



God's Suicide by Harmony Holiday

Preface to James Baldwin's Unwritten Suicide Note

Essay by Harmony Holiday
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Take Me to the Water

Corsica, October, 1956, some jittering brandy. Billie Holiday is on the phonograph serenading a petit gathering of lovers and friends. Baldwin and his current lover, Arnold, have become taciturn and cold with one another and Arnold has announced that he plans to leave for Paris, where he wants to study music and escape the specter of an eternity with Jimmy—he feels possessed or dispossessed or both by their languid love affair. This kind of hyper-domestic intimacy followed by dysfunction and unravelling had marked Baldwin's love life and seemed to prey upon him, turning his tenderness into a haunt, a liability. Baldwin made his way upstairs while Arnold and the others continued in the living room, and he absconded the house by way of the rooftop, leapt down, and stumbled through a briar patch to the sea, finished his brandy and tossed the glass in before he himself walked toward a final resting place, ready to let that water take him under, having amassed enough heartache to crave an alternate consciousness, a black slate. But at the last minute, hip-deep in the water, as if he had been hallucinating and a spark of differentiation separated the real from the illusion at the height of his stupor, Baldwin changed his mind, his mandate became more vivid to him. He had to keep witnessing these very agonies and ruptures, to keep coming unhinged and living to tell it, he was bound to the earth, where he had to finish inventing *Another Country*. The suicidal impulse, a sign he was at an impasse, would fade and intensify in a haunting pattern throughout Jimmy's life. A few months before this attempt at sea, while still in Paris, he had swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills and then called his friend and confidant Mary Painter, who helped him regurgitate them before the pills took their fatal toll. That attempt too, was after a fight with Arnold. This episode in Corsica was just another in a pattern of nights, where a sense that the human struggle was meaningless was usurped by a reckless commitment to purpose, just in time to fortify James Baldwin's spirit. Was his clairvoyance futile if it precluded intimacy, was his boundless capacity for eros trivial in the face of his filial love for Black people and for justice for all of humanity. If love affairs evoked the fearful, unjust malaise lurking within Jimmy's soul, was it better to die of a lonely heart or a broken heart, or could he reconcile the false dichotomy between being alone and being lonely, realize the pleasure and intentionality in his solitude, deriving joy and confidence from that reconciliation. Or was it too far gone—had self-loathing metamorphosed into self-obsession, a kind of inverse vanity that makes it hard to live and impossible not to.

One Day When We Were Lost

James Baldwin was one of our most well-loved writers, revered, and called upon any time the United States was in crisis, to serve as a resounding voice of honest critique and premonition, both on and off the page, and on either side of the race drama. Yet James Baldwin attempted suicide several times throughout his life, found this place as unbearable as it was worth saving. His best friend committed suicide in 1946. His novels and plays and essays explore the topic in detail and in act, stopping short of divulging his own suicidal tendencies. As explicit as depressive episodes and fixation on suicide

are in Baldwin's biography, as emotionally fragile as he was in private life, it's almost sinister that he is used by the literary and cultural machine as a symbol of the uncomplicated and elegant great Black hope, the well-adjusted unwavering public intellectual and writer to whom we can all look for an example of how to master the discipline and the image. The toll Baldwin's outward mastery took on his spirit is overlooked or hushed by the fanfare, so that writers who emulate him like disciples are practicing sorrow and precarity as much as excellence and genius. By tidying up the legacies of great talents, we undermine them completely, and doom ourselves to repeat the struggles as much as the triumphs. On some perverse level we even come to fetishize the trouble, as if it's part of the rubric of having a story to tell. Or worse, we aestheticize the trauma of an artist's or any citizen's translation into a public figure, we make them abstractions in our minds and leave them with no place left to be real, to become. What story does Jimmy Baldwin's very real recurring attempts at suicide, even at the height of his fame and creative power, tell? How does his lust for death complicate his effectiveness at life, his legacy? *For every James Baldwin, there are a whole lot of corpses, a lot of people who went under*, he once lamented during an interview toward the end of his glorious tenure on earth. The versions of him who almost went under, and not just the stellar easy-to-admire iterations, are the ones in need of our love and recognition. As in James Baldwin, so in ourselves. This revisionist history becomes an ongoing act of love and reparations, of rescuing us from the edge by letting us admit when we reach it and almost leap forth, almost wanna be ready. Suffering that precipice in silence is not a sign of courage, not romantic, not poetic, not going to make you see what Baldwin saw, not going to impede the truth from its clamoring march forward into and through and beyond you. So vent, own it, live to tell it, what made you want to die? What let you live? What does survival mean to you? What did it mean to James Baldwin? What does he mean suffering that he didn't as a purely oracular cultural hero whose subjectivity was masked by his capacity to reveal us to ourselves. If James Baldwin was lost, we all are. Searching is our mode of survival.

