4. Return to Exile

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“GOING TO MEET THE MAN” was published the year Malcolm X was assassinated. The anger, cynicism, and violence evident in that story had their counterpart in the turbulence that was overtaking the nation, and Baldwin’s response was similar to his response to racism in the pre-Civil Rights era: to return to exile, this time in Turkey. Something crucial had changed in the American mood. The “relatively conscious blacks and the relatively conscious whites” from the famous conclusion of “Down at the Cross” were no longer marching arm-in-arm. The gun hidden behind the pulpit in Blues for Mister Charlie had surfaced, and was being fired indiscriminately. Confronted with violence, the citizenry seemed eager to put the law’s primary power back in the hands of the police, who worked with brute force to incarcerate perceived troublemakers. Baldwin reveals his fear and the realization of “the fire next time” in a 1972 interview in Transition: “The fire is upon us. When construction workers in New York can walk, under the eyes of the police, and beat up kids and antiwar demonstrators, helped by the police really, and nobody cares, it’s very sinister. Sinister as the Reichstag fire. When the police become lawless, and are allied with the visibly lawless, a society is in trouble. I’m chicken; I don’t even want to say what I see.”¹ It is astounding for a man described by the interviewer in the same interview as “the greatest Negro writer” alive and by Baldwin himself, humbly, as “the most famous, which is not necessarily the same thing” to admit he is “chicken.”² This admission occurs not a decade after he appeared on the
cover of *Time* following the publication of “Down at the Cross,” the apex of his prominence as a public figure.

The legislation of the Civil Rights era coincided with the death of some black leaders (Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King) and led to the incarceration of their heirs (Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and a host of others associated with the Black Panther movement). In a 1964 interview Baldwin stated that he was uncomfortable being a “spokesman” for the black race: “I am certainly not a Negro leader . . . it is impossible to be a writer and be a public spokesman, too, because the line which you have to use, really, in polemics, is to my point of view, just a little bit much too simple.” His resistance to being considered a leader or spokesman revealed a power vacuum in the black community. In the wake of the assassinations, the Black Panther Party essentially stepped into the role of speaker for the race, and Baldwin was left in the precarious position of both agreeing (largely) with its leaders and distancing himself from the type of platform that would result (he feared) in his death or his incarceration. Baldwin could only agree with the Panthers to a point, similar to his position on the Nation of Islam at the beginning of the 1960s. He had predicted the Panthers’ ascendancy, but he certainly was not willing to arm himself, or to risk arrest, in order to demonstrate his solidarity. He was clearly aligned with them on one point, though; in his 1972 discussion with Margaret Mead, he says, “I agree with the Black Panthers’ position about black prisoners. I think that one can make the absolutely blanket statement that no black man has ever been tried by a jury of his peers in America. And if that is so, and I know that is so, no black man has ever received a fair trial in this country. Therefore, I’m under no illusions about the reason why many black people are in prison. I’m not saying there are no black criminals. Still, I believe that all black prisoners should be released and then retried according to principles more honorable and more just” (*RR* 67–68). This statement is both hyperbolic (“no black man has ever been tried by a jury of his peers in America”) and abstract, for his solution does not define the principles he desires. The statement indicates the resurfacing of Baldwin’s fear that he had begun to conquer in the early to mid-1960s—that is, the fear that prisons and police are now associated with “lawlessness,” or raw physical power, rather than with any sense of justice.

Although Baldwin believed Civil Rights legislation had only a limited effect on the lives of black people, he ultimately preferred it to the type of activism that might result in police brutality or incarceration. Many of the Panthers spoke from jail; as Bobby Seale wrote in 1970, “To be a revolu-
tionary is to be an Enemy of the state. To be arrested for this struggle is to be a Political Prisoner.” Carefully supportive of and yet not fully allied with Seale’s cause, Baldwin wrote the introduction to Seale’s autobiography in 1978. Angela Davis, whose incarceration became a cause for public outrage in the early 1970s, also received cautious alliance from Baldwin in the form of an open letter published in the New York Review of Books in 1971. Most egregiously and most troublesome for Baldwin was the publication of Eldridge Cleaver’s bestselling screed about his prison experience, *Soul on Ice*, published in 1968, which contained a lengthy homophobic attack on Baldwin, an attack which Baldwin publicly forgave without much comment, and, uncharacteristically, without retribution: in *No Name in the Street* he writes, “when I did read *Soul on Ice*, I didn’t like what he had to say about me at all. But, eventually—especially as I admired the book, and felt him to be valuable and rare—I thought I could see why he felt impelled to issue what was, in fact, a warning” (NN 172). As far as this younger generation of black thinkers and writers were concerned, incarceration was increasingly synonymous with the black experience. The ninth point of the Black Panther Party’s official ten-point platform calls for the abolition of prisons: “the ultimate elimination of all wretched, inhuman penal institutions, because the masses of men and women imprisoned inside the United States or by the United States military are the victims of oppressive conditions which are the real cause of their imprisonment.” Angela Davis continues to fight for this cause over three decades after her imprisonment, asking the rhetorical question in the title of her 2003 book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*. Despite her fiery life-long crusade on behalf of the abolition of prisons, the American answer to this question is an emphatic “no.” The construction of prisons is in fact a growth industry. Beginning with various “get tough on crime” laws in the early 1970s, the rate of incarceration, especially among black people, has increased dramatically and shows no signs of abating in the twenty-first century. In a 2004 ethnographic study, the authors Murty, Owen, and Vyas succinctly point out that the United States “has the highest rate of incarceration in the industrialized world” and that, in 2000, 47 percent of inmates were black males. The imbalance of black prisoners in the United States penal system did not originate in the mid-1960s, but it has undeniably increased since that time.

Baldwin may have considered himself “chicken” when it came to stating what he saw “when the police become lawless, and are allied with the visibly lawless,” but he had to deal with the subject, both in fiction and in nonfiction, if he was to be true to his original goal of being an honest
man and a good writer. He also had to legitimate himself as an ally of this younger generation of radical spokespersons even while denying his own role as a spokesperson and writing from an exiled perspective. Thus, in his open letter to his “sister” Angela Davis, Baldwin alludes to his alliance as a brother who has done time: “This may seem an odd, indefensibly impertinent and insensitive thing to say to a sister in prison, battling for her life. . . . I do not say it, after all, from the position of a spectator.” He was experiencing some of the fear he felt in a Paris prison before his rise to fame, coupled with his fear of meeting the same fate as the assassinated black leaders or those who died in prison during those turbulent years, notably during the Attica uprising of 1971.

