The Weight

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It was an acquaintance's idea to go there, to Baldwin's house. He knew from living in Paris that Baldwin's old place, the house where Baldwin died, was near an elegant and renowned hotel in the Côte d'Azur region of France. He said that both places were situated in a medieval-era walled town that was scenic enough to warrant the visit. He said we could go to Jimmy's house and then walk up the road for drinks at the hotel bar where Baldwin used to drink in the evening. He said we would make a day of it, that I wouldn't regret it.

For the first time in my life I was earning a bit of money from my writing, and since I was in London anyway for family obligations I decided to take the train over to Nice to meet him. But I remained apprehensive. Having even a tiny bit of disposable cash was very new and bizarre to me. It had been years since I had I bought myself truly new clothes, years since going to a cash machine to check my balance hadn't warranted a sense of impending doom, and years since I hadn't on occasion regretted even going to college because it was increasingly evident that I would never be able to pay back my loans. There were many nights where

I lay awake turning over in my mind the inevitable, that soon Sallie Mae or some faceless, cruel moneylender with a blues-song-type name would take my mother's home—she had cosigned for me—and thus render my family homeless. In my mind, three generations of progress would be undone by my vain commitment to tell stories about black people in a country where the black narrative was a quixotic notion at best. If I knew anything about being black in America it was that nothing was guaranteed, you couldn't count on a thing, and all that was certain for most of us was a black death. In my mind, a black death was a slow death, the accumulation of insults, injuries, neglect, second-rate health care, high blood pressure and stress, no time for self-care, no time to sigh, and in the end, the inevitable, the erasing of memory. I wanted to write against this, and so I was writing a history of the people who I did not want to forget. For many years, I taught during the day and wrote at night—long pieces, six thousand words for which I was paid two hundred bucks. I loved it; nothing else mattered because I was remembering, I was staving off death.

So I was in London when a check with one comma hit my account. It wasn't much but to me it seemed enormous. I decided if I was going to spend any money, something I was reluctant, if not petrified, to do, at the very least I would feel best about spending it on James Baldwin. After all, my connection to him was an unspoken hoodoo-ish belief that he had been the high priest in charge of my prayer of being a black person who wanted to exist on books and words alone. It was a deification that was fostered years before

during a publishing internship. Basically, during a lonely week I had spent in the storeroom of a magazine's editorial office organizing the archives from 1870 to 2005, I had once found time to pray intensely at the altar of Baldwin. I had asked him to grant me endurance and enough fight so that I could exit that storeroom with my confidence intact. I told him what all writers chant to keep on, that I had a story to tell. But later, away from all of that, I quietly felt repelled by him—as if he were a home I had to leave to become my own. Instead, I had spent years immersing myself in the books of Sergei Dovlatov, Vivian Gornick, Henry Dumas, Sei Shōnagon, John McPhee, and bell hooks. Baldwin didn't need my prayers, he had the praise of the entire world.

I still liked Baldwin but in a divested way, the way that anyone who writes and aspires to write well does. When people asked me my opinion on him I told them the truth: that Baldwin had set the stage for every American essayist who came after him. One didn't need to worship him, or desire to emulate him, to know this and respect him for it. And yet, for me, there had always been something slightly off-putting about him—the strangely accented, ponderous way he spoke in the interviews I watched; the lofty, precious way in which he appeared in an essay by Joan Didion as the bored, above-it-all figure that white people revered because he could stay collected while the streets boiled. What I resented about Baldwin wasn't even his fault. I didn't like how many men who only cared about Ali, Coltrane, and Obama praised him as the black authorial exception. I didn't like how every essay about race cited him. I didn't

like that he and my grandfather were four years apart in age, but that Baldwin, as he was taught to me, had escaped to France and avoided his birth-righted fate whereas millions of black men his age had not. It seemed easy enough to fly in from France to protest, whereas it seemed straight hellish to live in it with no ticket out. It seemed to me that Baldwin had written himself into the world—and I wasn't sure what that meant in terms of his allegiances to our interiors as an everyday, unglamorous slog.

So even now I have no idea why I went. Why I took that high-speed train past the sheep farms, and the French countryside, past the brick villages and stone aqueducts until the green hills faded and grew into Marseille's tall, dusky pink apartments and the bucolic steppes gave way to blue water where yachts and topless women with leather for skin were parked.

