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DISPATCH

Moment of Truth in Atlanta: James Baldwin Remembered

Walter Lowe Jr.

Abstract

James Baldwin Review offers readers a reprint of a rare archival find, an article from *Emerge* magazine, first published in October of 1989, which ran with this abstract: “A magazine editor recalls working with his literary hero and getting to know the surprisingly vulnerable, charming, and often exasperating man behind the legend.”

Keywords: James Baldwin, Atlanta child murders, Walter Lowe Jr., *Playboy* magazine, *Evidence of Things Not Seen*

Walter Lowe Jr. is a native Chicagoan who had a twenty-one-year career in newspaper and magazine journalism that began in 1971 at the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He was among the first full-time African American reporters at the *Chicago-Sun Times* and he was the first African American editor to join *Playboy*. After his career in journalism, Lowe obtained his PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) from Purdue University, West Lafayette. At the time of his graduation, Lowe was the only African American male to have graduated from the Purdue MFT program in its more than fifty-year history. Lowe received his PhD when he was sixty, before taking his professorship at Antioch University New England.

He is passionate about social justice causes, and writing—both fiction and nonfiction—is one of Dr. Lowe’s favorite pastimes. Lowe was the winner of *Playboy*’s Article of the Year award for his 1980 article, “Bad Dreams in the Future Tense.” His work made him a presence in African American artistic and social justice circles. That work included interviews with literary and civil rights giants from African American history, including Alex Haley, author of *Roots*; Chicago’s first Black mayor, Harold Washington; and Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*. Lowe’s short stories were among the earliest from an African American author that *Playboy* elected to publish, and he may be the only African American author to have had four stories selected for publication by *Playboy*.

Lowe spent significant time with James Baldwin on the Atlanta child murders, which culminated in “Atlanta: The Evidence of Things Not Seen,” an essay that was written by Baldwin and edited by Lowe and that won *Playboy*’s award for the Best Nonfiction Essay of the Year. Lowe’s critical understanding and emotional empathy is evident in the following essay, reprinted from *Emerge* magazine, October of 1989, and was one of the reasons why he and Baldwin went on to do more work together.

Holly Jones Lowe

A child believes everything; he has no choice. That is how he sorts out reality. When a child retreats and can no longer be reached, it is not that he has ceased to believe; it is that we, who are all he has, have failed him and now he has no choice but to die. It may take many forms, and years; but the child has chosen and runs to death.

James Baldwin, “Atlanta: The Evidence of Things Not Seen,” 1981

I was surrounded by the reverberation of drums. Deep, powerful drums, like the heartbeat of the universe: Babatunde Olatunji in flowing white robes, a black angel on conga. The drums filled the great spaces of New York City’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine with a thrilling electricity.

I saw people with programs, but I couldn’t find an usher who had one. Someone told me there had been only 2,000 printed. I asked a few people if they had extras. No one did. I heard a young black man with foot-long braids ask a white-haired white lady for hers. She gave it to him. That gave me the idea to ask only white

people for a program. They might, I figured, be more likely to part with theirs. I had to have one.

I walked around the cathedral focusing on white people. Each one I asked turned me down. Finally, two young women, who appeared to be sisters, gave me one of their programs. They seemed very glad to do it. I felt thankful and ashamed.

I had not known Jimmy long, certainly not as long as the people who sat in the pews at the far end of the cathedral, some of whom would speak to him, perform for him and eulogize him over the next two hours. I'd known him, *cara a cara*, for only three weeks, or so.

His coffin, covered with black satin and velvet and surrounded by candles, seemed so small in the center of the vast cathedral. Almost like a child's coffin. He was a small man, physically. The biggest thing about his body was his head, and the biggest thing about his head were his eyes. They all talked about his eyes.

Black children were disappearing and being murdered in Atlanta in 1980, and I wanted *Playboy* to send me down to write about it.

"I don't think it's a *Playboy* story, unless you can get somebody whose name we can put on the cover, like James Baldwin, to do it," the editorial director said in essence. "And he'd have to come over here from France, go to Atlanta and do some real reporting. I doubt you can talk him into it, but if you can ..." He shrugged and smiled, which I interpreted to mean maybe.