Dear Etheridge, Dear Rufus,

Poet Etheridge Knight is slurring and weaving through his reading at the Scranton, Pennsylvania public library, drunk, lit up in the glow of his lavish, endless, Mississippi, Goddamn, when he invokes an interlude about James Baldwin's *Another Country*. The novel disturbs Knight's biases about how Black men cope with morbid depression by allowing a protagonist to leap from the George Washington Bridge to his death, to commit suicide right in the middle of an American tale. *That just ain't our style*, Etheridge quips. *We might kill each other, drink ourselves to death, overdose, but we don't jump off no bridge or shoot ourselves in the head*. The meta quality of Etheridge's monologuing is some hybrid of beautiful and devastating. Here's a black poet drinking himself to death slowly and confessing it at a slant to his mostly white audience in this echoing hall in small town USA, and by default admitting a deep state of denial about what preys on him when he says he does not agree with Baldwin's portrayal of Black men in *Another Country*. Rufus, the

novel's grand martyr, is a gay Black jazz drummer based not so loosely on Baldwin's best friend Eugene Worth, who had leapt to his death from the George Washington Bridge in 1946 in almost the same way the character does, prompting Baldwin to move to Paris before tempted or pushed off that bridge himself. And here's Etheridge, Black poet and ex-convict in the Reagan era 1980s, the crack cocaine 80s, when no one Black can be subtle or safe, refusing to believe that what he calls 'social pressure' could motivate a Black man to very literally take death into his own hands, control with self-inflicted violence what the state and dominant culture were otherwise controlling with similar, though by then more tacit, methods.

If even a sensitive and nuanced poet thinks blatant suicide is for chumps and cowards and not for real authentic Black men, that it's a disappointment, that it's cooler to ease casually into lethal numbed-out misery or at least make up a good masculine excuse, like alcoholism or gangsterism, is there any hope for Black people like Rufus, who sacrifice themselves to prove just how doomed their surroundings make them feel, and just how boundless that doom is? Is there any restitution for those who make suicide a matter of ruthless confession that might, if examined or at least acknowledged, compel us to demand more of our lived experiences and to listen to one another even when it's an uneasy sound seething through, to be the reason a Black man or woman decides to take the risk that is survival and self-actualization in a place that has always been genocidal and happy to see us go?

Maybe it's reactions like Etheridge Knight's that explain why Baldwin, unflinchingly honest and exposed, kept his depressive brooding side quiet and led with the leverage of his smile, his charisma, his intelligence, his humor, and his critique. For a powerful and magnetic Black man, does being suicidal strip you of your charm and intrigue, make you just another mule in the eyes of your community? Is it safer to be a criminal of any other kind—does sorrow make you a fool or a king, a god or a monster, a Black prince or an afterthought?

Jimmy on the bridge running from his FBI agent, like Sweetback, or stuffing his mouth with a lethal dose of barbiturates, is not the James Baldwin the American establishment wants us to understand. We won't let him be misunderstood.

Johnny on the Spot

Hierarchies of shade, the contagious sickness that is colorism, and that infected Harlem social life when Jimmy was a kid, inspired the first suicide he remembers in rumor like a listening witness. He was nine years old—it happened on his neighbors' doorstep, a petty threshold for internalized prejudice. A boy named Johnny loved a girl from a family of light-skinned Blacks. The girl he was seeing, the youngest in the family who was also the darkest, the anomalous one and quiet scandal of the group herself, had been forbidden to continue the relationship because of the shade of her suitor's skin. Johnny had been given his nickname for always being on time to meet his beloved. When the relationship was ended by her parents, he arrived at the family's door with a pistol and faithful as ever to his nom de guerre, shot himself in the head when the door opened. Johnny had his own style. Jimmy never forgot that image of bloody loveless love.

Dear Langston, Have you Been to the Mountaintop?

