

CREATIVE NONFICTION

The Fire Inside

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Abstract

In this semi-biographical short story, the relationship between James Baldwin and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and its culmination in their epic confrontation in New York City on 24 May 1963, is portrayed through the lens of an unidentified fictive narrator. In the midst of heightened racial tensions, Baldwin has been tasked with bringing together a delegation of prominent Black US personalities to meet with the Attorney General and share their views on the measures necessary to combat segregation and racism. The meeting has barely begun before the naivety of the administration's view of the national situation becomes clear, and the atmosphere in the room grows increasingly strained. "The Fire Inside" has never before appeared in print. An earlier version of the story was broadcast by Swedish Radio on 29 November 2019.

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We tried to cleave the fire. There is, we said, a fire that burns because we need it, a fire humans learned to control, by necessity, back in the early days, when they still dressed in animal pelts. There is, too, another fire, which has always lived its own life, which has transformed buildings, cities, civilizations; anything that stands in its way is turned into gray and white fields of ash. We tried to cleave the fire in order to understand it. There is, lastly, a fire that lives inside us, which glows in the spark of life, and erupts when dreams are cut short.

This is the fire that horrifies them now, the fire they describe as looting and destruction, as barbaric violence unfolding in our streets. When people talk about the fire it's always this fire they associate with us, with the Black Americans, the Negroes, who exist nowhere else in the world. Everyone is asking when and where it will erupt next time.

"It doesn't matter what you say about the violence," Jimmy had noted, commenting on the most recent uprisings, which he had prophetically foretold would break out in Birmingham. The violence exists, regardless of our thoughts on it. As long as there is a will to live in this world haunted by the nightmare of race, it will always erupt.

Jimmy was not alone in putting words to our experiences, but when he spoke nobody was left unmoved. This was true for both sides of the color line, not just for us. He was the first person to succeed in getting under the skin of the white liberal, forcing him into his own; nobody else had made them see what it means to be a citizen of the United States.

Jimmy always had white friends. Without them, he wouldn't be the person he's become: the author James Baldwin. We know this, those of us who go way back with him, all the way back to his childhood when his teacher was a woman named Bill, those of us who watched him mingle with artists and other bohemians at *The Calypso in the Village*, before he went to Paris and finished his first novel. It was good to have him back. He knew that we were at the cusp of an era that would come to define the future of the United States.

"Who are the Negroes other Negroes listen to?" Bobby Kennedy had asked.

Jimmy had the answer to Bobby's question. They would listen to no politician; they would listen only to people who could put words to our experiences for the simple reason of having, themselves, deep knowledge of them. The crucial thing was knowing how to speak honestly and straightforwardly about things that confused them. And it was those people who the Attorney General wanted to invite to a gathering. He wished to hear what was on our minds, what we wanted to achieve with the protests.

It all came together with lightning speed. When Jimmy asked for my opinion the decision to hold the meeting had already been made. If there is one thing I've learned from all these years of knowing Jimmy, it's to grasp the moment when it arrives.

"I guess it can't hurt," I said and thought about everything Kennedy had done to get James Meredith into the university, despite how badly they'd handled the situation with troops meant to quell the protests that broke out at Ole Miss. But I also thought about the President's call to Coretta, and their efforts to free Martin from

jail. If there is anyone among the obtuse white liberals who can help make America what America must become, it is him.

Jimmy laughed at my words, which I had borrowed from his most recent book.

“So you’ve read *The Fire* now?”

“Of course,” I nodded, bashful.

In truth I had only had time to page through it. I liked the ending, the idea that the price the whites must pay for their own liberation is our full liberation. I wasn’t saying that Kennedy had been convincing in his fight for civil rights—only that there was nobody else.

“The total liberation of the Blacks is an exceedingly high price to pay for he who has built his whole identity on being white,” Jimmy replied; he had no delusions that progress would come overnight.