I tracked down Baldwin's phone number in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. When the phone rang, I had only a vague notion of what I would say to him.

A man answered. As I would find out later, it was Bernard, Baldwin's unfailing mediator with the world. I identified myself and asked to speak with Mr. Baldwin. Bernard wanted to know what my call was about. I told him. He asked if I'd ever met Mr. Baldwin. I told him that I hadn't.

"Well, he's very busy right now, working on several other projects, and I don't think his health is good enough for him to go to Atlanta and get involved in all that. Every time he goes to the South, he gets physically ill. He's had some very bad experiences down there."

I pleaded with him to at least allow me to present my case to the man, himself. I reminded him that Mr. Baldwin had written four articles for *Playboy* in the 1960s. I told him that he was the only writer who could lay bare the real issues involved in the celebrated "Atlanta child murders," as the newspapers called them.

Bernard relented, and Baldwin got on the phone.

"Mr. Baldwin," I started, and then stuttered out all the reasons I thought he should take the assignment, lacing everything with flattery.

"I'm really very busy right now," he said in the clipped manner of someone who wishes to end a conversation politely but immediately.

It suddenly occurred to me that he may have thought I was white, since had I not known he was black, I probably would have thought he was white. I rephrased my request in terms of writing about our murdered children. He interrupted, asking bluntly, "Are you black?" I said I was. "I didn't know *Playboy* had any black editors," he said, then paused and said softly, as if to himself, "I see."

I again launched into my reasons for his going to Atlanta—to investigate the mystery of why, in a city with a popular black mayor and a powerful black police chief, none of the murders had been solved.

“No, no,” he cut me off. From what I learned about him later, I’m sure that at that moment he was waving his right hand in a little backhand brushing movement that meant, “Say no more; I’m way ahead of you.”

He was silent for a long time, then sighed deeply and said, “I was just reading about the murders in the *New York Times* when you called. I find the whole thing very disturbing. Very disturbing. I quite agree with you that there’s much more there than anyone is willing to discuss and that someone should say *something*. Perhaps your call is what the Turks call *kismet*.”

“So you’ll do it?”

He sighed again, more deeply than before.

I figured it was time to talk money. “You see, of course,” he explained, “it’s not really about the money, it’s about whether or not I want to do it at all. How much do *you* know about the murders? After all, you’re over there and I’m over here.”

I told him I had a collection of clippings dating back six months. He wanted all of them, and I promised to send them that afternoon. He asked about the accommodation *Playboy* intended to provide. I told him a nice room at the Peachtree Plaza Hotel. He groaned.

When we finally worked it out a week later, he wanted specific things: a reservation for two rooms instead of one, virtually unlimited expenses for basics such as food, drink, transportation, and entertainment, and several hundred dollars spending money as soon as he stepped off the jet. But he wasn’t satisfied with that alone.

“I’d like you to meet me at the airport,” he said, and before I could explain to him that sending me to Atlanta wasn’t included in the budget, he handed the phone to Bernard.

“Walter? Bernard Hassell. I’m Jimmy’s friend. Listen, Walter, Jimmy would like you to meet him in Atlanta, check him into the hotel and make sure everything is going smoothly. Do you think you can do that?”

I began to mumble a weak protest, but Bernard would hear none of it. “Listen, Walter, Jimmy is the best we have, and he should be treated that way. He’d like for you to come down and take care of things when he arrives. Can you do that?”

Oh, so much in that question. Are you a house nigger or do you have any actual power at *Playboy*? Are you trying to get Jimmy to do this as though he were just another media puppet or do you truly treasure this opportunity? Who are you and *what* are you, really? All those things Bernard was asking me. In fact, he was asking those things for Baldwin, since Baldwin didn’t know me from Adam.

I said I’d have to get approval to go down to Atlanta. “Very well,” Bernard said coldly.

I was back on the phone to Bernard within an hour to tell him I could not only meet them but also stay there as long as I was needed.

“Very good,” he replied, and suddenly Baldwin was back on the line.

“Walter, Bernard tells me you’re going down to Atlanta to meet us. I appreciate that.”

