

TELL ME HOW LONG THE TRAIN'S BEEN GONE¹

A Letter to James Baldwin on the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of His Passing

*Anguish has many days and styles.*²

I. MANY THOUSANDS GONE

It's a typical mid-October morning in the Northeast: a grizzle-powder sky whose cloud cover is rent by brief bursts of sun that seem almost cliché in their force and divinity. I am traveling on Amtrak, from south-central Pennsylvania to New York City, rereading the two essays collected in *The Fire Next Time*, the second of which was first published fifty years ago in November 1962. You were thirty-eight and I had just turned three.

During the autumn of that same year, federal marshals were deployed to protect James Meredith, the first black student to register at and attend Ole Miss³. By mid-October, the tension of American-Soviet relations brought this country to the edge of a nuclear showdown in Cuba. In November, the UN formally condemned apartheid in South Africa, though it took thirty-plus years to formally end that modern-era slavery after Resolution 1761 was passed.

So many different kinds of wars, and so many thousands gone:

To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.⁴

I live in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, eight miles from the Mason-Dixon Line, a boundary that has defined this country much too long. On this northbound train, I contemplate our American past and the history in which we have elected to burn instead of drown, a history from whose ashes we may yet rise, though it seems more and more unlikely: The many millions gone because of the genocide that predicated this country's founding, a genocide that is often not discussed. How we ignore the condition and wisdom of indigenous people, who are sequestered on reservations or in prisons, working to preserve their languages and customs in the face of poverty, addiction, crime, and injustice⁵. Our dependence on petroleum-based products—the gas that propels our cars, the oil that heats most homes, and all the chemicals injected into the soil, water, and air to eradicate insects, weeds, and fungus from our food, trees, yards, workplaces, and homes—has resulted in fire *this* time: drought, conflagration, and record heat waves; the withering of this nation's corn and the burning of almost nine million acres, the ongoing disease and death from the continued combustion of fuel and the exposure to toxins. Yet the presidential and vice presidential candidates⁶ have not uttered, during three debates, one solitary word about the

¹ The title of this essay and its segments derive from titles of novels and essays by James Baldwin.

² "Here Be Dragons," from *The Price of the Ticket. Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985* (St. Martin's, 1985), p. 683.

³ And fifty years after the "integration" of Ole Miss, on the eve of Barack Obama's re-election, over 500 Ole Miss students gathered to protest his election, chanting racial slurs.

⁴ *The Fire Next Time* (Dial Press, 1963), p. 95.

⁵ In 2009, 58 percent of the 760,216 adults (truly *many* thousands) incarcerated in U.S. prisons were people of color.

⁶ One of whom has fulfilled Bobby Kennedy's declaration that a black man "can become President in forty years" (*Ibid*, p. 108).

steady warming of the planet and the subsequent rise in sea levels, an omission that is not truly astonishing, given the collective amnesia that seems to have our citizens in its grip. The candidates' arguments about how many "green jobs" ("wind jobs," in Romneyspeak, which sounds vaguely pornographic) were lost or won during the last four years replace any reference to—never mind an intelligent conversation about—global warming. Their talk about "foreign policy" omitted any mention of the irreversible pressure being exerted on the world's dwindling resources, which are being jealously contested, regardless of the excuses we've been given or tell ourselves as to why we are at war now and have been for ten years and counting, and why a war with Iran might have even been considered by those seeking political office. These resources are located, of course, in some of the very same places where slavery disfigured human communities and ecosystems and where colonialism left a legacy of disgrace that have disenfranchised and marginalized the brown people who now extract, package, and deliver these resources without any real benefit to themselves (including their inability to procure at a reasonable price, if at all, said resources for their own use).

The candidates pretend to be talking about class—suddenly, in fact, the middle class is de rigeur—but what they are really talking about is a way to resuscitate the invented past of the 1950s, which somehow has become chic in its retro-ness.

Lest we forget: the 1950s was the path most followed to where we now reside. Those big cars, that big hair, the bigger, better refrigerator and all the emphasis on enormity, has led us to bigger vehicles, empty McMansions, big-box stores, a megaplex culture that is, well, growing ever bigger.