This was what made him so unique; he had the ability to see things from their point of view, and not just from the point of view of what would, sooner or later, become inevitable. And for them, our rights were a crime against the natural order, as if the sun were to shine from a starry sky. Perhaps this was the reason he always hesitated when I grew too optimistic. I did not understand how frightening this upheaval of the universe would appear.

“But if not even the Attorney General can push new laws through Congress,” I asked, “who can?”

For some reason there was nevertheless a hopeful tone to his voice when we met up. Once we’d sat down there was no doubt in him that we were in the midst of an event that would determine our country’s future. The Attorney General wanted to hear our thoughts, and what he heard were things he was not prepared to hear.

The time for reforms had passed. This was the problem with the administration: they had no grasp of the urgency of the situation we were in. Even if they understood the scale of the problem of segregation, all they wanted to discuss was how much time it would take to change the structures.

I arrived a little before the others, but they let me in while they prepared the buffet. I knew that Jimmy had met Bobby a few times before; he’d told me about a perverted White House feast honoring Nobel laureates from the Western Hemisphere. That’s what Jimmy was like, he was able to gain the trust of any scene that had even an ounce of openness. At the same time he was hard, philosophical, never engaged in ad hominem attacks. It was the ideas at the core of the inequality that interested him, not the person.

“It’s up to you,” he’d told a journalist who interviewed him. “As long as you think you’re white there’s no hope for you. Because as long as you think you’re white I’m going to be forced to think I’m Black.”

This was what made him so beloved and respected, but also feared and hated. James Baldwin’s name was on everyone’s lips at this point. His recent books were displayed in bookshops all across the world, and his face was everywhere, in magazines, on posters, and in the televised debates he took part in, where he often outdid philosophers and pundits with his fiery tongue. And yet, he was what he’d always been: late.

Jimmy was known for it. He was always late to meetings, it didn't matter who he was joining. During this period he had appearances and talks almost every day. He was even late to the breakfast meeting at the Attorney General's house before the gathering. After just two hours of sleep that night he'd missed his flight to Virginia, or maybe it was the plane that had been delayed.

In any case, it was a truncated breakfast with Kennedy at Hickory Hill in McLean. Half an hour. They served poached eggs and coffee and all seven children were seated at the table along with their parents, chewing on pieces of bacon. Bobby took a fork and scraped what Jimmy didn't touch on his plate onto the plate of one of his daughters. After breakfast Ethel, who was pregnant, went upstairs to rest. The Attorney General had to run to another meeting.

"My driver is already waiting in the car," he said and took one last sip of coffee.

Before leaving he asked Jimmy if he'd give his autograph to the maid who was clearing the table. She was overcome at such a thoughtful suggestion. The most recent issue of *Time*, with Jimmy on the cover, was upstairs. Bobby proposed that he sign the cover. Evidently he had read Jimmy's essay, which was on the nightstand along with *Time*. Though he'd studied up for their breakfast get-together there was no time to get to the details. Just a short conversation about the meeting Jimmy had had with the Nation of Islam. Nevertheless, what they did get into was very interesting from Bobby's perspective, and he looked forward to the gathering with the delegates.

I don't know that we were looking forward to it in the same way. In truth it was a bit unclear what the purpose of it all was. Formally, we'd been invited to a luncheon, but of course the Attorney General would want something concrete from it. He'd always been a pragmatic person. He wanted to know how to stop the violence. The situation was getting to be untenable. Especially after the events in Birmingham. Chaotic.

I'd walked past 24 Central Park South many times, never knowing who the owners of the building were. The grand apartment had a view of the park. Some days you could see through the foliage of the trees, and behind the noise from the traffic on the street down below you could hear the sounds of children playing in the distance. Despite the lack of advance planning for the gathering a good number of the invitees had made it, several of them celebrities: Lena Horne, Lorraine Hansberry, Harry Belafonte. Jimmy turned up with his brother. But there were people like me there too, and others who didn't say much. At one point there had been murmurs about Dr. King coming, but he was busy with his work in Chicago; in fact, he was quite skeptical of Kennedy's intentions. He had dispatched his counsel and attorney.

