

Royal Literary Fund Commission 2018

Letters to James Baldwin

Kei Miller



Kei Miller was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and the Royal Literary Fund to respond to the life and works of James Baldwin. Kei performed his new commission, a series of letters to James Baldwin, at the Cabaret for Freedom: A Celebration of the Life & Work of James Baldwin at St John's Church, Old Trafford on Saturday 13th October as part of the 2018 Manchester Literature Festival.

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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, a 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, the awful fact – that you do not exist in this world, not anymore – 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 – which I guess appropriate, 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 write, moving from review to sermon – because there was never a pulpit you could refuse, and never a pulpit you did not earn... 'The poetic trick 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.

You were never able to do that – to hold an experience outside yourself. 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, about my insecurities, that I must begin this way of making you fallible, approachable. To read you as I have been reading you all these years is to encounter majesty – something enthroned, something that can only be approached on one's knees, with one's eyes trained to the floor – and I know that this image would bring you no comfort, no pride – to have a black man so stooped, so lowered before you. Forgive me then this truth. I read Jimmy's Blues and was struck by your genuine gifts and how little you had made of them.

What Hughes had, and what you lacked James, was an instinctive understanding of the form of poetry, of the lyric line and how it breaks and how it takes 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. I think about the distance that is between us which is only the distance of life and death which isn't so great a distance as I once imagined. And this is painful to say – that there is so little distance between the world you described, the set of circumstances you wrote of, and the set of circumstances we live in now. And so what I want from you is a way – a way to write the things I have been trying so hard to write.

James, it is true 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 recently stopped and need your help, because what you had and what I lack, is an instinctive understanding of the form – the sentence that you could make as clear as glass, a 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 are called 'The Most Important Things' because I think the things we need to say are in fact the things we can never say, because of fear, and because of the price of friendships.

'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 is now a man, an awful man who is president of your country and an untrustworthy woman is Prime Minister of the country I live in, and the awful man and the untrustworthy woman have their supporters, and there are still men who wear white sheets in your country, burn crosses, and people who tattoo Nazi signs on their skulls, and people who spit at me and call me nigger, and James I have no desire – none whatsoever 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.

And the big, terrible things distract us from the 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 the miles that stretch 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.

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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.' And don't we all James – aren't we always suspicious of the conversation that our bodies prevent, that stop when we enter a room or that never get started because we are there – and how hard that 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.

In the Caribbean, a woman – a white woman, a friend really who is very clever and very bright and who has worked very hard to champion my books and the books of other writers of colour, she begins to talk, and talk, and maybe she has had one too many glasses of rum punch, because her words are suddenly careless – or maybe it isn't the words that are careless, but the setting that has changed, the light that makes us see clearly – makes us see what has always been problematic and patronizing in her politics, in her advocacy. She is not from the Caribbean, she is not used to the light of this place. So finally in this place, amongst these people who she loves or who she thinks she loves but from afar, and on whose behalf she advocates, they query a very small thing that she's said – and it really is very small, but it is the thread that unravels the cardigan of her thoughts. The conversation unspools like that – like thread, and my friend's face becomes red though she is trying to smile and to be British and composed, her eyes are trying not to water, her lips not to tremble at what must feel like a betrayal, like ungratefulness, because here now is the truth that black people almost never say and which her advocacy makes possible but which she really didn't want to hear after all. 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 speaking to another friend, another white woman, she says, 'Can we go shopping together. I would like to be able to talk without being so goddamn careful.' And I'm not sure why the confidante tells me this, except maybe she no longer wanted 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, that there are always things said when we are not in the room.

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Dear James,

I am writing this letter from Miami Airport, which you must not confuse for Miami, because airports seem to be their own places and never really a part of the cities that claim them. There is such a keen sense in airports, as there is in hospitals – of formality, sterility, and limbo – or not being in a place but being between places, of being 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 fully-fledged professor, which seemed to me a spectacular thing being some years shy of 40, 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 man talking brusquely into their walkie talkies – they had 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 – how it meant nothing that I technically outranked everyone in this moment – that 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, and these were the same old Black Codes being enforced in which black people had to produce all manner of IDs 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 about 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.

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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 continue to write with as much grace and as much love and as much truthfulness as you taught us, and some days, James, I resent that – I resent what you require from us which is nothing less than you required from yourself, but James... I need your help.