

An aerial photograph of a coral reef, showing intricate patterns of coral and sandy channels. The entire image is bathed in a deep blue light, creating a monochromatic effect. The text is overlaid in a clean, white, serif font.

A
NEW
PLACE

ESSAYS & POEMS

JAYMES JOHNSON

A NEW PLACE

Essays & Poems

Jaymes W. Johnson

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FOR MOM

One night, Poetry came to me and said,

“You’re coming with Me. You need to learn how to listen; and yes, We know it is going to be a hard road. Especially for Us, who are teaching you.”

-Joy Harjo

FOREWORD

I am so grateful that you are reading this. I did not think that I would ever use myself as subject; that I would ever share the poetry that I had written in secret and silence over this year. You see, I was meant to complete a different book entirely. True crime, *or something*, I told everyone. But that is not what this is at all.

Let's begin a bit further back, for context.

So much of a young writer's life is filled with phrases like, "Write what you know," and also, "You're not that interesting as a subject—make something up." While potentially confusing and altogether true, I do believe after some time I understand those sentiments a bit better. Often young writers don't have enough life *lived* to express themselves with the perfect words that they would like employ, nor the eye for form and structure, including the most beautiful rendering of character and character arc, journeys and pay offs. We all desperately want these things as young writers—but sometimes we just don't have the *juice* for it yet. Our teachers and mentors instead invite us to read more, and to write incessantly, like we are mad.

I've read and heard accounts of the Spanish mystic, the Carmelite nun, St. Teresa of Avila, that describe her as loving though stern as a spiritual director. The story goes that other nuns would ask too many questions of the mystical path they were on, that they

could not simply endure the rigors of daily prayer, service, and contemplation—and this was in the 1500's mind you. There was no such thing as Instagram or e-mail at this moment in history. St. Teresa would tell them, "You're not ready yet. Go into the kitchen and peel potatoes."

This is the sentiment that I feel our teachers and mentors are extending to us if we can allow it. That there is a time and a season for all things to be done. As young people, we want so much to express ourselves with the new words and the sharp ideas that pass across our minds, so fresh. Experience says that we should do our work, pay our dues, *peel potatoes*. Said another way by Stephen King, "Read widely, and constantly work to refine and redefine your own work as you do so."

When I began this project, it was under the express interest that I wanted to shed light on the murder of black bodies, the casual violence that is enacted upon LGBT youth, and the subtle ways that these things, these thought forms that we live amongst and give validity to every day, *racism* and *white supremacy*—how these things show up in our lives.

I was meant to write a novella. Fiction. For years the kernel of this novella-story lived within me and loomed in my consciousness; it hung around in themes and characters. Sentence fragments and feelings, impressions: Gun violence. School shootings. Racism. Homophobia. You know, those things that we live and engage with each day, those ideas that pervade our lands and homes and hearts even though we all seem displeased with the outcome of their effects.

Everything that I ever wanted to talk about and everything I never wanted to mention was in that original story of a young person, murdered in a classroom before lunchtime.

Over this past year, as I went about peeling the potatoes, shaping the scenes, the events, the characters into a true crime fiction, I realized that I was actually telling my own story in some way. I was telling a story of not just one bullied gay teen in 2008, I was telling and retelling an account of how easy it is for a black body to move about the world and simply *die*. The text was reactionary, and did not work in the ways that I originally planned for.

Time marches forward incessantly, and nearly every week, incessant images of black men and women in extremis, gay boys, lesbian girls, our transgendered brothers and sisters are routinely put into the palms of our hands, into our very backpacks and purses. I felt that it was time to comment on this pain, to process my own, especially through the lens of Spirituality and Mysticism. That is what this project became.

I've learned that peeling potatoes can look differently for all of us, sometimes it 's a bad job that will reveal to us our true passion; sometimes it looks like you've been sent away from school to try again; sometimes it looks like walking this road of life alone for a while, getting to know ourselves and thereby the rest of the world as we do so. One of the biggest lessons I've learned is that it is always *okay* to be there, in the kitchen, working away at the details of life. And that there is no shame there, save for the shame that we carry with us.

