

Praise-Song for James Baldwin

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PRAISE-SONG FOR JAMES BALDWIN

We stare into the near future, like the hurt and
the dying often do, without proclamation.
We see your summons to text and action as a
special healing, a twin annulment of continuing injury.
When the clarity of self-acknowledgement stretches
its wisdom, a numinous light across a life,
we hear your crisp definitions of your clear candor
catch and hook our scattershot attention,
as if to tell us that your way of gouging reality
is your morning at sea, fresh but edged by salt.

Consider America! In part, yours by right of
seized labour, dispossession, and coffle-old money
you never once had in hand because all that was
bankable was pocketed by allowed thieves.
Again, consider America, where its central dream,
even at night, is as white and out of reach
as sky, and where liberty is on everybody's lips
but equality is seldom ever mentioned,
gospelled only in those voices at the Capitol
gates, led there by the ancestors, time and again!

You always had an accurate, cutting bead on sophistry,
a straight axe for cant and obfuscation.
Your quick slices across the broad back of *if*, *but*,
and *perhaps*, all the impossibilities
of stasis that bind us to thralldom, have been the
heralding, swift fires of our time.
Never one for the crusade of emblems and aimless
philosophies, you took to fierce tenderness
like a call to community, wherever it was
threatened by neglect and the emperors of discard.

Once you said that miasmal Europe was the spout
that spewed the suffering of modern slavery
in our faces (we make over your words, but not your

intended sense or meaning). Expansion is as expansion does, and Europe's pillage and suction have done only Europe good and plenty and puffed it with surplus, spent on wars, genocidal compulsion, and on bankrupt morality. And again you said: so it goes in America, with its hubris and practised, imperial strut.

We tend to sing our praise-songs only when those we celebrate have moved well beyond our praise (and even these words are abjectly late), but suffice it to say that they are more for us than we care to know, for those who whistle in exile, who needle the night into morning, the ignored at the drag-end of the discouraging dream, the deprived hurling, their leftover hope at drift. And that won't do! Better your own songs than merely our own that ask for closure.