little you had made of them.

That isn't really fair. I know. You had never tried seriously to be a poet. *Jimmy's Blues* was more our collection than it was yours – just our own desperate attempt to read something new from you, to find once again in your words some shard of beauty and truth. So we gathered together the few poems you had written – one here, one there – and put them together in a book you had never imagined. And the thing is this: the beauty was there, the elegance of thought we have come to expect from you – but the beauty was cumulative, a result of the whole poem and not of its individual parts. You were always poetic but you weren't quite a poet – though you could have been. You could have been amazing. You didn't know how to pack enough into that most basic unit of poetry – the line.

What Hughes had, and what I think you lacked, James, was an instinctive understanding of the form of poetry, of the lyric line and what could be contained in it, and how that line might break and how it might take its breath. But I think if you and Langston Hughes were one person, James Hughes maybe, or Langston Baldwin, if such a person had written poetry – poems in which the body was present and vulnerable, and that broke in the same soft places where lines break – I think I would not have survived. I think I would have read such poetry and not been able to breathe.

Dear James,

I think about why we write letters – as an antidote to distance, as a cure for miles and the spaces that stretch between us. *If the beloved were present, there would be no need to write.* I think about the distance that is between us, which is only the distance of life and death and nothing more, because (and this is painful to say) there is little between the world you described, the set of circumstances you wrote of, and the set of circumstances we live in now. And what I want from you is a way – a way to write the things I have been trying so hard to write.

James, I do not think much of your poetry, but I think everything of your essays and it is essays that I have been trying to write but have stopped and need your help. What you had and what I lack is an instinctive understanding of the form – the sentence that you could make as clear as glass, style whose purpose was only ever to show and never to obscure – and how you could write these things that were so muscular and so full of grace is a wonder to me.

The essays I've been writing – they began because of something Dionne Brand once wrote about 'the most important things'. She suggested the most important things are, in fact, the things we almost never say, because of fear, or because we think they can only be said at the cost of friendships. I have been wondering how to say them.

'We still live, alas, in a society mainly divided into black and white. Black people still do not, by and large, tell white people the truth and white people still do not

want to hear the truth.' Oh James . . . ain't that the goddamn truth!

James, there are still men who wear white sheets in that country to which you were born, and who burn crosses and who march in support of the Aryan nation. There are still men who tattoo Nazi signs onto their skulls, and people who spit at me and call me nigger. I have no desire to write to such people, to condemn them, because that kind of racism, that kind of hatred is so unimaginative, so obviously deprived of reason and morality that why I should waste words or intellect on it is strange to me.

But the big, terrible things distract us from the other things, which are both smaller and more urgent, and prevent us from loving or trusting each other. I think about why I write essays – as an antidote to distance, as a cure to what stretches between my best self and my worst self, or between my friends, however close we are – the people I laugh with, the aunts who I kiss, the men I have kissed, the people I love, the people who want to be good people, who try every day to be good people, to do good things, but how so often between us, between our love is this black and white world, these truths that, by and large, I do not say and by God, we do not want to hear.

Dear James,

It is the body that I wish to write about – these soft houses in which we live and in which we move and from which we can never migrate, except by dying. I want to write about our bodies, and what they mean,

and how they mean, and how those meanings shift even as our bodies move throughout the world, throughout time and space.

I do not often like to think about my own body, or even look at it. Left to itself, my body relishes in fatness and a general lack of definition, though this is not true at the present moment. At the present moment my body is hard and muscled because I have been swimming and going to the gym and running and trying hard to undo the things that my body would rather do. I look in the mirror now and wonder how long this new shape will last. I do not like to talk about my body, because I might have to talk about its weight, or else the weight of my insecurities. But I must talk about it, because it has meant so many things in so many places.