Baldwin’s lifelong meditation on the law’s power returned to its most primal and visible manifestations during this period. The decade following the publication of “Going to Meet the Man” shows him retreating from a consideration of the effects of *Brown* and other judicial victories and returning to an examination of the law’s most brutal exercises of power. His major works of the next decade—*Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968), *One Day When I Was Lost* (1972), *No Name in the Street* (1972), and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) all touch upon or even center around the prison experience, to various degrees. Baldwin’s early works revealed prisons to be the distorted mirror image of one’s private room—alienating public spaces where the incarcerated subject can be monitored and controlled. In this later phase of Baldwin’s career, prisons are much worse: more hell than purgatory, more torture chambers than alienating spaces. The power of the law not only to control but to abuse is magnified in these works, and Baldwin’s skepticism over the progress of legislation approved by Congress, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, develops into deep pessimism: the law is as powerful as ever, and the status quo is preserved as a result. Following their wrongful arrests, his protagonist Leo Proudhammer in *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* and his real-life acquaintance Tony Maynard must rely on the influence of their friends if they are to avoid the desperation Baldwin experienced in Paris. Put back in the hands of the police and prison guards in the turmoil of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the law represents in Baldwin’s writings of this time period reactionary force, not reason in the service of social progress. Baldwin believed that the interdependency of American personalities faced no greater test than policing and imprisonment—a fervent attempt to maintain order on one hand and the greatest evidence of Americans’ unwillingness to face one another on the other.
A watershed moment in the shift of Baldwin’s thinking during this time is the publication of the 1966 essay “A Report from Occupied Territory,” originally published in *The Nation* and collected in *The Price of the Ticket* and in the Library of America edition of his essays. It is a penetratingly honest and far from sensationalized account of the so-called “Harlem Six,” a half-dozen black men, the oldest of whom was twenty years old at the time of his arrest, who were facing life sentences for murder during a riot inspired by the death of a fifteen-year-old Harlem youth at the hands of a white policeman. The essay uses the case of the Harlem Six as a springboard into a much broader consideration of race and the law. Baldwin gradually moves from a specific date in Harlem at the essay’s beginning to “all our Harlems, every single day” by the end (*PT* 423). Along the way, he voices outrage, anger, and fear: he implicitly compares the police “occupation” of Harlem to a kind of genocide, quoting a family member as saying, “Well, they don’t need us for work no more. Where are they building the gas ovens?” (*PT* 424). Baldwin’s response is to point out that “There is more than one way . . . to get bad niggers off the streets” (*PT* 424). As he details throughout the essay, the main method he is talking about is extreme police brutality.

The degree of police abuse Baldwin describes in “A Report from Occupied Territory” far exceeds any description of it in his work up until this point, and it anticipates his near-obsession with this topic over his works of the next decade. The essay begins as one mild-mannered Harlem salesman named Frank Stafford questions why two policemen are beating up a kid. Baldwin dryly notes that this is an “unwise question” and proceeds to recount, in Stafford’s voice, how “thirty-five [policemen] came into the room and started beating, punching us in the jaw, in the stomach, in the chest, beating us with a padded club—spit on us, call us niggers, dogs, animals” (*PT* 415–16). All of this occurs without any criminal charges being raised. The beating becomes so severe that Stafford is brought to the hospital and eventually loses an eye. He continues to be targeted as a “cop hater” once he is released, and, Baldwin writes, “You will note that there is not a suggestion of any kind of appeal to justice and no suggestion of any recompense for the grave and gratuitous damage which this man has endured” (*PT* 416). This is the epitome of “criminal power,” and it is made possible, according to Baldwin, because there is no accountability on the part of the police force: “the Police Department investigates itself, quite as though it were answerable only to itself.” He refers to this condition as the “arrogant autonomy . . . guaranteed to police” (*PT* 423).

This autonomy is one of the forces that separates and divides society.
Harlem becomes less than “another country”—a colony—in this formulation: “Harlem is policed like occupied territory” (PT 417). As the descriptions of police beatings intensify over the course of the essay, Baldwin’s analysis of the police presence in black neighborhoods becomes rather blunt: “Now, what I have said about Harlem is true of Chicago, Detroit, Washington, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and San Francisco—is true of every northern city with a large Negro population. And the police are simply the hired enemies of this population. They are present to keep the Negro in his place and to protect white business interests, and they have no other function” (PT 420). At points, Baldwin attempts to remain cool in the face of this dangerous situation; he insists, “I am writing a report, which is also a plea for the recognition of our common humanity” (PT 418). This perspective makes it seem as though Baldwin is appealing to his readers to develop their conscience based on his observations. Yet he also calls for resistance on the part of black people whose rights should be recognized as a higher power than the law itself. He recognizes that the police “know they are hated, [so] they are always afraid. One cannot possibly arrive at a more surefire formula for cruelty” (PT 420).

This observation leads to one of his most profound and rhetorically powerful statements about the law’s power: “This is why those pious calls to ‘respect the law,’ always to be heard from prominent citizens each time the ghetto explodes, are so obscene. The law is meant to be my servant, and not my master, still less my torturer and my murderer. To respect the law, in the context in which the American Negro finds himself, is simply to surrender his self-respect” (PT 420–421). Following this logic, the law is the enemy of the self: it is impossible to respect both at the same time.

The defiance in Baldwin’s essay is tempered, though: the law may be meant to be his servant, but there are so many examples in the essay of its acting as a “master, torturer, and murderer,” that he either must submit to it or flee. He is aware of a “portion of the citizenry for whom the police work and who have the power to control the police” and he realizes that legislation can be passed to reinforce the “arrogant autonomy” of the police force, such as New York’s “No Knock, Stop and Frisk laws, which permit a policeman to enter one’s home without knocking and to stop anyone on the streets, at all, at any hour, and search him. Harlem believes, and I certainly agree, that these laws are directed against Negroes” (PT 421). What we have come to call racial profiling was clearly systemic in Baldwin’s lifetime. Feeling outraged but powerless and fearful for his life, Baldwin returned to exile in the mid-1960s and stayed in Turkey and France for the majority of the next decade.
Baldwin felt a solidarity with the Harlem Six but maintained a cautious distance from them, wary of sharing their fate and aware that he was different from them because of his prominence. Fame, clearly, exacted a cost. After his near-breakdown following the production of *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Baldwin rendered this experience in fiction as a heart attack in *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*. Leo Proudhammer, an actor, collapses in the novel’s opening sentence, and the narrative is a series of flashbacks during his recuperation. As if consciously retreating from his public role as civil rights spokesperson, Baldwin sets much of his tale in the pre-*Brown* era, opening again the wounds he suffered in white-only restaurants, on the streets of racist rural towns, in jails, and in precincts in New York and Paris. Leo’s brother Caleb experiences the racial profiling evident in Baldwin’s early works, and this experience leads Baldwin to advance an even more forceful indictment of the prison system than he had in earlier works. The difference is that the assassinations and disillusionments of the late 1960s following the promise of the 1950s deprive Baldwin of any hope that the raw power of the law can be altered or overcome. The spokesman disappears, the artist goes back into exile, and the fate of the individual is in the hands of the oppressor.