Among the attendees was Jerome Smith, who was known for his zealous nonviolent resistance. Even though he'd been beaten up by the cops—and he stuttered when he talked about the attack he'd suffered in McComb, where a white mob almost took his life with brass knuckles—he continued to defend the principle of nonviolence. Some people called him Gandhi II. He'd spent his whole life arguing

against those who believed violence would ultimately be inevitable in the struggle to end white oppression.

In other words, we were there because the frustrated Black masses listened to us rather than the politicians of the country. What could we say? How could we encourage a new attitude from the politicians?

First, we said nothing.

Maybe that's why Bobby and his adviser started talking about all the things they'd done for us. It didn't impress anyone. In fact, there was raucous laughter when he started listing the measures he'd passed. We'd heard this talk many times before, and if there was a point to the meeting it was not for us to give our blessing to their planned reforms.

Maybe the fire had stopped burning. In Birmingham the smoke had dissipated. But it was just a matter of time before the protests would erupt again, either there or elsewhere in the United States. It wasn't just cars that were on fire—there were reports of whole busses ablaze with flames like dragon tongues as they approached the station where Klansmen were waiting with clubs and weapons. Not in a hundred years had the military been called in to quell the uprisings that spread from the outskirts to the cities' incensed interiors. Not even sites of worship were safe from reactionaries, from persecution and acts of revenge. It would only get worse, but Kennedy did not understand this.

A buffet table was set in the salon with wild salmon, green salad, and mushroom-stuffed potato croquettes. Already at this point, the chasm was evident. On the walls hung framed black-and-white photographs of some distant Swedish relative of the family, who had been a missionary at the Zambezi River in South Rhodesia.

We knew from the outset that the Attorney General didn't intend to arrange a group sing or anything like that. Bobby was, after all, known for his critique of the segregationists' stubborn resistance to Black students at the universities. And there were many other things he'd done that indicated good will and good intentions. Few politicians were his equals on this topic. In other words, if there was anyone who could do something for us, it would be him.

That's why Jimmy had agreed to arrange this delegation. But the problem was that Bobby had not understood the depths of the experiences that were at the center of the conflict; had not understood the frustration, why so many had found their way to the radical separatists, the Black Muslims. He had no sense whatsoever that forceful action from the country's leaders was necessary, that vague promises of political change did not cut it.

"You," Jerome suddenly said, "have no idea what the trouble is."

That much was clear from the newspaper reports that followed the event. At this point, the Attorney General proclaimed that as the grandson of Irishmen and Catholics, he understood very well the feeling of being oppressed. He said that his father and his grandparents had endured discrimination themselves, and not only in the United States; the British had once viewed them as "white monkeys," so he could very well understand, he said, the despair that was spreading among the

Blacks. Bobby even tried to instill a sense of hope by saying that we might have a Black president in this country—forty years from now.

“There you go, the problem distilled,” Jimmy flashed. “We’ve been here for far longer than three generations, and we did not arrive out of our own free will. But while your family is at the top, we are still crawling in the gutter.”

Bobby attempted to preserve the friendly atmosphere with a speech about the efforts the Justice Department had made in Black voting rights cases. It was soon after that things derailed. There we were, once again having to explain “the problem.” Before anybody could start talking, Jerome said that he felt physically nauseated just having to be in the same room as Kennedy. The minister listened while his press secretary crunched a croquette between his teeth. Then he repeated, almost like a mantra, that “these things take time.” In that moment it was clear that they still lived in another world, and that nothing would change.

“We don’t have that time anymore,” Jerome interrupted and set the tone for the rest of the meeting. “Can’t you see that? Because I’m close to the moment where I’m ready to take up a gun.”

Jerome’s proclamation shocked everyone, not just the Attorney General and his advisers, who started shifting anxiously.

“When I pull the trigger you can kiss it goodbye.”