I hope that I have peeled enough potatoes to share some long form ideas, free verse poetry, inspirations and meditations with you. I do hope that you enjoy these pages as much as I have found healing and unexpected enjoyment in writing them.

In gratitude,

Jaymes

Santa Barbara

May, 2020

PART ONE

AHEAD

There is a
Place ahead
That calls
Me,
 as I call it.

I long to make
The journey
As easy as
Rumi's words
Enter my heart.

COMPASSION

As a kid
I needed
A god
With a more
Consistent
compassion.

Seemed like I
Wasn't alone.

But we all kept
Clapping
Until
We all stopped.

YOU KNOW...

It's fun
At times—all times
To look for
Consistencies
Across faiths

Surely they
All could
Be getting something
Right, right?

Bigger than
War,
Smaller and more
Infinitesimal
Than breath,
It's hard to weigh
Against that
Gold brick over
There.

You know,
Love.

UNTITLED

It feels
Conspiratorial
At time

The way the
Stars
Stay put,
But move
So fast.

Not that both
Are observable
Or that
Some dude
(Really old)
Sat back and thought
Of it: where to put them...

Much too big for
The fanciness between
The ears, I suspect.

What I mean
Is the Nature
Of weak forces;

The nature of the
Spread of ideas
And galaxies (and worlds)

It's all too grand
To give away to
One man or
One symbol

Different Woman.

a poem for Mom

“Doctor called and said he found something—
He sounded pretty cheerful—I’m sure it’s fine—but will you go
with me,
if you’re free?”

“Oh, sure. No problem.”

I could hear a
Tinge of uneasiness, unsteadiness.
Where had she gone so quickly?
The confidence;
the confident woman I left this morning
had gone. I could Hear it
in voice and tone.
“Oh, sure. I’ll be there.”

Two days later,
the fluorescent lights were bright—
blinding me;
stunning me, as Doctor
Flicked them back on.

It hadn’t been good news.
Something was there—
Growing in the lung—*quite* big—
Something foreign—something pernicious.
I knew it. *Again, I knew it.*

Doctor had circled the unclear outlines
of the foreign,
homegrown mass.
He was,
Showing us what shouldn't be present,
but was.

Then he left us
for a moment to
gather ourselves
before the journey home—
but what even would that *be* anymore?
Home. Home. Home?

Mom slumped forward. Fingers
Pressing into her eyes.
Tears flowing.
Be strong, I tell myself.
Be here, for her now.

She asks why. Why me—why her,
She meant.
Why us, collectively,
maybe.

Who even *has* the
answer to *that* why?
Seems like something we've been
asking since a
Time immemorial....
And where are *those*
Good answers by now?

Those

Good Prayers—

The Right Words.

The *perfect* words:

The ones that heal, and

change for the better,

the ones that offer solution and a

new reality.

The ones that create or recreate the world into something soft...and cushy. That feels nice to look at most days.

Three years on,

I'm not sure I've found these words. But I'm also sure that I have.

Because it *seems* that the same words that harm *do* heal.

Because, "Stage four cancer" means freedom. It means

Death. And Life, and Salvation.

But it's all an inside job.

I try to remember that as I was having a panic attack last Friday.

breeeathe! breeeathe!

And *this* particular Friday,

All that...seems like bullshit.

But I give it a moment.

Just trying to accept,

accept the *truth*.

I am alive.

Mom is dead.

Or, am I dead,
and is she living?

Fuck if I know. It gets too cosmic if I think about it too long.
And I just want my heart to stop beating.
So. Hard.
I just want to feel like I'm alive again—
as if I'm...*not* dying.

Funny how quickly things change—
How quickly people come and go here.
When just this morning,
I had been *begging* to die—
Unable to see meaning or truth or *beauty* in
anything around me.

And now I've woken from a
peaceful nap
in a *panic*.
Trying—
fighting myself to live
to be thankful—
to be grateful.

Because now is all there is.
And sometimes,
Cancer means freedom.

COURAGE

Courage can
Sometimes show up
As the simple
Act of
deleting
 social
 media.

Because the
walls of
The maze
Have already
Come down
Around us.

But we've forgotten
Through intention
That the walls
And halls we've
Created digitally
Are voluntary
Spaces.

DON'T PRETEND

“And don't pretend god can't see what you've done on this Sunday morning.”