*Tell Me* was not well received by critics and has not been the subject of much critical scrutiny since then, with the notable exception of Lynn Orilla Scott’s chapter in *James Baldwin’s Later Fiction*. Mario Puzo, in *The New York Times Book Review*, called it “a simpleminded, one-dimensional novel with mostly cardboard characters, a polemical rather than narrative tone, weak invention, and poor selection of incident.”11 James Campbell writes, “almost everything that can go wrong with a novel has gone wrong here.”12 Scott attempts to redeem the novel from its harsh criticism and to reevaluate its significance, arguing that “the complete breakdown in understanding between Baldwin and the majority of his critics was, indeed, a sign of the times.”13 There is no denying the novel’s unwieldy nature, its centrifugal force emanating from a protagonist so deeply divided that he seems inconsistent in character and random in his attempts to give shape to his life. Leo’s responses to the world’s injustice range from all-out rage to helplessness. He rejects his brother’s religious fundamentalism as well as the artistic bullying of the San-Marquands; he gyrates between belief in long-term monogamy and resignation to bisexual promiscuity; his love for the southern white “princess” Barbara King and for the black nationalist Black Christopher cancel each other out, rather than balance each other out. It can safely be said that the United States was on the verge of madness when *Tell Me* was published in 1967. The
nation was as bitterly divided as it had ever been, along the lines of race, gender, political orientation, patriotism, and generational values. Without apologizing for its excesses, *Tell Me* can be appreciated as a chronicle of profoundly confused times from the perspective of a man deeply affected by the confusion. His dredged-up fear of the police and prisons provide a key to understanding how this chronicle falls into the pattern of his career.

Baldwin’s rejection of the church and his hatred of policemen, jails, and wardens are the most recognizable traits that link this work to all of his earlier work. He even begins the book with an epigraph from Auden that signals the book’s prison motif: “In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise.” The quotation is from Auden’s famous poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” significantly about how the death of a great poet—a private, obscure death on a cold day—affects humanity. The lines of Baldwin’s epigraph are from the poem’s conclusion, but they echo a line from the poem’s first section: “And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom.” In both of Auden’s lines, prison is a metaphor for self-imposed limitations. The artist’s role is to liberate the individual, to “teach” him how to transcend such prisons. This optimism about art’s potential is countered by the book’s essential pessimism when it comes to actual prisons. As an artist, Leo feels used up by the end of the book: he is at the mercy of others in the book’s final sentence as he finds himself “standing in the wings again, waiting for my cue” (*TM* 484). Having arrived on death’s doorstep, he is miraculously redelivered into the world, yet art does not have the same capacity for transcendence in Baldwin’s novel as it has in Auden’s poem. Leo’s art seems more a job than a calling, and rather than giving him life, it continues to kill him. Love, Baldwin’s other saving grace along with art, is similarly draining by the end of the book as Leo perceives that lovers use each other up rather than nurture one another.

It would be reductive to say that the police or prisons are the only factors that lead Leo to this despairing conclusion; yet they are undeniably large factors. Leo’s relationships with Barbara and Black Christopher are attempts to regain losses stemming from the end of his most profound relationship in the book: with his brother Caleb. It seems as though it is the church that stands between Caleb and Leo, but the church is, to use Baldwin’s terminology from “Down at the Cross,” merely Caleb’s “gimmick” to lift himself out of despair. The root cause of the rift between these brothers is Caleb’s wrongful arrest and the abuse he faces in prison. Leo describes the depth of their relationship in the book’s early pages: “We were very good friends. In fact, he was my best friend and for a very long
time, my only friend. . . . He was my touchstone, my model, and my only guide” (TM 13, 17). We later learn that the brothers also become lovers after Caleb returns from prison. The sexual contact between them is an attempt to heal the emotional wounds Caleb has suffered in prison.

Caleb’s removal to prison is, in fact, the central trauma of the book not only for Caleb, but for Leo as well. A central theme of the book is irrecoverable loss; immediately after Leo describes a recurrent nightmare in which he carries a book entitled “We Must Not Find Him, For He Is Lost,” he tells the reader,

When Caleb, my older brother, was taken from me and sent to prison, I watched, from the fire escape of our East Harlem tenement, the walls of an old and massive building, far, far away and set on a hill, and with green vines running up and down the walls, and with windows flashing like signals in the sunlight, I watched that building, I say, with a child’s helpless and stricken attention, waiting for my brother to come out of there. I did not know how to get to the building. If I had I would have slept in the shadow of those walls, and I told no one of my vigil or of my certain knowledge that my brother was imprisoned in that place. . . . Alas, he was not there; the building turned out to be City College; my brother was on a prison farm in the Deep South, working in the fields. (TM 9–10)

It is deeply ironic that Leo misinterprets a college building as prison, but this misinterpretation reveals the limits of his horizons as well as his sense that threats surround him. All of Harlem is a prison: he describes it as “the prison where” his Barbados-born father “perished” (TM 14), and his first home is “the tenement from which Caleb was arrested” (TM 17). As his world begins to expand beyond his immediate surroundings, he is aware of “the eyes of white cops, whom I feared, whom I hated with a literally murderous hatred” (TM 31). The other white authority figure toward whom he feels a murderous hatred is his landlord (TM 16), echoing the association between these two archetypal figures in “Previous Condition.” In both cases, Leo feels menaced by white authority figures; he associates his landlord with his own poverty, but the police represent the scrutiny and surveillance that he only dimly understands as power. He is not the only black Harlem resident who feels this fear; when Caleb’s friend Arthur leads Leo to Caleb, Leo says, “We walked the length of the block in silence . . . and passed two white cops, who looked at us sharply. Arthur muttered under his breath, ‘You white cock-suckers. I wish all of you were
dead.’ We slowed our pace a little; I had the feeling, I don’t know why, that this was because of the cops” (TM 50). Leo is becoming aware at this moment that his response to the police is instinctive: fight or flight. The instinct to flee, he learns from Arthur, must be controlled because to run is to admit fear and thus to attract suspicion. Leo takes Arthur’s cue and slows his pace in order to avoid persecution, though at the time he is not aware why he is doing it.

This scene foreshadows one that occurs the same night when the two brothers are harassed by the police. Leo is interrupted while narrating the details of a movie to Caleb in order to give a cover story to their parents: “we were hurrying down the long block which led east to our house, when we heard the brakes of a car and were blinded by bright lights and were pushed up against a wall. . . . I had never been so frightened in my life before. . . . A hand patted me all over my body, front and back, every touch humiliating, every touch obscene. Beside me, I heard Caleb catch his breath” (TM 57). Leo and Caleb are deliberately disoriented in this first encounter with the police, “blinded by bright lights,” hearing only the officers’ voices, feeling their hands without seeing their faces. This description is consistent with Foucault’s description of the panopticon, a “machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing.”14 Moreover, the police, “white, tight-lipped, and self-important” (TM 58), illustrate Foucault’s observation that “surveillance is based on a system of permanent registration”15 by asking the brothers for identification and for an explanation of where they have been and where they are going. There is no indication that Leo and Caleb have done anything suspicious or that there is any justification for harassing them, and Caleb remains cool, saving his anger to mutter under his breath after they have left, “you white cock-sucking dog-shit miserable white mother-fuckers” (TM 59). Leo is surprised at Caleb’s ability to keep calm throughout the encounter, and he again reveals how this evening has taught him how to act: “I also felt, I don’t know how, nor do I really know why, that I couldn’t let him feel, even for a moment, that I did not adore him, that I did not respect him, love him and admire him” (TM 59). Leo has observed not only that power must be answered with graceful aplomb, but that it must be combated with unconditional love for the fellow powerless. He and Caleb must bond together against such injustice, which they accept as inevitable; Caleb says, “I’m glad this happened. It had to happen one day and I’m glad it happened now. I’m glad it happened while I was with you—of course, I’m glad you were with me, too, dig, because if it hadn’t been for you, they’d have pulled my ass in
and given me a licking just as sure as shit” (TM 59). When Leo asks why, Caleb responds, “Because I’m black’ Caleb said. ‘That’s what for. Because I’m black and they paid to beat on black asses. But, with a kid your size, they just might get into trouble. So they let us go. They knew you weren’t nothing but a kid. They knew it. But they didn’t care. All black people are shit to them. You remember that. You black like me and they going to hate you as long as you live just because you’re black’” (TM 60). It is possible that Caleb is referring to all white people here rather than just to policemen, and Leo is confused about this aspect of the lessons he is taught that night. He interprets Caleb’s words as “true” and believes that his brother is talking about white people, but associates white power with policemen particularly: “I only saw the policemen, those murderous eyes again, those hands, with a touch like the touch of vermin. Were they people? ‘Caleb,’ I asked, ‘are white people people?’” (TM 60). His thoughts immediately turn to the landlord, but he also thinks of his white schoolteacher whom he likes very much, then changes his question: “are all white people the same?” (TM 61). Caleb responds, “I never met a good one” (TM 61). Leo, who grows to love Barbara and many other white people who work in the theater, is eventually able to reject such racial essentialism and to distinguish between policemen and other white people; but at least initially, the coarsest form of power and abuse is associated with white police, and this association remains in Leo’s mind.