At an immigration desk in Iraq, before boarding the plane that will take me away, I am pointed towards a small room. I cannot remember much about that room now – if there were windows or if there was a ceiling fan, its slow blades uselessly stirring the warm air. This is what comes to my mind now – a windowless room and a useless ceiling fan, though I am not confident in the memory. In the small room I am ordered to take off all my clothes. I fear that they will put on latex gloves, that they will put a finger inside my body searching for drugs. They will not find any. I wonder when it was that Iraq became a popular departure point for drug mules, but I do not wonder what it is about my body that has aroused suspicion. I am used to it. I am used to being pointed to small rooms. I am used

to being interrogated again, and again, and again. But I've never been asked to strip before. I stand there with my trousers and my underwear pooled around my ankles. I am aware of the pudginess of my belly, aware of my penis, unimpressive in its flaccidity, aware of a bead of sweat that has escaped the pit of my arm and is now running down my side. They sit – three men in uniform – and silently observe my body, and suddenly this does not surprise me either.

All week in Erbil, I had been literally chased by men as I walked along the streets. It had scared me at first – seeing them lift up their thawbs like modest British women from the nineteenth century and run towards me. What seemed threatening at first was usually defused when they handed me their phones and through a series of gestures, a sort of sign language, made me know that they only wanted a picture. A picture with me and my strange body. So here, in this small room, it does not surprise me that these officials who have the power to stop me, who have the power to order me into a small room, who have the power to order me to take off all my clothes, have done that. They have ordered me to strip and they do nothing more than observe my body for a minute or two and then they tell me to put my clothes back on and leave.

I am always being stopped. In New Zealand, in Dubai, in France, in Miami, I am stopped. The officers have looked carefully from my passport and then to my face, and all the time assessing me, sizing me up, and my body – this body that must be spoken about – this body that in some contexts arouses suspicion, and in

other contexts, lust, in others anger, in others curiosity – this body that has meant such different things to such different people – I must talk about it, and about its meanings.

James, I must talk about my body as black, and my body as male, and my body as queer. I must talk about how our bodies can variously assume privilege or victimhood from their conflicting identities. I do not want to talk about racists or classists or sexists because most people in the world do not assume themselves to be these things. I do not assume them about myself. And yet I know we participate in them all the same – in racism and classism and sexism. We participate with the help of our bodies, or because of our bodies – because our bodies have meanings we do not always consider.

Dear James,

I am writing this letter from an airport in Florida, an airport named after the city which it serves, but which you must not confuse for that city. Airports seem to be their own places and never really a part of the cities that claim them. There is such a keen sense, as there is in hospitals – of formality, sterility and limbo – of not being in a place but being between places, of being in a space between the life where you were and the life that you are heading to. I am always in airports, in this strange collection of wings and tarmac and glass doors and duty-free shops.

It is at Tallahassee Airport that you describe the meeting of a woman with her chauffeur – the meeting between a white woman and a black man, and what

could pass as friendliness if we did not know any better, if we did not know the codes that allow, and the codes that forbid, and the lines that must never be crossed.

'If she were smiling at me that way,' you write, 'I would expect to shake her hand. But if I should put out my hand, panic, bafflement, and horror would then overtake that face, the atmosphere would darken, and danger, even the threat of death, would immediately fill the air.'

James – this is what happened: on my first day in my present job I arrived early, in the dark, before the bird had sung its first song. I was now a full-fledged professor, which seemed to me a spectacular thing, being some years shy of forty, and being, of course, black. And so I was there in my office, but it was so very early, and it was my first day. It took me by surprise when the door began to jiggle, though it seemed to take the cleaning lady by much greater surprise to find someone present after she entered. She took one look at me, screamed and ran away. And James, I didn't even think much of that – I shrugged, and thought in time we would meet officially and laugh at this first bizarre interaction – but soon there was a loud rapping on the door. I opened it to campus security, burly men talking brusquely into their walkie-talkies – *We have arrived at the scene*, they reported to some disembodied voice of authority on the other end. I had to present IDs and photographs to explain the spectacle of my body in this space, to prove that I had every right to be there. And how our titles meant nothing in that moment. I

was no longer a professor and the woman a cleaning lady – I was just a black man, and she a white woman, and my presence had terrified her. These were the same old Black Codes being enforced, in which black people had to produce ID papers to explain themselves, our spectacular presences in places we are not easily imagined. But I had no way to say any of this, James – to talk about this history that had become so painfully present, and how we all played our roles so brutally, so perfectly. I could not tell them how you had already imagined this moment at an airport in Tallahassee, the panic, the bafflement, the horror – the sense of danger that can suddenly fill the air.