II. ANOTHER COUNTRY

On the train home to Pennsylvania from New York, I consider that twenty-five years ago, I pulled *The Fire Next Time* off my father's shelf (how it came to be there and why I brought it home with me is another story). If I could stop the train, I would read it aloud to all who are aboard, though what I really want to do is to flip a switch and hear your voice, a voice no one ever forgets once it's broadcast, telling us that

the threat of universal extinction hanging over all the world today... changes, totally and forever, the nature of reality and brings into devastating question the true meaning of man's history. We human beings now have the power to exterminate ourselves; this seems to be the entire sum of our achievement. We have taken this journey and arrived at this place in God's name.⁷

The train, one of the Keystone line's fleet, meanders from Manhattan's Pennsylvania Station, past Newark, where my immigrant grandparents settled after fleeing the pogroms of czarist Russia, and where both my parents were born...it rattles into Trenton, on whose bridge is visible a sign declaring that Trenton Makes/The World Takes...it chugs through the urban wilds of New Jersey (there a dubious wetland with oily puddles and bridges in the distance)...it pulls into, and just as rapidly out of, the glass and steel of Philadelphia...it trundles past North Philly,

⁷ Ibid, pp. 70-71.

graffiti splashed on defunct walls, the row houses in the distance looking as if they might collapse if any weight, inside or out, were added to them...it stops at the Chester County towns of Exton, Downingtown, Coatesville, Parkesburg, their British names reminding us of that eternal tie to the imperialists from whom America severed herself, only to remake herself in their image...it wends through the Pennsylvania Dutch farmland outside Lancaster (there a horse-pulled plow, its driver straw hatted, reminding us of how we might live), then twists into Mt. Joy, Elizabethtown, and, finally, for me, Middletown, one stop prior to the train's Harrisburg terminus.

"How long," I ask the conductor, a man in his late fifties, "have you been working for Amtrak?"

We are standing in the vestibule (how I love seeing that word on the signs that tell us not to stand in it), early-afternoon sun pouring into the train car.

"Sixteen and a half years," he says. "I was just thinking about that, about how long I've worked here."

"Is it a good job?" I ask. Recently, because I've been traveling frequently by train, I've started to daydream about what it might be like to work as a conductor or, even, an engineer (writers often spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about things that are either impractical or have nothing obvious to do with writing).

"If it lasts," he says, launching into an explanation of how, if Romney is elected, Amtrak will disappear. "But this country is already gone," he tells me as I step off the train in Middletown, a mere five miles from the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant.

III. THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN

You understood the brink of already gone on which America stood in the early sixties. White people, you explained to your nephew in the first part of *The Fire Next Time*,

are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but...people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity.⁸

Readers who disagree might consider why Barack Obama distanced himself from the Reverend Jeremiah Wright (whose "chickens-come-home-to-roost" phrasing echoes a speech by Malcolm X), or why our black president cannot afford to appear angry when he debates Mitt Romney, whose aggression in the first debate is an attribute that liberal pundits, spin doctors, and many Democrats wished to see emulated by President Obama. Aside from the fact that Obama thinks

⁸ Ibid, pp. 22-23.

before he speaks⁹, this country is not ready, nor has it ever been ready, for black (or brown¹⁰) anger. This is made clear by a handful of the people who paid a high price for stirring revolt when they made their rage public: Medgar Evers, Malcom X, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Angela Davis, Leonard Peltier, Anna Mae Aquash. To this list, we must add Martin Luther King, Jr., whose insistence on nonviolence relied on the idea that violence was *possible* if change did not occur.

Consider, too, *your* solution, so elegantly stated, which we have failed to embrace:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.¹¹

After the first presidential debate, I was immobilized by the reaction of the majority, whose representatives (which is now everyone who uses Facebook and Twitter) proclaimed Romney the winner. Obama had failed the liberal community. And even though I recognized the practiced rhetoric of a man who’s been living in the White House¹², I had found him gracious, studied, articulate; he was taking notes, paying attention—attending—and listening. Some of the pundits described him as *presidential*, a word that is flatly unimaginative given that Obama *is* the president.