One of the reasons these lessons lodge so deeply in Leo’s mind is that his father and his mother reinforce them. What Caleb has described in terms of an inevitable if unfortunate awakening in Leo also serves as a connection to his heritage. His father, upon hearing the story of police harassment, grows visibly outraged. He tries to respond practically, first commending Caleb for refraining from talking back to the police, then asking if he at least took their badge number; Caleb responds, “What for? You know a friendly judge? We got money for a lawyer? Somebody they going to listen to? You know as well as me they beating on black ass all the time, all the time, man, they get us in that precinct house and make us confess to all kinds of things and sometimes even kill us and don’t nobody give a damn. Don’t nobody care what happens to a black man. If they didn’t need us for work, they’d have killed us all off a long time ago. They did it to the Indians.” Their mother agrees: “I wish I could say different, but it’s the truth” (TM 64). The powerlessness of the Proudhammer family is evident; all they have is their rage and their solidarity in the face of police harassment. Leo remains confused about the difference between all white people and the white police officers who have harassed him, and
this confusion is at the core of his more general confusion about his place in the world, even after he becomes a successful actor.

More pointedly, this incident with the police sets in motion the events that will take his beloved brother Caleb away and thus leave a void in his life that will never be filled. He gradually makes clearer the distinctions between white people and white policemen, the latter of whom were the key to the question he raises about “what principle united so peculiarly bloodless a people [i.e., white people]. I suspected that the principle was cruelty, but I was not sure” (TM 118). He claims that he and his white peers “fought all the time . . . but I was lucky in that we usually fought fair” (TM 119). In other words, their animosity was not agitated by a power imbalance, and in fact he and his classmates “had to band together against the cops—and I had long ago dismissed the cops from all human consideration. But the others, the men and women, young and old, sometimes smiling, sometimes harsh, always distant—if I fell into their hands, would they treat me like the cops?” (TM 119). The law’s capacity for physical and psychological torment, which Leo has experienced first hand, is, in his mind, a weapon that all white people might have and might use against him if they are indeed motivated by cruelty. This distortion accounts for Leo’s cynicism.

The timing of this question within the narrative is significant: immediately after his attempt to work through the difference between white people and white policemen, Leo tells of the fateful day when Caleb is arrested. The circumstances are almost identical to what happens to Richard in Go Tell It: “They done robbed a store, whoever they is, and stabbed a man half to death. They say Caleb was with them” (TM 122). Leo tries to process the information, but his fear paralyzes him: “My mind had stopped, stuck, screaming, on the faces of white cops” (TM 122). Leo runs off frantically to warn Caleb, but the lessons he learned on the night they were harassed by the police have stayed with him: “something cautioned me not to run too fast; something cautioned me to dissemble my distress; something cautioned me to look, to look about me, before I moved” (TM 123). These behaviors are not powerful weapons against the police, but they will at least keep Leo relatively invisible. Once he reaches Caleb, though, they both realize that there is nothing to do: “‘If I run,’ said Caleb, ‘I won’t get far. And then they’ll fix my ass for sure’” (TM 124). The three policemen who find Caleb, pointedly white (TM 125), are more thuggish and racist than any who have appeared in Baldwin’s work until this point. When Dolores, whose house they have entered, asks why they want to see Caleb, one responds, “Listen to the nigger bitch” (TM 125). When Caleb
asks why they are bringing him to the station, the scene becomes a nightmare; “You’re a very inquisitive bunch of niggers. Here’s what for,” and he suddenly grabbed Caleb and smashed the pistol butt against the side of his head. The blood ran down—my brother’s blood. I jumped up, howling, from the sofa, trying to get to Caleb, but they knocked me back. . . . I butted one cop in the behind, with all my might I dragged on one of his legs. ‘Get that kid out of here,’ one of them said, and somebody tried to grab me, but I kicked and bit again. I tumbled headlong down the steps and grabbed the policeman’s leg again. I held on, I held on, he dragged me down. . . . Now the cop kicked me, and I tasted blood” (TM 126). The violence of this scene is in marked contrast to earlier arrest scenes, such as Baldwin’s in “Equal in Paris” or Richard’s in Go Tell It. Even the officer who asks the young Baldwin in “Down at the Cross,” “Why don’t you niggers stay uptown where you belong?” seems relatively harmless next to these officers. Their oppressive control has not only shattered the confidence of a young black man, as it had done with Baldwin and Richard, but it has divided a family. Caleb’s physical removal from Leo’s life is only one aspect of this division; immediately after he is taken away, Leo returns to his parents and declares that he hates both of them. The power of the law to divide and disrupt black families becomes an increasingly prominent motif in Baldwin’s writing from this point on.

The other distinction between Caleb’s experience in prison and Baldwin’s earlier renditions of this motif is that here the prison experience is described in gruesome detail. This scene has not received adequate critical attention; even Lynn Orilla Scott, who has written the most substantial analysis of Baldwin’s later fiction, initially says that Caleb’s story “interrupts the longer story of Leo’s summer at the Actors’ Means Workshop,” though she later analyzes it in some detail in the context of “the sexual dynamics of racism on the black male body.” For the purposes of my study, Caleb’s story of incarceration marks a shift in Baldwin’s perception of this subject that will pave the way for later works. In earlier fiction, such as Go Tell It, Giovanni’s Room, and “Sonny’s Blues,” the incarcerated characters are carried away. Regardless of whether or not they return to society, the reader is not given direct access to their experience behind bars. Baldwin describes his own prison experience in “Equal in Paris” in such a way as to show the psychological torment and physical deprivation involved in even the mildest forms of incarceration. In Tell Me, though, he chooses to illuminate the prison experience in its most horrifying manifestation, as a form of raw power abuse and psychosexual torture that damages Caleb forever. Like Sonny and the narrator of “Sonny’s Blues,”
there is initially a communication breakdown between these brothers: “He had been home a week, but he and I had found it hard to talk—he did not want to tell me what his time away had been like. But I knew what it had been like from the way he flinched whenever my breath touched the open wound, from the distance between us, as though he were saying, Don’t come near me. I’ve got the plague” (TM 202). An abstract, indirect rendering of the prison experience is no longer enough to serve Baldwin’s purpose in this novel, though, which is to explore Leo’s idea that cruelty might be a stronger force than love, and to contemplate whether psychological and emotional loss are permanent. Caleb’s story is evidence of the supremacy of cruelty and the irrecoverable nature of loss. Not even a desperate act of transgression like incest can help to heal Caleb.