There was a chill in the air the night I waited at Atlanta’s Hartsfield International Airport for Baldwin to arrive. His plane was late. Then there was an announcement that it would come in at a gate other than the one scheduled. I ran through the airport, a good quarter-mile, to get there. When I arrived, there wasn’t a soul in sight. An airline attendant told me the flight was coming in at the original gate, after all. Back I ran. The plane had come in, and he was gone. I scoured the airport looking for him, and then at last, far down a long corridor, I saw him. There were two men with him, one young, the other middle-aged. I presumed that the older man was Bernard.

I noticed that Baldwin was walking unsteadily, and when closer realized that he was about as far from sober as he was from France. I identified myself, and immediately he threw his arms around me. “Thank god,” he said. “I thought I’d be wandering around this desolate airport forever.”

Baldwin was wearing a dark gray jacket, black pants, and a black shirt. As I embraced him, the top of his head hit me at the bottom of my sternum. He was perspiring, and there were puffy bags under his eyes. He was distraught, his pupils shrunken with fear. He was obviously serious when he said he thought he’d never find me. And then he looked up at me with childlike innocence and said, “I put myself entirely in your care.”

At that moment, though I didn’t recognize them at the time, I saw two essential truths about James Baldwin: he felt that the world, overall, and the United States, in particular, were terrifying places; and that of the many terrors that can afflict the human soul, the feeling of abandonment was the most terrible. Anyone who has read his work knows that derivatives of terrible, dreadful and horrible were among his favorite adjectives. There was, if one knew him, good reason for that.

What I also didn’t realize was that when Baldwin put himself “entirely in your care,” he was only half serious. But the half he was serious about was an orphaned child looking for a home, even if temporary.

“Jimmy’s not feeling well,” Bernard said confidentially, but in no way apologetically. “He needs to get to the hotel and rest as quickly as possible.” Bernard was a well-dressed, medium-brown-skinned man in his 50s, who appeared to be in excellent shape and sober as a judge. I thought, even then, that Jimmy was indeed fortunate to have such a capable and clear-headed companion.

The other man was a tall, curly-haired youth, brown-skinned, with a slender but strong-looking physique. “Jimmy needs to rest, man,” he said in a deep, husky voice. “He’s tired, and he hates to fly.”

“Jimmy has too much to drink when he flies,” Bernard said. Baldwin continued to look up at me helplessly. “Let’s go get your bags,” I said.

Once we arrived in his room, Baldwin collapsed on the bed. I gathered indirectly—no one addressed the matter openly—that the extra room was for Bernard and that the young man would be staying in Baldwin’s room.

The young man was hungry and mentioned it to Jimmy, who said, looking at me, "Let's order up some food then." Bernard found the room-service menu, and we ordered a couple of shrimp salads, a cheese-and-fruit tray, a ham omelet (for me) and a pot of coffee. While I was calling in the order, Jimmy waved to get my attention. "A bottle of Stolichnaya vodka," he said. "A bottle of Stolichnaya vodka," I said.

Fifteen minutes later the food arrived. We had passed the time discussing their dreadful flight over the Atlantic. Baldwin picked at his salad, then ate some slivers of cheese and a few grapes. He poured himself a cup of coffee, took a few sips, then got up from the bed, turned on the television and, glancing at his watch, suggested, "Let's see the midnight news. We might learn something."

We learned that another child had disappeared and that a group of black college students was camped out on the steps of City Hall to protest the inability of both the Atlanta police department and the FBI to capture the person or persons responsible. There was a few seconds' footage of the students chanting, displaying signs and making ugly faces. The newscaster implied that they might get violent before the night was over.

Baldwin turned to me and said, "I think we ought to go over there, don't you?"

"I'll go, Mr. Baldwin," I said. "Why don't you stay and get some rest. I'll take a tape recorder, do some interviews, whatever you want."

"I'm fine. *Really*," he said, with that little wave of his hand. And he fixed those heavy-lidded size-EEE eyeballs on me and held me in his gaze long and steadily enough that I could hardly doubt he was neither too tired nor too disoriented to do what he had come to do.