A good friend, though disappointed by the president’s subdued affect during the first debate, called Obama “the adult in the room,” meaning, in part, that he was the man we had both elected and celebrated because we believed—and still want to believe, in spite of our disenchantment with the sum of Obama’s agency—that he understands love as a quest that involves taking risks and subsequently growing. Another friend told me that the altitude in Denver had winded Obama, literally, which was a plausible explanation for his poor performance, one I even repeated to others, who nodded as I offered this observation, needing, perhaps, as I did, the safety of that excuse, one that vindicated the president, if only for the briefest of moments, akin in its lukewarmth to noting that Obama has supported the development of Arctic drilling but has also encouraged the growth of alternative energy. During a discussion of the first debate in one of my creative writing classes, a young black graduate student from Texas put it bluntly: “Okay, I’ll play the race card,” she said. “He can’t afford to lose his temper.”

I concede that once everyone started criticizing Obama, I, too, wanted him to inhabit the role of the archetypal President and just say *No* to Romney, to put his money where his mouth is (“being a leader means saying no”); to call on Jim Lehrer to be mad as hell and not take it

⁹ And, who is, according to a woman who first met young Barack when he lived in Indonesia with his mother, well described by the Indonesian word *halus*, which means “polite, refined, or courteous” (www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/magazine/mag-24Obama-t.html?pagewanted=all).

¹⁰ Or for that matter, white anger that responds to injustice: think John Brown, the Weather Underground, the Chicago Seven, students at Kent State, etcetera.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 109.

¹² A dwelling, it is germane to remember, that was constructed by slaves, Freeman, and immigrants unprotected by citizenship.

anymore, stand up and moderate or side out and rotate; to remind the former governor of Massachusetts that he *was* in the room with the Commander in Chief of the United States of America, and have you forgotten that it's *rude* to interrupt? But if I extend that characterization's behavior to its logical conclusion, I become uncomfortable and dislike the man Obama would have to be if he assumed the persona of such a mask. I'm relieved and grateful that our president is intelligent and charismatic, that he is a son raised by a single mother and her parents, that he is a brother to a sister, a father of daughters, that perhaps because of the women whose universe he inhabits and who inhabit his, he knows that macho has no currency and therefore doesn't need to act belligerently, that he is "secure in his manhood / 'cause he's a real man," as the Salt-N-Pepa song goes.

I am discomfited that no one is asking Romney why he can't be a polite, truth-telling white man.

And I know, too, that if you were still here, you'd likely have something to say about composure and politesse and, maybe too, something about the real and psychic emasculation perpetrated on men who, regardless of color, social standing, religion, or culture dare step out of their proscribed roles.

The word *composure* may be critical to understanding why Obama walks the color line with such a cool reserve these almost 150 years after Emancipation, these fifty years after the publication of one of your most prescient essays, these twenty-five years after the painful halt of all those many, many words you composed in your fierce and lucid love letters to America.

Composed: there it is. *Poser* means to place, ergo *compose* is to place *with*. To *compose* oneself, therefore, is to place yourself with your self. To be composed is to be in a state of composure—calm and *in control* of the self—to watch yourself as others see you, to be constantly self-conscious of the humanity mirror and how you are reflected, refracted, or, sometimes, made invisible, in those numerous glasses. To know one's place because one knows the terrible consequences that are possible should one dare to appear aggressive, militant, to swear to fight injustice "by any means necessary."

IV. HERE BE DRAGONS

I am lucky to dwell in a place where I can hear, from an acceptable proximity, the sound of freight trains passing in the afternoon and evening. But although millions of tourists visit this town, coming in droves of cars and charter buses, arriving even during a period of economic crisis when gas is more often than not closer to four dollars a gallon, passenger trains do not come to Gettysburg. Even the railroad—perhaps because the laying of rails was such a part of American empire making whose price included theft, rape, betrayal, and murder—is subject to time, which, you point out,

catches up with kingdoms and crushes them, gets its teeth into doctrines and rends them; time reveals the foundations on which any kingdom rests, and eats at those foundations, and it destroys doctrines by proving them to be untrue.¹³

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 65.