The fact that Caleb is taken to a prison “farm” in the “Deep South” suggests more than an incidental relationship between his incarceration and slavery. This connection is a cornerstone of H. Bruce Franklin’s study The Victim as Criminal and Artist, in which he argues, “Contemporary prison literature returns to the explicitness of the slave narrative. . . . But this literature goes much further than the slave narrative, for it speaks as part of a profoundly more revolutionary age.” He dates the beginning of the contemporary era of prison literature in 1965, with the publication of The Autobiography of Malcolm X, which was very much in the air when Tell Me was published. Joy James, in The New Abolitionists, also writes explicitly of this connection: “Prison is the modern day manifestation of the plantation. The antebellum plantation ethos of dehumanization was marked by master–slave relations revolving about sexual terror and domination, beatings, regimentation of bodies, exploited labor, denial of religious and cultural practices, substandard food, health care, and housing, forced migration, isolation in ‘lockdown’ for punishment and control, denial of birth family and kin” (xxiii). This description closely resembles Caleb’s experience; when he finally feels ready to discuss his experience, it initially sounds like an excerpt from a nineteenth-century slave narrative:

The farm I was on, down yonder. They used to beat me. With whips. With rifle butts. It made them feel good to beat us; I can see their faces now. There would always be two or three of them, big mother-fuckers. The ring-leader had red hair, his name was Martin Howell. Big, dumb Irishman, sometimes he used to make the colored guys beat each other. And he’d stand there, watching, with his lips dropping, his lips wet, laughing, until the poor guy dropped to the ground. And he’d say,
That’s just so you all won’t forget that you is niggers and niggers ain’t worth a shit. And he’d make the colored guys say it. He’d say, You ain’t worth shit, are you? And they’d say, No, Mr. Howell, we ain’t worth shit. The first time I heard it, saw it, I vomited. But he made me say it, too. It took awhile, but I said it, too, he made me say it, too. That hurt me, hurt me more than his whip, more than his rifle butt, more than his fists. (*TM 232*)

Under the system of slavery, supervisors would use similar tactics to the ones Howell uses to dehumanize and divide any spirit of cooperation or community among slaves. Howell parades through the fields on horseback, continually reinforces his racist message through physical force, and turns the black inmates against one another. He also reinforces his power through sexual harassment; after Caleb refuses to acknowledge him, Howell asks, “Nigger, if my balls was on your chin, where would my prick be?” (*TM 233*). Caleb responds by picking up a pitchfork, thus initiating a standoff between the two of them reminiscent of the famous animosity between Covey and Frederick Douglass in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Caleb realizes that Howell is attempting to emasculate him: “He made me feel like I was my grandmother in the fields somewhere and this white mother-fucker rides over and decides to throw her down in the fields. Well, shit. You know. I ain’t my grandmother. I’m a man” (*TM 233*). His assertion of his own masculine power only gets him to the point of conflict, though, because Howell, entrusted with the power of the law, has greater weapons than a pitchfork. When Caleb and Leo were first harassed by the police, Caleb realized that it was futile to take down their badge number. Similarly, in prison, he understands that he has no recourse to report Howell’s abuse: “He was going to break my back. I knew it. He was going to make me kneel down. He was going to make me act out his question. I wasn’t going to do it. He knew it. And I knew it. And there we were” (*TM 234*).

The structure of a prison is hierarchical, and its nature is to make the incarcerated feel that freedom is relative. In current parlance, a minimum security prison is better than a supermax. A cell is bad, but “the hole”—solitary confinement—is worse. An outside work detail is preferable to empty time in a cell, even if the work is hard and if the worker is uncompensated. Caleb describes how Howell uses this structure to exercise his power over him: “They had a place there where they put you when they was displeased. It was a kind of cellar. We was already in jail, you understand, but they had a jail inside the jail. But, at least, you know, if they
wasn’t displeased with you, if you could kiss enough ass, or if they just plain didn’t notice you, well, you was in the open air, and, you know, you could talk to your buddies—we was only put there, like they said, for our own good” (TM 234). This description illustrates Foucault’s assertion that a chief aim of incarceration is to produce “docile bodies”: Caleb realizes that he would have an easier time in prison if he weren’t defiant, if he submitted to the will of Howell and the other guards. Caleb goes out of his way to explain that Howell was not the only one who wielded power over him, that the white female cook who is his boss for a while is also physically abusive. Moreover, race is not the only factor determining this power dynamic: “sometimes these mother-fuckers was white, baby, and sometimes they was black” (TM 237). The point here is that the power of the prison to take away the will of individual prisoners is not in the hands of one person. As the “ring-leader,” Howell is merely the most visible figure of power, but not because of his physical power alone. Despite his whips, pistol-butt, and horse, Caleb is assured that he himself can physically overpower Howell. When Caleb attempts to assert himself by counterattacking Howell who has touched him sexually, he realizes how Howell’s power is reinforced by the prison structure.

The experience of solitary confinement is finally what undoes Caleb. He describes it as the starkest form of deprivation associated with imprisonment: no window, a door with bars, no plumbing, “stale bread and cold water,” and rats (TM 237). Caleb loses physical strength and all sense of time. Nevertheless, when Howell returns for the inevitable battle between them, Caleb manages to get the better of him: “I made that mother scream” (TM 239). Howell’s stated intention is to continue his sexual humiliation of Caleb, but this is only one possible way of reinforcing the sense of hierarchy Caleb has refused to acknowledge. Howell calls in reinforcements; Caleb continues his resistance, but he changes when “one of the black trusties spit[s] on [him]” (TM 239). At this point Caleb submits to the race-based self-loathing that Howell has reinforced on all of the other black inmates: “You right, Mr. Howell. I ain’t worth shit. And they left me. And I was alone down there for a long time. On bread and water” (TM 239). This is the end of Caleb’s narrative, and its effect on Leo is to inspire in him a murderous hatred in almost the exact terms Richard uses in Blues for Mister Charlie: “Because I could love, I realized I could hate. And I realized that I would feed my hatred, feed it every day and every hour. I would keep it healthy, I would make it strong, and I would find a use for it one day” (TM 239). This vow for vengeance has no outlet in Leo’s life, though, and he ends up internalizing it, hating himself at times,
Caleb at times, and Barbara and her family at times, but never doing anything productive to combat the law’s terrifying and absolute power. Throughout the novel, he remains scared of the police who continue to haunt and scrutinize public life. Rather than revenge, he seeks safety by keeping himself profoundly visible through fame. Caleb’s experience does not spur him to action, in other words, but rather reinforces his essential fear. Moreover, it prevents him from being able to follow his life-affirming instinct to love and comfort others.