We took a cab, and he told the driver to stop about a block away so that we could approach the students on foot. The temperature had dipped into the lower 50s, and he wrapped his scarf tightly around his neck and turned up the collar on his overcoat. There was a full moon that night, and its eerie light carved out the contours of his face and turned his hair into a soft white helmet. Beneath it was the most deeply etched face I'd ever seen. The furrows of his brow extended halfway around his prominent forehead, and where they approached each other, a quarter-inch apart, high over the bridge of his nose, they went straight down between his arched eyebrows and disappeared into a puffy crease separating his eyelids. The lines in his face were so deep and so symmetrical that they seemed, in that stark light, to be painted on or intentionally carved into his face like a tribal scarification.

Later, at the funeral, Amiri Baraka would say that Jimmy "was not only a writer, an international literary figure, he was man, spirit, voice—old and black and terrible as that first ancestor," and Jimmy's face outlined against the white night came back to me. For at that moment he had seemed truly black, truly terrible, and virtually prehistoric.

As we drew near to the scattered halos of light from the students' candles, Jimmy suddenly stopped, raising his hand for me to do the same. He cocked his

head toward the students, in all some 200, who were listening to a young black man with a bullhorn.

One of the students noticed me, probably because I looked like some kind of undercover agent, tall, light-skinned, in a leather trench coat. He nudged the young woman sitting beside him, and she was the first to notice the short dark man at my side. She whispered into the ear of her boyfriend, and he stared at Jimmy. I could see the dawning recognition. Finally he jumped up, grabbed his girlfriend's hand and walked over to us, all the while peering at Jimmy's face, which was shadowed except for the light reflected from the whites of his eyes.

"James Baldwin, James Baldwin, James Baldwin." Another student turned around, looked at Jimmy and shouted, "Hey, brothers and sisters! James Baldwin is here! We got Brother James Baldwin here!"

A moment later they were gently crowding around him, smiling, laughing with joy. I say they surged around him gently because it wasn't the avaricious welcome crowds often give a sports hero, a politician or a rock star. This tender mob wanted nothing other than to love Jimmy, as they would an angel, a saint or a child. As they ushered him up the steps and introduced him, they clapped respectfully, their voices mixed in a low murmur of surprise.

I don't recall exactly what he said to them, but I remember that he started haltingly, seeming at a loss for words. And by the time he finished, five minutes later, the students were filled with hope and a sense of pride, even in their helplessness.

I was silent in the taxi on the way back to the hotel, as was Jimmy. A faraway look remained in his eyes. Malcolm, Martin, the Kennedys, Medgar—so many good men gone. And he left behind to witness and suffer what he had always witnessed and suffered, ever since he was 15 years old. I suddenly felt pity for him, not because he couldn't bear his pain, but because he had obviously borne it for so long.

We stayed up talking in his room that night, Jimmy, Bernard, the young man and I, until almost 3 a.m. The young man wanted to be a writer. Jimmy asked me to give him some advice.

"Read good writers and expand your vocabulary," I responded. Jimmy sipped vodka and said knowingly, "What did I tell you?"

Later, the question arose as to why certain people have a need to write, since writing is such a lonely and sometimes painful pursuit.

"I'll tell you why a writer writes," Jimmy said, his voice husky with fatigue and overuse. "You're forced to learn about yourself. If you really *need* to write, that's why you do it. Certainly you want to communicate, but that's secondary. What you're really trying to do is know yourself. Of course, just because you need to write doesn't mean you write *well*," he said with a deep chuckle, looking first at the young man, then at me. "But, on the whole, I think those who need to, write better than those who merely *want* to."

The next morning I woke up at 9:30 and rang Jimmy's room. Bernard answered the phone and said that Jimmy had slept until seven, gotten up and gone to breakfast with a woman he'd known for many years, a resident of Atlanta who'd

been conducting an independent investigation of the case. He intended to get the addresses and phone numbers of parents whose children had been slain, or disappeared. He also wanted her to take him to as many of the murder sites as she could.

That was the first time I realized he had a network of people in Atlanta who could help him, at the street level, find out what was going on. I also realized, though not as clearly then as later, that he didn't need my help in researching the story. He just wanted me there to act as a sounding board and, I suspect, a source of direction.