To leave south-central Pennsylvania requires driving: either all the way to one's destination, or to a bus, plane, or train. Thus I motor toward the capitol city of Harrisburg, glimpse the reactors at Three Mile Island as I cross the Susquehanna River, park my car, and wait for the train on a platform in Middletown, a community of some nine-thousand plus citizens. But what was here before Karns Foods, the 7-11, Alma's House of Flowers & Gifts, the Brownstone Café, the Victorian houses with For Rent and For Sale signs in front?

This place was—once, and not that long ago—home to the Susquehannock Nation. Here the Native peoples fished and planted, loved and birthed and were buried. Here they were dislodged and unsettled by the Scotch-Irish, Scottish Presbyterian exiles fleeing religious persecution. Here a supply depot replenished soldiers of the Revolutionary Army. Here were writ in 1774 the *Resolves of Independence*, later incorporated into the *Declaration of Independence*. Here the Scotch-Irish abandoned their farmland and houses in search of new homes further west, and here came the German immigrants. Here were built a foundry, flour and saw mills, blast furnaces. Here came the nuclear power plant, which melted down and here leaked its poison. Here there is a stop on the Keystone line operated by Amtrak. Here there is no real station. But here the parking is free. And here are we who wait for the train, waiting still for time to rend the kingdom that has settled here.

V. STRANGER IN THE VILLAGE

From the window of this train headed from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg, I watch the sun rise. A metallic light whispers into the mist, out of which emerges the rust and bronze of late autumn. Amtrak's Pennsylvania line travels across the Pittsburgh and Westmoreland coalfields, through wooded hills flanking the Conemaugh River, and along the Horseshoe Curve, a feat of engineering in the Alleghenies that warrants a long announcement from the conductor, who takes on the tone of an airline pilot and points out the historic landmark upon which this train ambles. To journey on horseback between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, we learn, required four, sometimes more, weeks. With the advent of the locomotive and the construction in the 1830s of the Portage Railway and Canal System, travel time was reduced to four days. The Horseshoe Curve—a three-track, 3,485-foot curve with a 2 percent grade—was completed in 1854 by 450 Irish laborers, brought to Pennsylvania from County Cork, who spent three years moving the mountain using picks, shovels, handcarts, wheelbarrows, mules, and black powder. Today the trip takes seven and a half hours by train, with a thirty-minute layover in Harrisburg.

Though I've lived many places—from the Northeast, to the West Coast, and abroad—I've never seen this particular countryside. America's industrial heart once pumped here, arresting by the 1950s, and leaving in its wake the acid mine drainage that contaminated the Kiski-Conemaugh watershed with heavy metals, to the point of rendering many streams uninhabitable for native fish.¹⁴ The train passes GenOne Energy's Conemaugh Generating Plant, a coal-powered station in New Florence that was fined \$5 million in April 2011 for over 8,600 violations of the Clean Water Act. As I stare at the plant, whose cooling towers call to mind those of a nuclear power facility, I can't help but recall this quiet yet powerful moment from your

¹⁴ Kiski, for the Kiskiminetas River, a tributary of the Allegheny, the origin of whose name is unclear, but which may mean "make daylight" or "cut spirit," and Conemaugh, which means "otter."

essay: “It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *Whoever debases others is debasing himself*. That is not a mystical statement, but a most realistic one.”¹⁵

And yet we continue, practically unabated, to debase not only one another, but every other living creature with whom we share water, earth, and air. The weather report is calling for the perfect storm to slam into the East Coast; this hurricane-cyclone, whose name will be Sandy, shall remind us, as a friend once put it about a storm that delayed her travel for two days, “who’s really in charge.” Afterward, the presidential candidates will still not bring climate change to the fore of their campaigns, despite the fact that 70 percent of Americans believe that human activity causes it. In a rare moment of selflessness, the mayor of New York will endorse Obama as the one candidate most likely to address global warming.