Yes, I would think silently in the back of the church, twelve years at best,
silently inspecting the red velveteen along the back
of the pews, or perhaps playing with that gameboy again,
*And did you know that God saw you smoking crack with those hoes,
like He saw my uncle also?*

*I'd overheard my mom
gossiping with the gals
about everything.*

*perhaps it's easier to sidestep
because crack isn't
mentioned explicitly in
The Good Book*

But whores are. and judgement is.

*Don't forget the rules for
keeping your slaves well.
Truly we can go around in circles
with this nonsense for eternity.*

*Entire civilizations have been purported to have been built upon these
words*

*The real question is
are those women,
those men
we call whores,
crackheads
faggots
and dykes
actually full of the
evil and vile
that we force into them?*

*And what if this place, the site of evil and salt pillars,
All contained within a human body, is
also the site of compassion and equanimity?
We are all equal. and seen and known and loved, equally.*

guilty and innocent simultaneously.

A trick of The Light.

A Complexity.

Namaste.

MATH ON PAPER

I like to do the math on paper sometimes.
For sake of posterity.
My father was born in '56,
Louisiana. Pre civil rights. It's good to mark that time.

Fatigued by war,
Brothers and Cousins
Fathers and Sons retuning home,
Inquiring earnestly
What *Home* was anymore.

The Music had a response.
The Music had more questions for all those that could hear
them.

Already had Merry & Mick
Reminded them how close
War lives to us all.

The landscape had changed.

When he was a teenager,
I guess it would have been 1971
music shops were few.
Those that were, like much else, were segregated:

Blacks entered in the back. My dad.
His brothers and sisters
required.

Can you *imagine*?
Required by social laws,
unprotected by
laws of the land
to engage in that
practice of racial capitalism.

Even *that* was kept segregated—
even though the profits were not.

The records were there,
packed tightly in an alcove
by the door,
That housed the Black Music,
black paint on cardboard signified;
Where lived Al Green,
Aretha, Marvin, and Gladys.

If my father, or one of his sisters dare to want,
Or know and celebrate that idea of *Friends*
That Carole King espoused,
She needed to wave down,
Flag an associate, white,
Asking for permission.

Imagine that.

We listen to people talk about yesterday
so fondly,

Forgetting what yesterday was,
How close it lives, unrecognized.
Forgetting what those artists truly sang about,
Forgetting the pain from which they sang.
We are the recipients of
the weight of their social consciousness.

There was no such thing
As an Instagram Like back then.

It's Too Late, baby, now it's too late.

I like to do the math on paper sometimes.
To remember that psyches and hearts don't change with pen
strokes alone.

We all play a part in the healing of this community project
we are the recipients of.
And each day, each moment it requires renewing.

This community project, invoked with the blood of the
enslaved
Used for ink.
This community project called
America.

How will be seen as Ancestors?
Does this even matter to the attention pirates
Who would have you over for
Breakfast lunch and dinner,

Just to make some money off you,
And send you home,
Belly emptied, pockets also
And make you feel like it was your idea,
All along?
How will we be *seen* as Ancestors?

There are profits to be made
From our eyes alone.
We are known,
We are known.
Imagine that.
We are known.

I like to do the math on paper.

THE TALENTED TENTH

I can remember my mother, wanting me to belong to a
fraternity in high school.

Like her best friends son.

It would offer up and open up a network of opportunity,
for life she goaded.

But I could also remember watching

In the blue glow of the TV/VCR combo

Images of black men in a circle, declaring faggot, declaring
powerless femininity; castrating the gay man in the public
square; the crowd of black faces jeering, cheering, sneering:
more, more.

If you squint,

These black bodies can become

White bodies.

And the castrated, that are castrating,

Are castrated once more, through

hoops of time and powerlessness;

And in the future, repaying this

Debt, this duty, upon his brother

As Truth, a gift:
Of *Salvation*.

but what if salvation was never the goal of this practice?

*i just want you to know
i love you, still.*

MAYA ANGELOU: A TRIBUTE

It was my mama that gave me Maya

I can't remember where
We were—the house or the
place; but I remember
that feeling.