It was on that train that I had time to consider the first time I started to revere Baldwin, something that had occurred ten years earlier, when I was accepted as an intern at one of the oldest magazines in the country. I had found out about the magazine only a few months before. A friend who let me borrow an issue made my introduction, but only after he spent almost twenty minutes questioning the quality of my high school education. How could I have never heard of such an influential magazine? I got rid of the friend and kept his copy. But still I had no idea of what to expect.

During my train ride into the city on my first day, I kept telling myself that I really had no reason to be nervous; after all, I had proven my capability not just once but twice.

Because the internship was unpaid I had to decline my initial acceptance to instead take a summer job and then reapply. When I arrived at the magazine's offices, the first thing I noticed was the stark futuristic whiteness. The entire place was a brilliant white except for the tight, gray carpeting.

The senior and associate editors' offices had sliding glass doors and the rest of the floor was divided into white-walled cubicles for the interns and the assistant editors. The windows in the office looked out over the city, and through the filmy morning haze I could see the cobalt blue of the Manhattan Bridge and the water tanks that spotted some of the city's roofs. The setting, the height, and the spectacular view were not lost on me. I had never before had any real business in a Manhattan skyscraper.

Each intern group consisted of four people; mine was made up of a recent Vassar grad, a hippie-ish food writer from California, and a dapper Princeton grad of Southeast Asian and Jewish descent. We spent the first part of the day learning our duties, which included finding statistics, assisting the editors with the magazine's features, fact-checking, and reading submissions. Throughout the day various editors stopped by and made introductions. Sometime after lunch the office manager came into our cubicle and told us she was cleaning out the communal fridge and we were welcome to grab whatever was in it. Eager to scavenge a free midday snack, we decided to take her up on the offer. As we walked down the hall the Princeton grad joked that because he and I were the only brown folks around we should be careful about taking any food because they might say we were loot-

ing. I had forgotten about the tragedy of that week, Hurricane Katrina, during the day's bustle, and somehow I had also allowed the fact that I am black to fade to the back of my thoughts, behind my stress and excitement. It was then that I was smacked with the realization that the walls weren't the only unusually white entities in the office—the editorial staff seemed to be strangely all white as well.

Because we were interns, neophytes, we spent the first week getting acquainted with each other and the inner workings of the magazine. Sometime toward the end of my first week, a chatty senior editor approached me in the corridor. During the course of our conversation I was informed that I was (almost certainly) the first black person to ever intern at the magazine and there had never been any black editors. I laughed it off awkwardly, only because I had no idea of what to say. I was too shocked. At the time of my internship the magazine was more than one hundred and fifty years old. It was a real *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* moment. Except that I, being a child of the eighties, had never watched the film in its entirety, I just knew it starred Sidney Poitier, as a young, educated black man who goes to meet his white fiancée's parents. The film was set in the 1960s; I had been born in 1981.

When my conversation with the talkative editor ended I walked back to my desk and decided to just forget about it. Besides, I reasoned, it was very possible that the editor was just absentminded. I tried to forget it but I could not, and finally I casually asked another editor if it was true. He told me he thought there had been an Algerian-Italian girl many

years ago, but he was not certain if she really "counted" as black. I was also alerted later to there being one editor who was half Filipina, half white. But when I asked how this dismal situation could be possible I was told that the lack of diversity was due to the lack of applications from people of color. As awkward as these comments were, they were made in the spirit of oblivious commonwealth. It was office chatter meant to make me feel like one of the gang, but instead of comforting my concerns they made me feel like an oddity.

On good days, being the first black intern meant having my work done quickly and sounding extra witty around the water cooler; it meant I was chipping away at the glass ceiling that seemed to top most of the literary world. But on bad days I gagged on my resentment and furiously wondered why I was selected. I became paranoid that I was merely a product of affirmative action, even though I knew I wasn't. I had completed the application not once but twice and never did I mention my race. Still, I never felt like I was actually good enough. And with my family and friends so proud of me, I felt like I could not burst their bubble with my insecurity and trepidation.