On the one occasion when Leo attempts to “feed his hatred”—when an elderly white couple regards him suspiciously as he leaves Madeleine’s apartment and he responds by reacting in a bizarre and immature way—he is promptly arrested, and his fear is evident. As in his early arrest and when Caleb is in the hole, Leo emphasizes that he is blinded by the police light, and that the police touch him inappropriately: “There they were, of course, in blue, two of them, of course, white, of course. One stood by the car, while the other came up to me, and frisked me. Cops love frisking black boys, they want to find out if what they’ve heard is true” (TM 251). Despite this initial description in which Leo sounds both angry and bored with this ritual, he immediately reveals his fear: “People become frightened in very different ways—the ways in which they become frightened may sometimes determine how long they live. Here I was, in the country, and on a country road, alone, facing two armed white men who had legal sanction to kill me; and if killing me should prove to be an error, it would not matter very much, it would not, for them, be a serious error” (TM 252). His response is to be neither fearful nor defiant, clearly reacting to Arthur’s and Caleb’s responses to the police earlier in his life: “They were accustomed to black boys whimpering, or, on the other hand, defiant, and it was easy, in either case, for them to know exactly what to do—to amuse themselves with the whimper or the defiance, and beat the shit out of the boy, and sometimes to beat the boy to death” (TM 252). He determines that he can only combat law enforcement officers by revealing that he understands and has access to higher echelons of the law’s power, and he calmly and repeatedly asks the officers why he is being arrested. He does this with the knowledge that he can use the names of the wealthy white people who run the Actors’ Means Theater “as a threat” (TM 252). Still, his bravado masks fear not only because of Caleb’s experience, but also because of its link to history: “I became faint, and hot and cold with terror. It was in vain that I told myself, Leo, this isn’t the South. I knew better than to place any hope in the accidents of North American geography. This was America, America, America, and those people out there, my
countrymen, had been tearing me limb from limb, like dogs, for centuries. I would not be the first. In the bloody event, I would not be the last” (TM 253). He continues to struggle with these dark fantasies of persecution, trying to maintain his composure enough to keep insisting on his rights; he tells the precinct officer, “I think the law compels you to tell me what the charges are against me. You have no right to hold me without charges. . . . I’m only telling you what my rights are, as a citizen of this country” (TM 254). He judges this utterance “a tactical error” (TM 254), but it apparently works: he is not booked or charged with anything. In fact, he manages to accuse the officers: “it is you who are acting against the law!” (TM 257). This pronouncement is consistent with H. Bruce Franklin’s claim: “What crime had the African people committed to be imprisoned? Obviously none at all. Hence the Afro-American people quickly arrive at a further conclusion: the real criminals must be those who uphold what is called law and order in America.”

Although it might seem like Leo has taken a high-minded approach to combating the law’s power and has won, the truth of the matter seems to be less positive. Leo and his friends are able to walk away unharmed and to insult the police officers as “Nazis” as well, but Leo’s escape depends entirely on his affiliation with wealthy, powerful white people rather than on his insistence that he has rights. Lola San-Marquand says to the precinct officer, “A word of advice. I will try to put it in extremely simple language so that you can understand it. The people standing before you are more powerful than you. I am more powerful than you, and I can break you by making a phone call” (TM 261). The lesson Leo learns on this night is not that everyone has equal rights in the eyes of the law, but rather that some people are more powerful, due to wealth and influence, than law enforcement officers, and his recourse is to seek their protection. He admits this to Barbara afterwards: “‘[The police] just scared me. . . . They humiliated me. They made me feel like a dog. They tried to turn me into something worse than they are. They had a wonderful time doing it, now they all feel more like men. And I was very lucky. They were afraid to go too far. They were afraid the Workshop might make a stink.’ I paused, and I laughed. ‘So now I owe my life to Saul and Lola’” (TM 266). Even though Leo isn’t detained, the social hierarchies of race and class are preserved through this incident. As a poor, black man, Leo cannot hope to be able to assert his rights unless he seeks the protection of rich, white people. There is little comfort in this idea, and no sense of social progress. Leo’s “rights” are meaningless when the law is a blunt instrument in the hands of its enforcers.
Leo becomes resigned to his fate, which is ultimately in the hands of others; as he tells an interviewer, “I do not belong to me” (TM 324). Through the rest of the novel the police continue to haunt the streets around him—from the restaurant where he works as a struggling young actor to the public rallies he and Christopher participate in once he is famous. He states, of one of these rallies, “The rally was guarded by the police, whom we were, in fact, attacking. They were there to make certain that none of the damage which we asserted was being done to the city’s morals would so far transform itself as to become damage to the city’s property” (TM 108). This sardonic observation suggests that the rallies will not really do much good: the police exist to protect the interests of the wealthy. Leo becomes desensitized to the point that he barely registers incidents of police brutality; he notes, tiredly, “I walked out into the streets again, to find a cop beating up some poor man in the gutter” (TM 431).

Leo begins to consider the violent militancy of Black Christopher as the only way to combat such power, but stops short of endorsing it. Christopher represents the spirit and hope of the next generation from which Leo feels distant, perhaps because he has put his faith in the legal leverage of the wealthy and powerful. Christopher informs him, “Leo—you a fat cat now. That’s the way a whole lot of people see you, and you can’t blame them, how else can they see you? . . . all these laws and speeches don’t mean shit. They do not mean shit. It’s the spirit of the [white] people, baby, the spirit of the people, they don’t want us and they don’t like us, and you see that spirit in the face of every cop. Them laws they keep passing, shit, they just like the treaties they signed with the Indians. Nothing but lies, they never even meant to keep those treaties, baby, they wanted the land and they got it and now they mean to keep it, even if they have to put every black mother-fucker in this country behind barbed wire, or shoot him down like a dog” (TM 479). Both Leo and Caleb had felt as though law enforcement officers had wanted to transform them into dogs. Christopher’s metaphor brings back this notion and questions why Leo insists on fighting for civil rights legally. Christopher claims that they need guns, not laws, if they are to prevail. Leo is silent when he hears this, for he remains fearful of the law’s power. Christopher’s skepticism about the efficacy of “them laws they keep passing”—presumably, given the novel’s publication date, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and all of the decisions based upon them—reflects Baldwin’s growing skepticism about these laws as well, but Leo does not respond to Christopher’s cry for militancy. Fearful of and damaged by the law’s power, he prefers to remain visible so that he will not meet the same fate
Caleb met in prison. He has become a “fat cat” because he realizes that wealthy, influential people are to a large degree safe from the law’s potential for abuse. He is left with a sense of paranoia about the law, believing strongly that he is “under surveillance” by the police (TM 481), and his solution is not to join an underground movement like Christopher’s but rather to return to exile and to focus on his artistic career rather than on social change.

Baldwin’s feelings of relative powerlessness and skepticism toward social progress in the late 1960s stemmed from his discouragement and disillusionment following the assassinations of black leaders. In 1972 he published One Day When I Was Lost, his version of Malcolm X’s life based on The Autobiography of Malcolm X rendered as a film scenario. The film was never made in Baldwin’s lifetime, but Baldwin’s script, edited by Arnold Perl, was one of the primary sources for Spike Lee’s 1992 film Malcolm X. One Day When I Was Lost illustrates a number of parallels between Baldwin’s life and Malcolm X’s: they both underwent a religious conversion, they were both black leaders who fell out of favor with the most radical members of the black community for supposedly sympathizing too much with whites (at least in Baldwin’s rendition of Malcolm X’s life), and they both feared persecution and even assassination (with obvious foundation, in Malcolm X’s case). With regard to the law, One Day When I Was Lost brings together a number of themes Baldwin had explored throughout his career: the way prisons foment hatred, the devastating effects of police brutality on the peacefulness of black neighborhoods, and, especially, black desire to achieve some alternative form of power when legal power is denied to them.