I didn't understand her
verse, though
her words were plain. She spoke of
Rivers,
 Rocks, and
 Trees that spoke to women,
To men and neighbors, as
Friends that did not yet know they were.

I didn't know it either,
Sitting in front of the
Television screen,
That my mama
was giving me Maya,
A friend for life.

Excerpt From An Impassioned (Fictional) Speech

“...And only that this should point to something larger: perhaps now, we cannot see clearly all the things that have been distorted through the lens of history; though maybe Love and well being, not sex and the details of its making will finally be enough, will finally be enough, to strengthen us, much more than dogma has brought down fences, gates, chains, walls, & wounds to separate us.”

WHISPERS

The Universe,
Or whatever (you call it)
Unites and Teaches
Us all.

It has no voice box,
No body,
But that man,
That woman,
Street sign
Or stray conversation.

It speaks with
No voice,
But those around
Us

Whispering,
Talking,
Sometimes streaming, screaming
Softly, urging
Ultimately, finally
To
Be still.

PURVIEW

I would be
Elsewhere
If I had listened to my
Mother.

But I'm not
Always certain
That is a
Place I would
Want to be

From the place,
The purview,
The vantage
I have now.



PART TWO

Going Home

I'm thinking a lot about memory lately. The way holds shape inside us, the ways it can move or be moved; molded, seen and held and felt differently in the present moment.

While I was home in Shreveport last week, I saw the place my bother and his father were murdered.

My own father took me to the lot and showed me that the house had since been torn down. What remains of it are broken cement steps that lead to an empty plot of land, all surrounded by a metal fence. In some ways it fit my memory: the real memory I have of being there at five or six and playing in the front yard of the white house on the corner, trying to catch grasshoppers that I'd only seen in books in California.

Then there was the other type of memory, that time and space lend themselves to, the type that obscures and darkens, and sometimes haunts. Over the next year or so, we would all be back in California. I would be in second grade and my brother would be released from jail, he was the eldest of us three boys.

There was a sense of excitement in the family because after years of my mother's pleading, he relented to go South. To his father's house, "get his life together," and help the man to drive trucks cross country.

Damean was only out of jail for seven days—two lost in transit with Greyhound—before he and his father were murdered in the living room of the white house on the corner. Side by side, hands bound, bullets to the back of the head.

Father and Son together.

Memory and the time and the space I'd been away had changed the house into a haunted space—a dark spot that I could no longer clearly see in my mind's eye.

Then to be there again last week, standing on the sidewalk that was overgrown with grass, staring at the vacant lot that was overgrown with grass, strangely it all matched and was mismatched simultaneously.

There But For The Grace

Larry King was murdered with two bullets to the back of his head. The first, to do the deed, the second to be sure it was done.

I don't know if it was the bullets to the back of the head, or the fact that Larry was reported to be gay (though most probably transgendered), that he was black, that his murderer was reported to be a white supremacist—I can't say. It was likely all of them at once that stirred something in me, that imprinted something upon my mind in 2008. Since then whenever Larry would hit my mind or my heart I couldn't help but think, *that could have been me*.

It could have been me, born of a mother addicted to crack, abandoned on a street corner at five, sent through foster homes and to group facilities, and jail for stealing food from my own cupboards.

Then later, it could have been me, pressing at the edges of my own sexuality in middle school, flirting with what collectively we call acceptable behavior; flirting with something within that didn't need acceptance, but rather guidance. It could have been me telling a boy around Valentine's Day that I loved him, testing, joking, pleading for love and he wouldn't know what to do with it, how to give, or want to, or care to.

Days later, it could have been me in computer class, writing about tolerance, Anne Frank, and also talking shit with my friends.

“I heard you're gonna change your name or something?”

“Uh huh. Leticia.”

Then bullets to the back of the head.

It could have been any of us, really. But this hit home for me.

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It is true that no book is written alone. Writers need more help than we are sometimes willing to admit. Whether it is a mentor that inspires, or someone who offers you a chance, we are always aided by groups of people around us.

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Until the next one.

Namaste, y'all!



About the Author

Hi there, I'm Jaymes. I'm a writer and a poet from Los Angeles. Currently I'm living in Santa Barbara completing my degree in English Literature. In my spare time I teach Yoga and meditation privately.