So when I was the only intern asked by the deputy editor to do physical labor and reorganize all of the old copies of the magazine in the freezing, dusty storeroom, I fretted in private. Was I asked because of my race or because that was merely one of my duties as the intern-at-large? There was no way to tell. I found myself most at ease with the other interns and the staff that did not work on the editorial side

of the magazine, the security guards, the delivery guys, the office manager, and the folks at the front desk; among them the United Nations was almost represented. With them, I did not have to worry that one word pronounced wrong or one reference not known would reflect not just poorly on me but also on any black person who might apply after me.

I also didn't have to worry about that in that storeroom. There I could think. I realized three things spending a week in the back of that dismal storeroom. That yes, I was the only intern asked to do manual labor, but also that I was surrounded by two hundred years of the greatest American essays ever written, and I discovered that besides the physical archives and magazines stored there, the storeroom was also home to the old index card invoices that its writers used to file. In between my filing duties, I spent time searching those cards, and the one that was most precious to me was Baldwin's. In 1965, he was paid $350 for an essay that is now legend. The check went to his agent's office. There is nothing particularly spectacular about the faintly yellowed card except that its routineness suggested a kind of normalcy. It was human and it looped a great man back to the earth for me. And in that moment, Baldwin's eminence was a gift. Because he had made it out of the storeroom. He had taken a steamer away from being driven mad from maltreatment. His excellence had moved him beyond the realm of physical labor. He had disentangled himself from being treated like someone who was worthless or questioning his worth. And better yet, Baldwin was so good they wanted to preserve his memory. I would look at that card every day of that week.

Baldwin joined the pantheon of black people who were from that instructional generation of civil rights fighters.

On that train to Baldwin's house I thought more about this generation and about the seemingly vast divide between Baldwin and my grandfather. They had very little in common, except they were of the same generation, the same race, and were both fearless men, which in black America says a lot. Whereas Baldwin spent his life writing against a canon, writing himself into the canon, he was a black man who was recording the Homeric legend of his life himself; my grandfather simply wanted to live with dignity.

My grandfather liked to look on the bright side. Even when I visited him in Los Angeles for one of the last times, he insisted things weren't so bad. He was eking out a living on the money we sent and social security. My mother asked him to come east to stay with us, but he refused. He had lived in this building for almost fifty years, but now the upstairs neighbors were what he called "young bloods," guys who threatened to shoot him when he complained about their noise. The landlord wanted him out to raise the rent; he needed more money for the place. All my grandfather had were a few worn tracksuits and his rusted golf clubs. No one needed an eighty-year-old carpenter, no matter how clever he was: he'd worked hard but had made next to nothing. California had once been fertile ground for him, but in the end it, too, was bound to the country that had long seen him and us as subservient human beings. But my grandfather preferred not to focus on that sort of thing. What Baldwin understood is that to be black in America is

to have the demand for dignity be at absolute odds with the national anthem.

From the outside, Baldwin's house looks ethereal. The saltwater air from the Mediterranean acts like a delicate scrim over the heat and the horizon, and the dry, craggy yard is wide and long and tall with cypress trees. I had prepared for the day by watching clips of him in his gardens. I read about the medieval frescos that had once lined the dining room. I imagined the dinners he had hosted for Josephine Baker and Beauford Delaney under a trellis of creeping vines and grape arbors. I imagined a house full of books and life.

I fell in love with Baldwin, because Baldwin didn't go to France because it was France. He was not full of naïve, empty admiration for Europe; as he once said in an interview: "If I were twenty-four now, I don't know if and where I would go. I don't know if I would go to France, I might go to Africa. You must remember when I was twenty-four there was really no Africa to go to, except Liberia. Now, though, a kid now . . . well, you see, something has happened which no one has really noticed, but it's very important: Europe is no longer a frame of reference, a standard-bearer, the classic model for literature and for civilization. It's not the measuring stick. There are other standards in the world."

Baldwin left the States for the primary reason that all emigrants do—because anywhere seems better than home. This freedom-seeking gay man, who deeply loved his sisters and brothers—biological and metaphorical—never left

them at all. He preserved himself so he could stay alone. In France, I saw Baldwin didn't live the life of a wealthy man but he did live the life of a man who wanted to travel, to erect an estate that held a mood of his own design, where he could write as an outsider from the noise, alone in silence, with fearlessness.