A different poet, Langston Hughes, wrote Jimmy after the publication of his debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, to praise the central suicide in that book, which features the character Richard, falsely jailed for a robbery and beaten by police, resorting to taking his own life as a means of regaining control over his circumstances, and because the senselessness of his persecution feels impossible to heal, haunts his every waking moment. Hughes understood the value of death being a decision and not a surrender to another group's crimes and obsessions. And Baldwin understood men like Kalief Browder, the high school student from the Bronx who committed suicide after being taken to Rikers and held for two years without conviction or charges for any crime, because there was no crime but walking with a backpack while Black. It was after his release that Kalief took his own life. Throwing an innocent man in a cage on a whim is a good way to make him crave death and revenge in near equal ratio. And how many Black men besides Django and other fictions survive their own revenge fantasies? Good job at killing off your characters, Hughes was saying. Way to be natural. It's a great day in the morning on the mountaintop with a knot of friendly ghosts in our hearts, but don't push us. We're so close. We're the ones you cannot touch because we are too near. Don't come too much closer.

I'm Your Pusher

James Baldwin's biological father is said to have been a drug addict his mother had to leave while Jimmy was still in utero. Beyond that, mention of the father in biographical information is cryptic or non-existent. Jimmy's surrogate father was a stern, unforgiving, preacher and laborer, son of a slave who had moved from the South to the North (Louisiana to Harlem) to take a piece of the American pie, and all his life remained obsessed with salvation and sanctity and that missing piece. In between these two men, the unknown and the all-knowing, we find James Baldwin, who both loved and resented the man who raised him and who served as an accomplice to the erasure of his natal father. Baldwin seemed to be okay with his mother's omissions of any biographical details of his first father, but it's unclear whether he arrived at that position because it was one of many strictly enforced rules in his sanctified Pentecostal household, or if Jimmy really wasn't concerned with his biological paternity.

Baldwin's autobiographical writing commits a kind of double patricide with its recurring emphasis of his being raised by a preacher, overriding any explicit mention of his being estranged from his birth father, not even knowing his name. He ultimately rejects both of his fathers and finds models like the painter Beauford Delaney and writer Richard Wright, who help him invent a composite paternal masculinity that is benevolent without the tyranny of old-time religion. And while Baldwin is a talented enough writer and mystic and demagogue to have us all believe that he was well adjusted to the eternal missingness of the man whose genetics and proclivities he inherited on some level but never witnessed firsthand, James Baldwin the boychild, the adolescent, and then the man (writer, witness, prophet) was not oblivious or careless or contented enough to forget that he'd been disinherited and

mythologized, that nothing was as it seemed, that he himself was not as he seemed, a heroic misfit.

Jimmy did his remembering with his body, his heart, as he fell in love time and again with men who wore two faces, who treated him like a menacing secret or a pleasing tangent from their actual lives. What he hid from the public and the page and his exterior attitudes, preyed on him privately as good old-fashioned daddy issues, and that ongoing subconscious patricide fueled his suicidal bouts of depression and longing. In omitting his biological father from his narrative, he had erased some of himself. The unknown where his father resided nameless, where his subconscious broke from verbal life the way only heartbreak can inspire, he tried to deliver his body, his entire sense of self to that strobing place during suicide attempts, in hopes of recovering from a nameless malady of the spirit. So much love and *raison d'être*, so much hopelessness and shame.

Being such an attentive and heroic witness can mean that you yourself, as that witness, are never entirely seen. And a father is a kind of god in the human psyche, one who sees you and whose vision you must both realize and overcome, overthrow, ruin. Maybe Baldwin was the only star-witness America could trust on any given day because at an early age he had to perform the ritual or rite of passage of becoming his own father, seeing himself, which allowed him to see others so clearly. But when it came time for the next ritual in the sequence, overcoming that self-imposed vision, betrayal of any limiting concepts of the self—maybe it was because the vision was his own, because he was his own master, that suicide so seduced him, as his own father, his own master, he was in his own way. Who, after all, was seeing him, reinventing him? Who was able to pierce the bouts of upheaval and depression in Baldwin's life with understanding and soothing intervention? It's taboo to intervene with people who seem to be deriving an outward omnipotence from the precarity of their lives or the deludedness of their ideas about themselves; but who was even aware of how close to dying Baldwin came behind all of his harrowing charisma, how near to the broken heart his exuberance lived?