Dear James,

I have grown so weary of intentions – the claiming of them, and the denial of them. *I did not intend to be racist*, they say to me all the time. *He did not intend to be racist. If there is no intention, how can it be racist?* They ask me again and again. They mean it to be rhetorical. They think the logic is so devastatingly simple and clear that it cannot be answered, but it is only that I have grown weary. As if one could say, *It was an accident! I did not intend to push you to the floor, and so the pain that you claim to feel shooting up your back cannot be real. It cannot be real because I did not intend it.* And I wonder especially when white women proffer such logic or ask such questions – when they say how can it be racist if there was no intention. Because I imagine these same women would flinch if a strange man were to call them honey, and ask them what they were doing out without their

husbands. I imagine these women would rightly call such a man out on his sexism and would sneer if he said, *But I did not intend to be sexist! I love women! How can I be sexist?*

James, this is what happened: An old woman was outside my flat. She looked disoriented and an overwhelming feeling of helplessness emanated from her. She was babbling to herself and looking hopefully into the faces of many passers-by. They did not see her, or if they did, they ignored her. I suspected she had dementia or Alzheimer's. I could not know for sure, but I thought of my own grandfather in the midst of one of his episodes, how he had walked away from the house in Red Hills, Jamaica, and then miles and miles through Kingston. For days we could not find him. I considered the old woman, and though she was white and though she was a woman, she reminded me now of my grandfather lost in his own city and in his own mind. I knew there was little I could do for her, but I could not walk away. I touched her gently on the shoulder. 'Do you need any help?'

She looked up then and when her eyes found my face she gasped and clutched her heart. 'Oh my god!' she exclaimed, reminding me of my body and what my body meant in a city like London. Suddenly it seemed the passers-by, who had been ignoring the old woman before, were not ignoring her any more. I stood there, feeling accused by them all, as if I was harassing her. I walked away quickly. I left her to be lost in her own city and in her own mind.

I go to the computer and write all of this in a post.

Messages start pouring in. There is a throng of responses and it is almost frightening the way these are neatly divided. My black friends respond with an all-too-knowing, *yeah, we've been there*. My white friends are both defensive and accusatory.

> . . . *But was she being racist? How do you know she was being racist?*
> . . . *Racist? But I didn't even use that word. I've just described a thing that happened to me.*
> . . . *Yes, but you're clearly implying that she is racist, and you don't know! You are a writer! You must be careful with your words. You don't know anything about her! Maybe she had a horrible experience before with a black man.*

Their sympathies seem to lie very clearly with the old woman, and so I turn off the computer. I turn it off so that once again I won't feel as if I were back out there on the streets, the passers-by all looking at me again, accusing me of my frightening height, my frightening maleness, my frightening blackness. The next morning, I see that more has been written on the thread but interestingly, not by my black friends. My black friends have become silent. Theirs is not the silence of acceptance, but it is a silence we are used to. It is the silence in which we have learned to keep our hurt because so often we are told we have no right to it, or that to even describe the hurt is irresponsible. It is the silence in which so many important things are kept.

Dear James,

In your essay, 'The White Man's Guilt' – this is how you begin: 'I have often wondered, and it is not a pleasant wonder, just what white Americans talk about with one another.'

Haven't we all, James! Aren't we always suspicious of the conversations that our bodies prevent, that stop when we enter a room or that never get started because we are there – and how hard it is to live in this world feeling the weight of words – of ghost words that we almost never hear aloud, but are only ever suspicious of – because they exist on the edge of the other things that our friends say?

