

## GIOVANNI'S ROOM (1956)

by James Baldwin

---

I scarcely know how to describe that room. It became, in a way, every room I had ever been in and every room I find myself in hereafter will remind me of Giovanni's room. I did not really stay there very long—we met before the spring began and I left there during the summer—but it still seems to me that I spent a lifetime there. Life in that room seemed to be occurring underwater, as I say, and it is certain that I underwent a sea change there.

To begin with, the room was not large enough for two. It looked out on a small courtyard. Looked out means only that the room had two windows, against which the courtyard malevolently pressed, encroaching day by day, as though it had confused itself with a jungle. We, or rather Giovanni kept the windows closed most of the time. He had never bought any curtains; neither did we buy any while I was in the room. To insure privacy, Giovanni had obscured the window panes with a heavy, white cleaning polish. We sometimes heard children playing outside our window, sometimes strange shapes loomed against it. At such moments, Giovanni, working in the room, or lying in bed, would stiffen like a hunting dog and remain perfectly silent until whatever seemed to threaten our safety had moved away.

He had always had great plans for remodelling this room, and before I arrived he had already begun. One of the walls was a dirty, streaked white where he had torn off the wallpaper. The wall facing it was destined never to be uncovered, and on this wall a lady in a hoop skirt and a man in knee breeches perpetually walked together, hemmed in by roses. The wallpaper lay on the floor, in great sheets and scrolls, in dust. On the floor also lay our dirty laundry, along with Giovanni's tools and the paint brushes and the bottles of oil and turpentine. Our suitcases teetered on top of something, so that we dreaded ever having to open them and sometimes went without some minor necessity, such as clean socks, for days.

No one ever came to see us, except Jacques, and he did not come often. We were far from the center of the city and we had no phone.

I remembered the first afternoon I woke up there, with Giovanni fast asleep beside me, heavy as a fallen rock. The sun filtered through the room so faintly that I was worried about the time. I stealthily lit a cigarette, for I did not want to wake Giovanni. I did not yet know how I would face his eyes. I looked about me. Giovanni had said something in the taxi about his room being very dirty. 'I'm sure it is,' I had said lightly, and turned away from him, looking out of the window. Then we had both been silent. When I woke up in his room, I remembered that there had been something strained and painful in the quality of that silence, which had been broken when Giovanni said, with a shy, bitter smile: 'I must find some poetic figure.'

And he spread his heavy fingers in the air, as though a metaphor were tangible. I watched him.

'Look at the garbage of this city,' he said, finally, and his fingers indicated the flying street, 'all of the garbage of this city? Where do they take it? I don't know where they take it—but it might very well be my room.'

'It's much more likely,' I said, 'that they dump it into the Seine.'

But I sensed, when I woke up and looked around the room, the bravado and the cowardice of his figure of speech. This was not the garbage of Paris, which would have been anonymous: this was Giovanni's regurgitated life.

Before and beside me and all over the, room, towering like a wall, were boxes of cardboard and leather, some tied with string, some locked, some bursting, and out of the topmost box before me spilled down sheets of violin music. There was a violin in the room, lying on the table in its warped, cracked case—it was impossible to guess from looking at it whether it had been laid to rest there yesterday or a hundred years before. The table was loaded with yellowing newspapers and empty bottles and it held a single brown and wrinkled potato in which even the sprouting eyes were rotten. Red wine had been spilled on the floor; it had been allowed to dry and it made the air in the room sweet and heavy. But it was not the room's disorder which was frightening; it was the fact that when one began searching for the key to this disorder, one realized that it was not to be found in any of the usual places. For this was not a matter of habit or circumstance or temperament; it was a matter of punishment and grief. I do not know how I knew this, but I knew it at once; perhaps I knew it because I wanted to



live. And I stared at the room with the same, nervous, calculating extension of the intelligence and of all one's forces which occurs when gauging a mortal and unavoidable danger: at the silent walls of the room with its distant, archaic lovers trapped in an interminable rose garden, and the staring windows, staring like two great eyes of ice and fire, and the ceiling which lowered like those clouds out of which fiends have sometimes spoken and which obscured but failed to soften its malevolence behind the yellow light which hung like a diseased and undefinable sex in its center. Under this blunted arrow, this smashed flower of fight lay the terrors which encompassed Giovanni's soul. I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and had brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in order to transform Giovanni's, must first become a part of Giovanni's room.