The story of Malcolm X’s conversion to Islam and his self-education in prison is one of the more famous scenes from his autobiography. One Day When I Was Lost depicts Malcolm’s imprisonment as a near inevitability: he is a street kid who has a problem with authority, and under the tutelage of “West Indian Archie,” he falls into gambling and drugs, among other illegal pursuits. He is aligned with other Baldwin victim-heroes like Sonny in “Sonny’s Blues” whose prison experience helps to formulate a crucial insight about social hierarchy as well as spiritual conversion or moral reform. Late in the scenario, Malcolm visits Sidney in jail, a character Baldwin has invented in his dramatic rendition of Malcolm X’s life. Sidney, a representative of the younger generation, accuses Malcolm of not understanding the reality of the current situation. Malcolm suggests that there are a number of people, black and white, albeit a small number, who are dedicated to change; Sidney responds, from behind his plexiglass wall,
Oh, Malcolm, Malcolm, what’s come over you? I can take you through this prison right now, and show you a thousand black men dedicated to change! Waiting for someone to help them to change things! For help—they need help! You know who’s in these prisons? Niggers and Puerto Ricans, niggers and Puerto Ricans. And they in here because ain’t no other place for them in this fucked-up white man’s society—and I’m supposed to love this man? Shit. (OD 262)

Malcolm responds by reminding Sidney that his own perspective was also altered in prison, and adds his interpretation of oppression not as simply a black-white hierarchy:

I know who’s in prison—and I know why. I was in prison, too, and I remember it, even though I think you think I don’t. All I’ve been trying to say is that white people in this country are what they are not because of the color of their skins—they’re what they are because of this country—because they live in a racist country. I’ve been trying to say what I’m beginning to see—Christianity and capitalism are the two evils which have placed us where we are—in prison. (OD 262)

This perspective closely resembles Baldwin’s—who, like Malcolm, rejected Christianity, though not as part of a conversion to Islam. Yet this critical perspective doesn’t matter to the powerless: Malcolm asks Sidney, “How can I make you believe me again?” and the young man responds, “By getting us out of prison” (OD 263). Whether one interprets the force behind prisons in terms of race, religion, or economic structure, the fact remains that the subjugated have no power. To be in prison is to be deprived not only of liberty, but of any means to control one’s destiny. This theme has stayed with Baldwin since the publication of “Equal in Paris.”

In fact, the lack of access to legal power is a direct cause leading to Malcolm’s imprisonment in the first place. Having avoided reform school and graduated as a top student and class president, Malcolm goes to a young teacher, Mr. Ostrovski, to seek career advice. (Baldwin created the character of Sidney for dramatic purposes, but Ostrovski is a real person represented in The Autobiography of Malcolm X.) When Ostrovski asks him what he wants to do, he says, “well, everybody seems to feel that I have a logical mind—and they seem to think that I talk well and am kind of presentable—well—the subject which really interests me is—law. . . . I think I’d like to try to be a lawyer sir” (OD 43). Ostrovski immediately shoots down Malcolm’s dreams in no uncertain terms: “Colored people
can’t become lawyers, Malcolm. That’s all there is to it” (OD 44). He even repeats these words in the same speech for emphasis, and they echo in Malcolm’s head throughout the book. When he and Shorty walk by the Harvard Law School Forum, Shorty observes, “This is where they turn out all them lawyers—to help keep you and me in jail” (OD 47), and Malcolm does not disagree. Having been denied access to the law’s power simply because of his skin color, he decides that the law is an oppressive force, not a tool he can get his hands on. After Shorty’s observation, Malcolm’s hatred immediately starts to germinate: “Malcolm stares at this building. His face is very bitter. Carved on the façade is a Latin maxim meaning ‘Equal justice under the law.’ Bells begin ringing. They are dismissal bells, resounding now across the campus, as the students, all of them white, pour out of the building. They scarcely see Malcolm and Shorty—they descend on the boys like waves breaking, and pass them with the same indifference—but they leave in their wake a very human resentment and wonder. Malcolm watches these students, with hatred in his eyes” (OD 47). The trajectory of the narrative from this moment on sends Malcolm’s life into a spiral. Having been summarily denied the ability to act as a practitioner and interpreter of the law, he sees no choice except to break it in every way he can—from illegal drug use, to weapon possession, to pimping. His drive to become literate and his conversion to Islam, both of which take place in prison, break this self-destructive pattern and enable him to become a prominent leader who speaks, pointedly, at the Harvard Law School Forum (OD 206).

As was the case with Leo in Tell Me, Malcolm’s ability to invert the power dynamic that has kept him down throughout his life comes from his gradual recognition that there are higher powers than the police, and also that eloquence and a public declaration of one’s rights can be effective weapons against police brutality. This knowledge comes slowly, though. Initially, Malcolm engages with the plainclothes police officers who are tailing him at their level, combatively calling them “dirty, white, low-life motherfuckers” (OD 98) and throwing their words back in their faces when they threaten him by saying, “You may not be so lucky next time” (OD 99). They continue to monitor him carefully, and one eventually suggests, “I think it’s about time you left town, Red” (OD 114). This culminating scene of police harassment causes Laura’s words to echo in his head, “You a lawyer yet?” (OD 115). A hollow realization of his own failure to gain power within the system immediately precedes his sentencing, and he stares at the judge “with murder in his eyes” just as he had stared at the Harvard Law students with hatred in his eyes (OD 124).
police, lawyers-in-training, and judges all represent the same thing to him: unchangeable hierarchy.

Malcolm’s belligerent behavior does not serve him well in prison. The guards label him “troublemaker” right away (OD 129) and, like Caleb in Tell Me, he is beaten and forced into solitary confinement. His rage reaches a fever pitch, and while declaring to the guards, “I hate every one of you” he smashes his fist against the prison wall (OD 131). His mentor, Luther, turns this self-destructive incident into a lesson: “Red, you got more sense than any cat in this prison—only, you don’t use it. You ain’t using your brains when you go around busting your fist against stone walls. That’s just what the white man wants you to do. Like he wants us to keep fighting each other—because as long as we fighting each other, we ain’t fighting him. And he wants you to beat your brains out, Red, against that stone wall he’s built. That’s why he built it—for you to beat your brains out against it” (OD 135). From the perspective of this wise insider, the power represented by the prison is both a barrier and a weapon, provided that the incarcerated man believes that he must physically attack it as opposed to the forces that created it. Like Malcolm’s engagement with the police who are following him, his initial behavior in prison reflects his inability to see beyond the physical and into the more abstract power of the law. At this point, he has only resentment: against Mr. Ostrovski for telling him he cannot become a lawyer, against the white law students who will become lawyers and who fail to see him, against the police who humiliate him, and against the judge who sentences him. Such rage, devoid of any deeper understanding of the law’s power, does the opposite of liberating Malcolm: as Luther says, it ensures that Malcolm will “stay locked up all [his] life” (OD 130).