Dear Harlem, USA

Up on the rooftop of the tenement building where his family lives, Jimmy is 13, a loose and lucky looking frailty circling his aura like an epic chorus, and it's on that shabby rooftop, in the privacy of up-high, that Baldwin discusses suicide for the first time, a conversation among friends. An Afro-American casual scenario, an afternoon, a hypothetical death. *A whole history of disaster which is talked about very casually*, he might have remarked. Or maybe he was candid about his temptations to jump at the sun, the last temptations before he became a boy-preacher at 14, appeasing the preacher-father who raised him, and tapping into his gift for oratory, for thinking, for making words seem like perpetual streams of song and medicine, for uniting reason with a keen sense of the miraculous. Rebirth at the pulpit was one answer to a lust for death on the rooftop. The rooftop would have to become the altar of a refashioned mission. Harlem would have to let young Jimmy Baldwin save some souls, spare his own, play God to be human.

None but the Righteous

Eugene Worth, an allegorical name and mythic presence in James Baldwin's life and psyche, his best friend during the years he lived in the Village in New York before moving to Paris, his deepest and most phantom love, had leapt to his death from the George Washington Bridge in 1946. Eugene's suicide is what had made Baldwin both brave enough and defiant enough against the American vision of the pursuit of happiness to flee that hypocritical nation, before he too made such a doomed leap. A fugitive's desperate frenzy can turn into a lifetime of running and guilt; a ghost can become an unshakeable muse—and so it was with Jimmy's psychic relationship to Eugene. In almost every one of his novels there is a suicide or a kind of ego-death that mimics it. And half-confessed affections and afflictions haunt many of his characters, from the furtive lovers in *Giovanni's Room* to the open secrets in *Tell me How Long This Train's Been Gone* to the negro gospel singer murdered outside of a church in *Just Above My Head*, all of Jimmy's fictions favor the haunted, the hunted, the misunderstood, the ones impulsive enough to get to the top and look down. Eugene had confessed to Jimmy that he loved him before committing suicide. Jimmy, who was in love with Eugene but afraid of creating havoc, or having misread the confession as romance and not platonic, did not reciprocate the candor. And he wondered his whole life what might have happened if he had—he grieved for a lifetime. And every time a love affair of his ended or became tumultuous, thoughts of joining Eugene in an eternity of reconciliation were not far off. Eugene Worth became both muse and demon, voice of reason and madman, inspiration to live and temptation to die, hero and antagonist, in Baldwin's psychic life. Eugene joined Baldwin's biological father as a mystery that was never examined openly and therefore could never be fully solved or soothed. A taunting intimacy on the other side of time. Jimmy was accumulating an entourage of such phantoms.

Dear Fonny, Dear Beale Street,

In *If Beale Street Could Talk* a man is framed for rape by a begrudging police officer while his wife is pregnant. The couple is living in the Village when it happens, where Jimmy lived when Eugene died, and once Fonny, the girl's husband in the novel, is sent to jail, she has to move back in with her family in Harlem while they fight the case with the help of a modest Jewish lawyer. The strain on the families as they try to pay legal fees forces Fonny's father to start stealing from his job as a laborer on the docks. When he is caught and fired from the job, he disappears and is found later, having killed himself, in his car. The novel ends with Fonny still in jail, his girl about to give birth.

Dear Malcolm, Martin, Medgar,

Martyrs are as close to suicides as murders come. Assassinations are murders. The dirty generosity on the side of the state, to make us these perfect immortal double agents, doesn't make it any less devastating. These were Jimmy's friends. These were men he could relate to, men in the same prison of scrutiny and prophecy he was locked in, and they were all shot down in broad daylight. All James Baldwin got was that fat FBI file now for sale on

Amazon and a long toxic bout of nostalgia and inadequacy for surviving the raid and reaching some patient twilight where survival would have to mean more than just another day, where he would have to try to carry the torch. It must have felt crazy to be Jimmy in the 60s, like a trap being constantly evaded and reset. Maybe giving up, knowing that some part of him was not afraid to die, is what allowed him to live. *It was a time for suicide, or good works*, he suggested. Those were his choices. Such was the glamour of a Black American during that era.