Once the word got around that he was in town, there was an almost continuous stream of phone calls from an amazingly broad cross-section of Atlanta's black population. Coretta Scott King called, Andy Young called, and a whole lot of people who weren't well-known to anyone but Jimmy called. With some of them, it was just to say hello and welcome to this embarrassing mess. Others wanted to get together with him for breakfast, lunch, dinner, drinks, to tell him their theories on who was killing Atlanta's black children.

The theory that disturbed Jimmy the most came from an old friend of his, a black businessman in his early 60s, who seemed to have known him at another time, in another place, when they were both much younger. The friend suggested that there was, indeed, only one perpetrator of the majority of the murders and that he was black, not white. The reason the city's police department seemed unable to arrest him was that he was the son of a prominent black family.

This gentleman further suggested that there was a still deeper reason for the city administration's apparent inability to solve even one of the more than two dozen murder cases: there was an underground of black closet homosexuals, many of whom were firmly entrenched political and financial power brokers in Atlanta, who were ambivalent about identifying the murderer for fear it might be one of them or a close relative.

By the time all the theories had come in, we'd been there a week, and Jimmy had had very little sleep and a lot of vodka. One morning he got up at seven and, without even a cup of coffee, went to inspect a vacant lot where, he was told, a nine-year-old boy had been found strung up on barbed wire, his body drained of blood and his severed genitals stuffed into his mouth. Scattered around the site, so he'd heard, were various eviscerated animals, including a chicken and a dog, and markings drawn in the dirt, suggesting ritual worship.

The temperature that day was in the mid-90s, and the combination of heat, fatigue and disgust took its toll of him. He fainted briefly and had to be brought back to the hotel. When Bernard called to tell me that Jimmy felt well enough to talk, it was dark outside.

I had a reservation on an 11 o'clock flight back to Chicago the next morning, and not a single page of the article had been written. It was scheduled to be in galley form in four weeks. Although I couldn't fairly have expected him to digest all he had seen and felt during his week in Atlanta, I was concerned about the deadline.

I went to Jimmy's room around 10 p.m., ordered up some food and asked him what he planned to write. There followed an intense two-hour session in which Jimmy, Bernard, Jimmy's young friend and I weighed and sifted each of the theories we'd heard. We concluded that even those that seemed plausible had gigantic holes and that none of them was substantial enough to warrant Baldwin's overt or implied support.

So what was he to write?

"Well," he said, when we were all brain-weary, "the ultimate question is not who is killing the children but how the children happened to be out there, waiting to be murdered. That is the question precisely, you see"—he looked at us wide-eyed, as though we were witnesses to a revelation—"and that is the question I'm not sure I have the strength to answer."

For two weeks we communicated by telephone and letter as he arduously, putting each word by hand on a pad of yellow legal paper, wrote the opening pages of the article. To write definitively about a grotesquerie that still lurks in the shadows requires a deeper wisdom than most writers possess. Yet that is the kind of writing that Baldwin did best; indeed, the only kind he knew how to do. For him, as expressed in all his works, true horror was never obvious. He had learned early that ugliness, *real* ugliness, is of the spirit, rather than physical. Thus, he suggested that the title for the article be "The Evidence of Things Not Seen," which was the way Saint Paul described faith. It wasn't about faith so much as it was about a fundamental lack of Americans' faith in American ideals and, particularly, a lack of black Americans' faith in themselves.

The article came through the mail in bits and pieces, usually with an accompanying note: "I think this is a beginning. Let me know what you think" or "I hope this will suffice. I'm finding this very difficult, as you can see. But then, it's a difficult subject—Jimmy."

And then, after he'd sent me about five and a half pages, Wayne Williams was arrested in Atlanta, charged with one of the unsolved murders and implicated by the press in others.

Baldwin called me at home around midnight.

"Well, now, what shall we do?" he asked, "since we have a different situation."

We agreed that it would be best for him to return to Atlanta and stay long enough to get as much as possible of the unfolding story before he wrote his final draft. As before, he wanted me to go down to meet him. This time he was bringing only Bernard.

A black kid from the Guardian Angels kind of adopted us and was at the hotel every evening to pass on the rumors about the case picked up on the streets. From what he told us, nobody thought Wayne Williams was guilty of the murders. Fueled by vodka and room-service snacks, Jimmy was having semiprofound conversations late into the night. Yet he was up early each morning to meet someone who'd heard he was in town and wanted to talk with him. His baggy eyelids were getting baggier by the minute. Bernard finally called the hotel switchboard and asked that no calls be put through to Mr. Baldwin's room until noon the next day.