In the beginning, because the motives which led me to Giovanni's room were so mixed, had so little to do with his hopes and desires, and were so deeply a part of my own desperation, I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work. I threw out the paper, the bottles, the fantastic accumulation of trash; I examined the contents of the innumerable boxes and suitcases and disposed of them. But I am not a housewife—men never can be housewives. And the pleasure was never real or deep, though Giovanni smiled his humble, grateful smile and told me in as many ways as he could find how wonderful it was to have me there, how I stood, with my love and my ingenuity, between him and the dark. Each day he invited me to witness how he had changed, how love had changed him, how he worked and sang and cherished me. I was in a terrible confusion. Sometimes I thought, but this is your life. Stop fighting it. Stop fighting. Or I thought, but I am happy. And he loves me. I am safe. Sometimes, when he was not near me, I thought, I will never let him touch me again. Then, when he touched me, I thought, it doesn't matter, it is only the body, it will soon be over. When it was over, I lay in the dark and listened to his breathing and dreamed of the touch of hands, of Giovanni's hands, or anybody's hands, hands which would have the power to crush me and make me whole again.

## THE WRITING OF STONES (1970)

by Roger Caillois

trans. by Barbara Bray

proposed by Cookies

---

JUST AS MEN HAVE ALWAYS SOUGHT AFTER PRECIOUS STONES, SO THEY HAVE ALWAYS PRIZED CURIOUS ONES, THOSE THAT CATCH THE ATTENTION THROUGH SOME ANOMALY OF FORM, SOME SUGGESTIVE ODDITY OF COLOR OR PATTERN. THIS FASCINATION ALMOST ALWAYS DERIVES FROM A SURPRISING RESEMBLANCE THAT IS AT ONCE IMPROBABLE AND NATURAL. STONES POSSESS A KIND OF GRAVITAS, SOMETHING ULTIMATE AND UNCHANGING, SOMETHING THAT WILL NEVER PERISH OR ELSE HAS ALREADY DONE SO. THEY ATTRACT THROUGH AN INTRINSIC, INFALLIBLE, IMMEDIATE BEAUTY, ANSWERABLE TO NO ONE, NECESSARILY PERFECT YET EXCLUDING THE IDEA OF PERFECTION IN ORDER TO EXCLUDE APPROXIMATION, ERROR, AND EXCESS. THIS SPONTANEOUS BEAUTY THUS PRECEDES AND GOES BEYOND THE ACTUAL NOTION OF BEAUTY, OF WHICH IT IS AT ONCE THE PROMISE AND THE FOUNDATION.

FOR A STONE REPRESENTS AN OBVIOUS ACHIEVEMENT, YET ONE ARRIVED AT WITHOUT INVENTION, SKILL, INDUSTRY, OR ANYTHING ELSE THAT WOULD MAKE IT A WORK IN THE HUMAN SENSE OF THE WORD, MUCH LESS A WORK OF ART. THE WORK COMES LATER, AS DOES ART; BUT THE FAR-OFF ROOTS AND HIDDEN MODELS OF BOTH LIE IN THE OBSCURE YET IRRESISTIBLE SUGGESTIONS IN NATURE.

THESE CONSIST OF SUBTLE AND AMBIGUOUS SIGNALS REMINDING US, THROUGH ALL SORTS OF FILTERS AND OBSTACLES THAT THERE MUST BE A PREEXISTING GENERAL BEAUTY VASTER THAN THAT PERCEIVED BY HUMAN INTUITION—A BEAUTY IN WHICH MAN DELIGHTS AND WHICH IN HIS TURN HE IS PROUD TO CREATE. STONES—AND NOT ONLY THEY BUT ALSO ROOTS, SHELLS, WINGS, AND EVERY OTHER CIPHER AND CONSTRUCTION IN NATURE—HELP TO GIVE US AN IDEA OF THE PROPORTIONS AND LAWS OF THAT GENERAL BEAUTY ABOUT WHICH WE CAN ONLY CONJECTURE AND IN COMPARISON WITH WHICH HUMAN BEAUTY MUST BE MERELY