I’m not sure anymore what is worse, this nonstop indulgence of selfishness that has led to the degradation of the planet, or our refusal to see that

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, imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is 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 to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us.¹⁶

VI. THE PRICE OF THE TICKET

Meanwhile, as if the anxiety of this election season, whose October surprise was a super storm that will cost upwards of \$50 billion, is not enough, we can turn our attention to, say, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Iran. Or, perhaps, to Israel, Lebanon, or Syria. Brown people everywhere are in a state of uprising and upheaval. And yet, though Obama promised to listen to our enemies, for the most part, Americans have not really invested much time or energy in understanding how enough might be enough, or that Western ostentatiousness might be the match that has caused the fire this time.

As you point out in the prescient heart of *The Fire Next Time*:

“White Christians have also forgotten several elementary historical details. They have forgotten that the religion that is now identified with their virtue and their power...came out of a rocky piece of ground in what is now known as the Middle East....The energy that was buried with the rise of the Christian nations must come back into the world; nothing can prevent it. Many of us, I think, both long

¹⁵ *Fire*, p. 97.

¹⁶ *Fire*, pp. 105-106.

to see this happen and are terrified of it, for though this transformation contains the hope of liberation, it also imposes a necessity for great change. But in order to deal with the untapped and dormant force of the previously subjugated, in order to survive as a human, moving, moral weight in the world, America and all the Western nations will be forced to reexamine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long.

“The white man’s Heaven,” sings a Black Muslim minister, “is the black man’s Hell.” One may object—possibly—that this puts the matter somewhat too simply, but the song is true, and it has been true for as long as white men have ruled the world. The Africans put it another way: When the white man came to Africa, the white man had the Bible and the African had the land, but now it is the white man who is being, reluctantly and bloodily, separated from the land, and the African who is still attempting to digest or to vomit up the Bible. The struggle, therefore, that now begins in the world is extremely complex, involving the historical role of Christianity in the realm of power—that is, politics—and in the realm of morals. In the realm of power, Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels. This particular true faith, moreover, is more deeply concerned about the soul than it is about the body, to which fact the flesh (and the corpses) of countless infidels bears witness. It goes without saying, then, that whoever questions the authority of the true faith also contests the right of the nations that hold this faith to rule over him—contests, in short, their title to his land...The Christian church itself—again, as distinguished from some of its ministers—sanctified and rejoiced in conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of the Western populations, was proof of the favor of God. God had come a long way from desert—but then so had Allah, though in a very different direction. God, going north, and rising on the wings of power, had become white, and Allah, out of power, and on the dark side of Heaven, had become—for all practical purposes, anyway—black. This, in the realm of morals, Christianity has been, at best, ambivalent. Even leaving out of account the remarkable arrogance that assumed that the ways and morals of others were inferior to those of Christians, and that they therefore had every right, and could use any means, to change them, the collision between cultures—and the schizophrenia in the mind of Christendom—had rendered the domain of morals as chartless as the sea once was, and as treacherous as the sea still is. It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being...must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of him.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Fire*, pp. 58-61.

Brief bio:

Kim Dana Kupperman is doing all she can to locate the parallel universe where she exists with no e-mail and few demands, naps every day in a sun-filled room with her cat and dog, requires no electricity or petroleum-based products, and subsists solely on pomegranate seeds, ginger cookies, and fresh air. In this universe, however, she is the founder of Welcome Table Press, which takes its name from the title of an unfinished play by James Baldwin, and is a nonprofit, independent press, devoted to publishing and celebrating the essay, in all its forms. In her dream of the welcome table, James Baldwin presides, and guests include Josephine Baker, Django Reinhardt, Black Elk, Sei Shonagon, Virginia Woolf, the prophet Deborah, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Henrik Ibsen, Malcolm X, Susan Sontag, Thomas Paine, Rachel Carson, Julia Child, and anyone else, alive in flesh or words, who ever had a good idea about how to live here on Earth.