It was evident that Bobby was upset. He took it personally. So he turned his back to Jerome in the hopes that the other members of the delegation would provide him with a more courteous response to the question they had gathered to discuss. This, he did not get. Instead, someone, I can’t remember who, though it might have been Lorraine, said:

“I can’t see why I should tell my children to fight for democracy when it’s in the name of democracy they are being chased by police dogs, when it’s in the name of democracy firefighters set off their water cannons to quell the uprisings, though all they did was walk peacefully in the streets to make use of their democratic rights. And here you are, beating your chest for having called in the military to deal with the warzone that exists down there.”

The others started fidgeting but they kept quiet because they saw the Attorney General’s face flushing. Jimmy held off on saying anything, he just listened very carefully. But at one point he asked Jerome if he would fight for the United States in Cuba.

“Never,” he responded. “*Never, never.*”

Bobby, who had lost a brother in World War II, was shocked into silence. He could not understand this lack of patriotism, but none of us had any sympathy for his reaction.

“If there is anybody you should listen to in here, it is this man,” Lorraine said and pointed at Jerome.

Essentially, we were all in agreement: what Jerome had said could not be dismissed as barbarism. The revolts were not just about the bomb attacks on Dr. King and his brother. Nor can they be explained by pointing to the brutal police torture

of a twelve-year-old boy, which had caused his five-year-old sister to suffer a psychosis.

The worst part of it was the calculated indifference. The silence of the large, innocent masses, as though they were numb to these kinds of events, as though everything was the way it should be, inevitable. It wasn't just in the South that people had begun to seek out the radical groups, not just there the separatists rattled guns in their hideouts. It was not just the South that had groups of people who had ceased putting their faith in this talk of reforms long ago, generations ago, groups that did not see how the authorities, even if they had the support of J. Edgar Hoover, could guarantee their safety—all over the country, Blacks had grown tired of symbolic action.

“What is needed is a change in attitude, a moral commitment the president must pioneer, a miracle.”

It didn't matter how the others tried to translate Jerome's fury into language the Attorney General could process—he'd already stopped listening. This was clear in the days that followed the meeting, when he made a statement to the *New York Times*.

“None of them had the slightest understanding of the meaning of political process. They don't even know what laws we have in this country. They don't know what the facts are. You can't talk to people like that. All you get is emotion, hysteria—they stood up and orated—they cursed—some of them wept and left the room.”

I've never seen Jimmy as upset as he was when he read the newspaper reports.

“Instead of taking responsibility, instead of initiating true change, he reduced us to a group of ungrateful hysterics.”

I didn't quite know what to say, so I placed my hand on his arm and watched my own fingertips dance nervously like a butterfly over his white shirt, before he took hold of my wrist, moved my hand to his cheekbone, over his eyes, his feverish forehead.

“The government asked us what Black people want. I mean, I have the answer. I know what we want and anyone who's learned to walk and talk knows what we want. Maybe I should have told Bobby. If you know what *you* want, then you know what *I* want.”

But that's not how the meeting had ended, Bobby wasn't lying about that sequence; we had left the room. Lorraine had stood up and said:

“Mr. Attorney General. I am deeply concerned about the state of a civilization that produced that photograph of the white cop—this specimen of white masculinity—standing on that Negro woman's neck in Birmingham.”

Then she thanked him for his time, and walked out. The rest of us followed.

Contributor's Biography

Aleksander Motturi (b. 1970) is a Swedish writer and the artistic director of the independent organization Clandestino Institute, where James Baldwin's legacy has

been explored in various programs. After finishing his doctoral thesis in philosophy (on Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks on James G. Frazer), Motturi has published both literary nonfiction and fiction in the form of novels, short stories, and plays. His auto-fictional novel *Broder* (Brother) won Swedish Radio's prestigious literary prize in 2018.

Translator's Biography

Kira Josefsson is a literary translator, writer, and editor working between English and Swedish. The recipient of a 2017 PEN/Heim translation award and multiple grants from the Swedish Arts Council and others, her work has appeared in *Granta*, *Vulture/New York Magazine*, *Words without Borders*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *The Nation*, and elsewhere.