One of the unfortunate aspects of being an editor for a major periodical publication is that you're sometimes in the uncomfortable position of having to coax a creative person to produce on a deadline. In this case, it was the December 1981 issue's deadline that I was concerned about. In the November issue, already sent to the printer, *Playboy* had announced Jimmy's article on the Atlanta murders. For it not to appear in the December issue would be a disappointment to *Playboy's* readers and an embarrassment to the magazine.

When I arrived at Jimmy's room one morning, he was sitting at a table that the hotel had placed near a window so that one could sit down to breakfast and get a good view of downtown Atlanta. From that window, on a clear day, one could see the Omni, a huge steel-and-glass combination shopping center, sports arena and entertainment showcase that purported to offer, as its name implies, the satisfaction of every desire an Atlantan might possess. Somewhere inside that complex was an electronic game arcade, and it was there that several of the murdered children had last been seen.

"I think I have to say something about the way a young black boy with no money and, most likely, no father might feel in the Omni. How he stays there quite late at night, aching for something that he can't quite identify," Jimmy said.

For some reason his words irritated me. During the entire time I had been with him, he had described scenes, elucidated major and minor pathologies, attempted to find the meaning of his article in one all-encompassing metaphor. I had grown impatient with these sometimes brilliant but, from my point of view, half-baked inspirations—for none of them seemed to bring him any closer to writing even the introduction to the article.

Deep in my heart I sympathized with him. Once the world has declared a man a great writer, it allows him very little room for mediocrity. A thousand other writers, black or white, could have been summoned to Atlanta, required to write a substantive examination of the unfolding abomination, and been publicly congratulated on *anything* they wrote merely because they'd had the courage to make the effort. But of James Baldwin much more was expected.

And yet, precisely because he was who he was—a literary icon—I hesitated to express my impatience. I asked him, rather tersely, when he planned to get down to writing pages instead of the paragraph-per-week approach he'd been taking thus far. Looking back, I'm surprised he didn't throw his writing pad at me and tell me to kiss his weary black ass. What he did was nod, smile apologetically, and say, "It's beginning to take form. Trust me. But believe me, I understand your concern. When is our deadline?"

"Two weeks at the latest."

"Well, you'll have it by then. Before I leave for France [he was scheduled to leave four days hence] I'll have at least 15 or 20 pages of it written. As a matter of fact, I'm going to stay up tonight and rewrite the introduction."

The following morning I was awakened by a phone call from Jim Morgan, then *Playboy's* articles editor. "How's it going? Are we gonna make the deadline?" he asked.

I told him I hadn't the slightest idea. "Is he drinking a lot?"

I said that he was, and also that he was constantly surrounded by friends, well-wishers, and fans. I confessed that I didn't know how to get him to settle down to write and yet hesitated to nag him any more than I already had. Jim sighed and said, "Well, you know that if he doesn't come in with it, I'm screwed."

"I know, Jim," I said. And there was a long pause ...

"Well, hell," he said finally, "I don't know what to tell you. Just do *something*, Walter. I know you can get it out of him."

"I'll do what I can," I told him.

After he hung up, I showered and dressed and went to Jimmy's room, praying that I would find him writing away furiously.

When I walked in he was lying on his bed, propped up on pillows, his bare feet extended for the ministrations of a thin, dark, mustached man wearing a pin-striped suit and sitting on a chair at the foot of the bed. A bucket of hot water and Epsom salts stood on the carpet.

Bernard said, "Jimmy needed a pedicure. He was beginning to develop an ingrown toenail, and his corns have been bothering him."

Jimmy just smiled broadly and asked whether I'd had a good night's sleep.

I asked Jimmy how the article was coming along. He looked helplessly at Bernard, and Bernard said apologetically, "Jimmy was very tired last night, so he wrote only a few pages ..."

"I'd like to see the pages," I said, more as a demand than a request. The pedicurist suddenly frowned, and Jimmy cried out in pain.

"Now, you see? I've cut Mr. Baldwin's foot," the pedicurist snapped at me, as though I had caused the accident.