Decades after his death in 1987, what I found left behind in Baldwin's house was something similar to what we experienced when I waded through my grandfather's effects after his house had burned down. Two months later, my grandfather would die from shock and stress caused by the fire. Baldwin's death, too, came at him hard and fast. In both houses, I found mail strewn on dirt piles in rooms that no longer had doors or windowpanes, entryways nailed over to prevent trespassers like us. In each case, clearly someone had forced entry in order to drink beer. The scattered, empty beer cans were recent additions, as were the construction postings from the company that was tasked with tearing the house down. So that nothing remained. No remembrance of the past. Not even the sense that a great man had once lived there.

James Baldwin lived in this house for more than twenty-five years, and all that was left were half a dozen pink teacups and turquoise saucers buried by the house's rear wall, orange trees that were heavy with fruit, but the fruit was bitter and sharp to the taste. We see Baldwin's name in connection to the present condition more often than we see Faulkner's, Whitman's, or Thoureau's. We can visit houses and places where they lived and imagine how their geog-

raphy shaped the authors and our collective vocabulary. By next year, Baldwin's house will just be another private memory for those who knew it.

I do not know if I will ever see his house again. If I will be able to pull sour oranges from his trees and wonder if they were so bitter when he lived there. I do know that Baldwin died a black death.

For a while when I came back to the States, I started to send desperate e-mails to people who knew him that read:

> For the last two days, I've basically found myself frantically, maniacally looking for everything that I could find about Baldwin's life there. To be honest, I'm not at all sure what I am looking for, but when I walked up that steep little hill, past the orange and cypress trees out onto the main road, and looked back at his house, I just felt a compulsion to start asking people who knew him about his life in that house. The compound is almost gone, as they are in the process of demolishing it, and yet something about it and him seemed to still be very much there.

I sent those notes—feeling as hopeless as I sounded—because I wanted to save that building. Because I was scared that no one else would ever be able to see that Baldwin had a rainbow kitchen—an orange sink and purple shelves—in his guesthouse. I wanted someone else to wonder what he ate from this kitchen, who he loved, who stayed in this annex of his estate; did his love feel free in this kitchen, in this house where two men could embrace in private behind the

ramparts of his home in another country? I wanted someone else to understand the private, black language found in one of Baldwin's last conversations with his brother David. Frail, sick, being carried to his deathbed in his brother's arms, what the world thought of him might as well have been an ocean away. In that moment, Baldwin didn't refer to French poets, or to the cathedrals of his genius, he instead returned to a popular Hollies song. He loved music, and he told his brother: So it is true what they say—he is my brother and he's not heavy.

Baldwin once wrote, "Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible for life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return."

Because I am telling you this now, writing it all down, I am finding time to regard memory and death differently. I'm holding them up in the light and searching them, inspecting them, as they are not as I want them to be. On that hill, in Saint Paul de Vence, I wanted to alter fate, and preserve things. But why? They did not need me—Baldwin seemed

to have prepared himself well for his black death, his mortality, and even better, his immortality. Indeed, he bested all of them, because he wrote it all down. And this is how his memory is carried. On the scent of wild lavender like the kind in his yard, in the mouths of a new generation that once again feels compelled to march in the streets of Harlem, Ferguson, and Baltimore. What Baldwin knew is that he left no heirs, he left spares, and that is why we carry him with us. So now when people ask me about James Baldwin, I tell them another truth: He is my brother, he ain't heavy.

Lonely in America

WENDY S. WALTERS

I have never been particularly interested in slavery, perhaps because it is such an obvious fact of my family's history. We know where we were enslaved in America, but we don't know much else about our specific conditions. The fact that I am descended from slaves is hard to acknowledge on a day-to-day basis, because slavery does not fit with my self-image. Perhaps this is because I am pretty certain I would not have survived it. I am naturally sharp-tongued, suffer from immobility when I am cold, and am susceptible to terrible sinus infections and allergies. My eyesight is poor. Most of the time I don't think about how soft the good fortune of freedom has made me, but if I were to quantify my weakness of body and character I would guess that at least half the fortitude my enslaved ancestors must have possessed has been lost with each generation in the family line, leaving me with little more than an obtuse and metaphorical relationship to that sort of suffering.

I resist thinking about slavery because I want to avoid the overwhelming feeling that comes from trying to conceive of the terror, violence, and indignity of it. I do not like to think of it happening in my hometown, where I work, in