Dear Jimmy,

How can we ask you to stay here with us a little longer, now that you're already gone? How we can act like this place was ever worthy of your fire. For every night of hysteria, was there a day of lucid, almost vicious, clarity that made you so happy you almost screamed your own name? Did it ever get easier to fall out of love, with people, with ideas, with your own deep infectious swoon? We all wanted to know your name and still do. We all needed you and still do. What was it like to have two fathers? Could anyone stand the pulpit without the whores and junkies? All that purity that was yours, all that merciless rendition. I'm glad you survived the West, at least for long enough to make this mongrel tribe of gods and monsters proud—you redeemed us in our own eyes. I still think about Julia in *Just Above My Head*. I still become her sometimes. Through her I am redeemed. And my lovers become Arthur and Hall and Giovanni. I think all Black people look ridiculous smoking cigarettes, like marionettes being dosed by invisible puppeteers, but your smoking had agency to it, intention. Maybe it was because you didn't want to be trapped here too long. Maybe it was your straining against immortality. Here you are, walking into the water more alive than all your survivors. Here you are with your fathers skipping and drinking brandy, naive again, beautiful. Here you are weeping and still teaching the blind to see. Here you are alone, tempted to take your own life again. Nobody knows your name again. The ego blames the heart again. Another man gone, another longing for reunion or numbness or unspeakable clarifications. Your voice is why we have Black notes. Black suicide notes, Black love notes, Black threats, Black overcoming, strange piano. You are the very tone of Black survival. Your music is one of the reasons that suicide seems so boring.

What made you want to die? What let you live?

Gods Were Never Decent

Let the record show that the American Dream is so many nightmares that some Americans dream of death for comfort; and what are we doing to make it better? The profiles that paint this man's life as some kind of literary fairy tale marred only by the political climate, are lies. Gay and Black and famous and beautiful and walking over the edge every day, James Baldwin longed to leave this world as much as he worked to save it from evils like race prejudice, homophobia, and capitalism—let the myth of the jovial cultural servant die at last, that he may live.

Excerpt from the play *God's Suicide*

by Harmony Holiday © 2021

Scene I

Jimmy sits in a sun-drenched single room in his St. Paul de Vence home, finger pads pressed together to make the skeleton of a pyramid, a prayer pierced by sheer sunlight, and he's somewhere between lament and rant. He's crying silently and breaks the triangle to wipe his eyes, sip his drink, and then inhale from the burning cigarette in the ashtray. There's a typewriter set with pages from a half-written letter. He's writing the first pages of this script, a letter to his best friend Eugene Worth, who committed suicide in 1946 by jumping in the East River, the leap that sent Jimmy from Harlem, New York to Paris, afraid for his own life, afraid he would be next to jump. The torment of mourning and recollections mingles with the ecstatic of making contact with a loved one in the spirit world and there's a warmth and intimacy in each gesture in the room and coming from Jimmy a sense of reluctant playfulness. He's sort of dancing with the transcript pressed against his own heart. A slow dance. There's a phonograph in the room and he perches over it and places the needle to the spine of some vinyl. The music of a jazz pavane comes on and the lane of his voice lights up.

Preface to first monolog (Jimmy musing to himself)

My name is James Baldwin. My name is James Baldwin. I'm James Arthur Baldwin. My friends call me Jimmy. I wanna bring some of them here to the table with me. I want to be joined by the people who know my name. The first friend who knew my whole name died when he was 24 and I was 22.

JB: Eugene, was my friend, my best friend! Sometimes my only friend. My brother, my blood. Traitor! Hero! I don't know anymore. **They're killing all my friends.** Somehow I respect you more for getting to yourself first. But I'm frightened by the light I imagine over there, the glaring release, how often I wanna leave this silly planet. How I want to just leave and abandon every groping for meaning that is the meaning of my life, my time here. I'm here to luxuriate in my own depletion, to give myself away as idea after idea, one of the last poets of love and I hate myself many nights and I hate this place, these people, as much as I love them I fantasize about murder too and the only way to do it is to yourself.

But I am their servant. I can't leave until they want me dead or wear me out, now I'm their emblem of beautiful suffering. Eugene you are miraculous. I'm acting alive to witness you as miracles from here on. Stay with me. I don't wanna let mamma down, or David, or Mary, or Barbara, or Lorraine. I don't want Daddy to call me weak even as he is busy luxuriating in his own depletion. I finally understood, picturing you in that icy river, that these are acts of love. Sudden departures are prayers. And mine may never be answered but my will visits that water too, is seduced or deluded by some endless urge to relapse and leap over the filthy bridge between life and living, to be a child of nature again in the womb of nowhere. I'm pathologically romantic and I've had to tell myself your death is a confession of love. How sick is that? I'm a sick man. But weren't we in love?

Credits

Writer/director Harmony Holiday

James Baldwin played by Larry Powell

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