James, this is what happened: in the Caribbean, a woman from England, a friend of sorts, who is really very clever and has championed the books of many writers of colour is on a stage talking. Her interlocutor is a mutual friend. They talk about writing and life and advocacy in the way old friends do. The woman from England then says she is about to share a story, and at first she was a little worried because it is a little risqué, but then hell! It's the Caribbean. So who cares? And there was a moment, James, when everyone in the audience sighed collectively, even if not audibly. And we turned to look at each other as if to confirm – did she really just say that? She did, didn't she? Of course, we didn't care that the story was risqué, but we cared about this imagining of our home as a place without morals or values, and where anything is allowed. But we would have let it pass the way we always do – the way we have learned to brush such

careless statements aside. But there was a pause on stage, and the pause was so terrifying for all of us, because we understood it and what was being contemplated. The interlocutor was biting her lip, and looking at her hands and the pause stretched and I think, in the audience – I do not know why – we were all willing her to just let it go, and we were all willing her to go there. She looked up from her hands and said, 'But what exactly do you mean by that?'

We held our breaths then. We were so stunned. And I think maybe the English woman had had one too many glasses of rum punch, or maybe she was just nervous, but her words are pouring out now, and they are so careless and they are so clumsy and they do not help. And then comes another question about something else, and another question, and every question is devastating, and every answer is awful. And I find myself wondering about the quality of light that shines in the Caribbean and if it was helping me then to see things more clearly – helping me to see what had always been problematic and patronising in my friend's politics and in her advocacy. It was such a small throwaway comment she had made. It's the Caribbean, so who cares? But it was like a loose thread that unravelled the entire cardigan of her thoughts.

The conversation unspools. The questions dig deeper, they are sharper, more penetrating, as if these are questions the interlocutor had always wanted to ask but hadn't because she had been afraid, or because she thought they could only ever be asked at the cost of friendship, or because she knew they could never

be answered. The woman's face is now red. Though she is trying to smile and to be composed, her eyes are trying not to water, her lips not to tremble at what I think must feel like a betrayal, like ungratefulness – these truths that people of colour almost never say, these things which her very advocacy makes possible, but which she didn't want to hear after all.

Finally, it is over. Finally, she walks off the stage and comes directly to me. 'Can you believe that?' she says, in a voice both hushed and urgent, almost a hiss, but I do not know how to respond. I do not know how to offer comfort.

The next day arrives as all days arrive in the Caribbean, with boats of fishermen silent across the waters, and with parrots loud in the sky. It is another day and over breakfast the woman from England is speaking to another friend, another white woman. Her eyes dart about the room and she speaks in a conspiratorial voice. 'Can we go shopping together?' she says. 'I just want to be able to talk without being so goddamn careful!' And I'm not sure why, months later, the confidante tells me about this breakfast conversation, except maybe she no longer wants to be complicit in this thing, this thing that you wondered about, James, this thing that we know, that our bodies prevent conversations that hurt us even when we are not around to hear them.

Dear James,

It is always the body that I return to, our bodies and their various meanings, even though we would like to be just human – just that and nothing more,

but we aren't there yet. I think about the little boy – I imagine him as three years old – who balls up his fists and ineffectively hits his father; this little boy who, in this moment, in his tiny rage, is just human, unsure of how to contain his anger at the world in his small body. And I think about his father who balls up his fists and hits his three-year-old son – and how it is the same emotion, but because his body is different it means differently. The child is not an abuser, but the father is, because his body is different – and I think about these things every day when a man says, 'But why is that sexist? A woman would do it too!' Or when a white friend says, 'But why is that racist? My black friends say the same things!' Or when my American friends say, 'But why is that exceptionalist or fascist? People from every country feel the same way about their countries!'

And I say it is because of our bodies; it is because there are histories that haunt our bodies.

Dear James,

I think I am writing these letters to say that I resent your dying – I resent the absence of your shoulders and your hands in this world. I resent the absence of your body, even though I am grateful for the body of work. It is just that I cannot say things any better than you have, I cannot think more graciously than you have, but the world and the circumstances that you wrote to, they are still here – obstinate world that we have – as if your words did not unravel the things they should have, did not bring down the walls of Jericho, which

means we who are left behind must try to write with as much grace and as much love and as much truthfulness as you taught us. But some days I resent this – I resent what you require from us, which is nothing less than what you required from yourself. My dear James, I need your help.