Jimmy, sensing that I was about to do serious damage to his snotty little foot servant, murmured, "Oh, it's all right. I'm fine, really. Just patch it up and go on to the other foot. I have to get back to writing, you know."

I spied Jimmy's legal pad on the table near the window, went over, picked it up and read what he had written. There was only one paragraph:

Terror leads to paralysis and paralysis leads to the end of hope. One's very body begins to be too heavy a weight to carry through the humid air; one longs to click one's heels, like Dorothy in *The Wiz*, and get the hell out of Atlanta. But to believe in yourself as I believe in you may never be possible for the children of this city, who are also the heirs, it is worth remembering, of the distilled and dreadful bitterness of the blood-soaked and sovereign state of Georgia. And, though we are discussing the murdered black children of Atlanta, it is important to bear in mind that for every black corpse, there is a white one, or an equivalent actual and moral disaster. There is absolutely nothing new in this city, this state or this nation about dead black male bodies floating, finally, to the surface of the river.

"Where's the rest of it?" I asked. He smiled slyly, like a little boy whose naughty act had been discovered, and said, "Well, perhaps Bernard exaggerated a bit. But,

really, I do have several pages composed in my head. I'll put them down before we go to dinner. I promise."

"Sit still, Mr. Baldwin," said the pedicurist, "while I try to take this corn off your little toe."

I headed for the door. Bernard asked me when I'd be back, but I didn't answer. At that moment I urgently needed a Bloody Mary.

After downing some scrambled eggs, toast and two Bloody Marys, I wandered around the hotel lobby for a time, working up enough fortitude to go back to Jimmy's room and get a few things off my chest. I knew I would be taking a gamble by confronting him: he was quite capable of saying to hell with you, especially if he'd had a liquid lunch. The result of my outburst could be not only *Playboy's* loss but also a sour note in my editorial career. Even worse—and the more I thought about it the more frightening the risk—I could alienate him and sever our friendship forever.

For, being honest with myself, I took a certain pride in knowing him personally and being his editor. He was, after all, a literary hero. To be able to count myself among his friends was, I suddenly realized, the secret prize I hoped to earn from my association with him. This meant that, at some level, I was just as much a hanger-on and a well-wisher as all the other people in Atlanta who surrounded him each time he came there.

When I got to his room I still hadn't the faintest notion of what I would say. There were five people present: Jimmy, Bernard, the pedicurist, a black female PhD who had bulldozed herself into Jimmy's life when he arrived in Atlanta the first time, and her grown daughter, who I presumed had come along just to meet the great man.

Jimmy sat at the table peering at his legal pad as though trying to remember what he had had in mind when he wrote the lone paragraph before him. Seeing me, he immediately launched into another assertion that the article was about to emerge.

"Stop bullshitting me!" I blurted out. If Bernard's icy glare was any indication, I'd blown whatever rapport Jimmy and I had developed. But I was only just getting started: "You know what I think? I think you're so addicted to *being* the famous James Baldwin that you haven't the stomach for *writing* like him. You keep all these people around you as a screen between you and your work. As long as they keep adoring you and hanging on to your every goddam word, you can ignore the fact that you're not writing. You keep drinking that goddam vodka, pretending that everything's all right and not facing the fact that you're not sure that you have it anymore." I paused for a moment, breathing hard and glaring around the room in fury.

"I mean, do you need all these people around you to write? Did you need them when you wrote *Go Tell It on the Mountain*? When you wrote *The Fire Next Time*? No, you didn't, because back then you accepted the fact that writing is a lonely goddam business and you had the courage to deal with it. But now you don't have it anymore. You're getting old. The fire isn't there anymore. So you're trying to drink yourself to death. Aren't you?"

The last question I hurled at him directly, eye-to-eye. His eyes widened, but he didn't blink. The room was utterly silent. He asked, "Are you finished?"

"No, I'm not," I said. "To younger writers like me, you're a legend, a hero, someone we'd like to measure up to one day. At least that's the way I felt before I met you. Now I don't know. What you've shown me since I've known you is a man who likes to talk a lot and drink a lot, but who hates to write."

Jimmy stood up and slowly removed his glasses. His shoulders straightened, his chin lifted. Suddenly he had the bearing of a king. He spoke without anger, deliberately and with dignity: "First of all, I assure you that I am not too old to write. The fire has never died out. Am I making myself clear?"

I felt like a pauper who had spoken out of turn to a lord. The power of his presence filled the room at that moment. It was the same power one feels through his best writing, but more direct, undiluted by the printed word. "As for the other things, there is, I'm afraid, some truth to them." Bernard started to say something, but Jimmy cut him off: "No, no, Bernard. It's good that Walter said what he said. We must always face truth when we hear it, even if it be unpleasant. That's why we came to Atlanta in the first place. To face an unpleasant truth about something."

And then, turning to me he said, "I will do what has to be done."

Jimmy Baldwin's article arrived a day before the deadline. "Atlanta: The Evidence of Things Not Seen" won for Jimmy *Playboy's* 1981 Best Nonfiction Award. He flew to New York to attend the presentation ceremony at Elaine's restaurant and was obviously moved, near tears, when he made his acceptance speech.

Afterward, he and I reminisced about Atlanta. I felt the need to apologize for having doubted him. "You know, I think I understand why it was so hard for you to write the article," I said. "It wasn't just because of the things I said to you; it was also because every boy who was killed might have grown up to be the young man in *Giovanni's Room* or, worse, Rufus in *Another Country*."

"Me, in other words," he said, smiling ruefully.

I nodded.

"Voilà!" He laughed bitterly. And then, leaning over the table, he whispered, "You see, I'm lucky I wasn't taken into a car and murdered. I could have been you know, because I was wandering around on the streets at night before I found myself ... for many years."

"Well, I hope you've forgiven me."

"Ahh, *bambino*," he said, chucking me lightly on the side of my head. "I was never angry with you."

Shortly after Jimmy's death, *Newsweek* described him, at the end of his career, this way: "With success, his famous noble rage had become a kind of truculent belligerence—it's difficult to sustain an apocalyptic style from the back seat of a chauffeured limousine."

Which was, from one point of view, I suppose, true. Yet my own feeling is that Jimmy didn't enjoy success at all; it was, in fact, killing him, and he knew it.

Newsweek also wrote that his ability to “combine polemic and autobiography ... worked so well that for a time Baldwin seemed a more important writer than history will probably judge him to have been.”

Maybe so. But he was, as I think history will show, much more than a writer.

At his funeral, Odetta sang, and Amiri Baraka, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison all played their “prose music” for him. His honorary pallbearers included Lerone Bennett Jr., Gwendolyn Brooks, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Vertamae Grosvenor, Max Roach, and many other writers, actors, and musicians who had in some way been inspired not just by his writing but by the man himself.

And though his being was the most important contribution he made to the world, it would be unfair to minimize the special gift he gave to all writers of African descent who try to tell their stories in English.

Until Jimmy, white Americans looked to black writers for a dialect that took them out of themselves. But without once losing the timeless rhythms that were born in him, he spoke to America in her own dialect. And being adept in the languages of both black and white Americans, his writings touched the collective souls of both races.

The program for his funeral said nothing about death, but was titled “A Celebration of the Life of James Baldwin.” At the end of the service, with Olatunji’s drums once again filling the cathedral, I watched Berdis Baldwin, Jimmy’s mother, rolled down the center aisle and out the front door in a wheelchair.

She looked older, darker, and even more terrible than her son. But because he had resembled her so much, her face was wonderfully familiar and immediately lovable.

The sky was a steely gray and the wind sent a chill through the bones as his coffin passed from the shadow of the cathedral into daylight.

The crowd surged out and flowed gently around his departing casket, just as I’d seen the college students flow gently around him that night in Atlanta.

It suddenly seemed clear that whoever it was that all those people were drawn to had either already been dead a long time or had, as I prefer to think, transcended death entirely.

Contributor’s Biography

Walter Lowe Jr. is a native Chicagoan whose career in newspaper and magazine journalism began in 1971 at the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He was among the first full-time African American reporters at the *Chicago-Sun Times* and he was the first African American editor to join *Playboy*. After his career in journalism, Lowe obtained his PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) from Purdue University, West Lafayette.