The more Malcolm behaves like Caleb from Tell Me (pre-conversion, in both cases), the more effective the law is in containing and controlling him. When he begins to associate with powerful figures—that is, when he becomes more like Leo—Malcolm is finally able to combat legal power. His education enables him to write to Elijah Muhammad to thank him for his teachings: “You have made me understand why black men are in prison” (OD 155). This knowledge is crucial. When the police beat and incarcerate Brother Hinton, Malcolm arrives and is able to speak on behalf of an angry mob that has gathered on the scene. Though he never becomes a lawyer, Malcolm sounds like one in his interactions with the officer in charge; he says, “You have beaten and imprisoned a certain Minister Hinton, you have him on the premises, we demand to see him, and we have eyewitness proof of the beating” (OD 181). The scene is strik-
ingly similar to the scene in *Tell Me* when Leo is arrested and confronts the officer in charge, indicating that he has influence with an authority figure higher than the police. By the end of the encounter, Malcolm has enough courage to order the officer to get Hinton to a hospital and to say to him, “If you spend much more time asking funny questions, you going to find yourself answering some.—You want that pension, don’t you? Well, you better get on that phone.—You dog” (*OD* 184). He is finally able to claim a higher moral position than that of the police, and as he becomes a more effective and influential speaker, he is able to exploit this position. Baldwin also exploits it. As Malcolm states in a speech, “The white man is in no moral position to accuse anyone else of hate!” the scenario directions state, “(Cut to: police dogs being used on children. Police on horseback using cattle prods on men, women, and children)” (*OD* 202). Reinforcing Malcolm’s description of the police as dogs here, Baldwin associates police with animals, which may connect to the grisly montage in the first part of the scenario in which witnesses to a lynching turn into animals who feed on the corpse, then turn back into people (*OD* 150–51). By rendering the police as subhuman and connecting them through animal imagery to this lynching scene, as he did in “Going to Meet the Man,” Baldwin has attempted to invert the hierarchy that would place law enforcement officers above the incarcerated.

Baldwin’s rendering of Malcolm X’s life recalls both brothers from *Tell Me*, but it also connects to another book he published in 1972, the essay *No Name in the Street*. The brutality and dehumanization of the prison experience is crucial to *One Day When I Was Lost*, but it becomes even more crucial in this essay and in Baldwin’s next novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (discussed in chapter 5). His deeper involvement in prison in these years is based on the incarceration of his friend and sometime bodyguard Tony Maynard, whose fate is connected, in Baldwin’s essay, to the fate of the assassinated leaders of the 1960s: Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King. Baldwin’s sense that he might be the next victim of an assassin’s bullet and his concerns with prisoners had both become obsessions at this point of his life. In addition to the Maynard case, he had directed a play by Canadian playwright John Herbert called *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* in Turkey that takes place in a prison/reformatory for young men. According to Campbell, “the police tried to ban it” because its homosexual content made it “a threat to public order.” Magdalena Zaborowska discusses Baldwin’s involvement with the play in detail in her recent study *James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile*. She argues that this play was a natural for Baldwin because of his personal
and artistic interests at the time: “By having made sexual violence central among the other interlocking systems of oppression—racism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia—Herbert’s *Fortune* privileges male gender and homosexuality and reveals them as embroiled with racism.”

Baldwin saw prison as a metaphor for the types of struggles that plague the free as well as the incarcerated: “[Baldwin] tried to make the actors understand that the play emphasized the power of experience, that ‘life on the inside of the prison was not much different from the life outside.’”

One of the most innovative ways Baldwin illustrated this principle on stage was to replace the traditional proscenium curtain with iron bars. According to Zaborowska, “Baldwin’s play ends with the deafening sound of the iron bars that separate the stage from the audience being slammed shut, thus sealing the fate of the children imprisoned behind them, ‘cut down . . . before our eyes.’”

In an interview about the play, Baldwin declared, “Unless the society and the audience feel disturbed by this play, they won’t try to correct the situations displayed there,” and he attempted to disturb the audience by emphasizing these iron bars: “he would have the actors bang on and shake the heavy iron bars that separated the length of the stage from the audience, or the guard would run his stick over the bars or hit them violently.”

The production of *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* that Baldwin directed only seemed to whet his appetite for other projects involving prisons. According to Campbell, Baldwin planned to stage a play inside an actual prison, and he was also considering a film project based on *Soledad Brother*, George Jackson’s celebrated collection of prison letters written to his brother, the publication of which touched off the riot at Attica.

One of Baldwin’s lovers during this period was in jail for armed robbery. His letters to Baldwin beg for visits during his furloughs, ask for clothing that he can wear upon his release, and include official letters he has written about the conditions at Walpole prison in Massachusetts, where he was being held.

Baldwin’s friend, the actor David Moses, co-organized a short-lived program in California prisons called “Artists in Prison,” and he enticed Baldwin to send a letter of support for grants and for a quotation to put on the program’s masthead. Baldwin complied, and in a letter to Moses dated September 27, 1974, he wrote, “What you are trying to do is to re-create the prisoner’s sense of life, of love, to re-affirm the powerful truth of his genuine existence in the human community: to make him know that we have not left him to perish inside the walls.” Baldwin was clearly deeply involved with prisoners and the prison experience during this period of his career: Maynard’s case was only the beginning.
No Name in the Street was the fullest expression of Baldwin’s involvement with the Maynard case, but it was only one expression. As early as January 10, 1968, less than a year after the crime for which Maynard was arrested, Baldwin composed an open letter that expressed his outrage and anticipated his obsession with incarceration that would last the rest of his life. He contemplated an entire book on the Maynard case, to be called Upon My Soul. The rough notes for the book, two pages in length, describe that the first part is to be titled “IN” and the second part “OUT,” emphasizing the radical, absolute societal divide represented by the prison system. Baldwin saw Maynard’s case as representative. Also in rough notes he writes, “Tony has the last word, his voice must control the book, otherwise there can be no book: the world is full of beaten prisoners, and very few of them can speak. Whoever can speak must speak for all the others.”

Although the book Upon My Soul never came to fruition, Baldwin did his best to give Maynard a voice in No Name in the Street.

At first glance, No Name in the Street is unlikely to be classified as a prison narrative, for it is a wide-ranging essay whose subject is most often described as American race relations in the 1960s. Baldwin examines his own life at length in the first section of the book, “Take Me to the Water.” In the second section, “To Be Baptized,” he discusses his contacts with the three prominent black leaders who were assassinated in the 1960s: Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. Baldwin also writes about his contacts with other famous African American figures such as Black Panthers founders Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and Eldridge Cleaver. Taken together, these six men were among the most influential black leaders of their time, despite their different causes, approaches, interpretations, and suggested solutions to the race crisis in the United States. Yet if we back away for a moment from the historical importance of these figures and their contributions to the struggle for equality or their militant pronouncements, we see that all six of them had something else in common: they were all, for varying amounts of time and for various reasons, in prison. Baldwin touches upon their prison experiences briefly (if at all) as he constructs the essay, but the fact that they all spent time in prison leads us to a greater understanding of the central figure of No Name in the Street: Tony Maynard, Baldwin’s former driver and bodyguard, who was accused and jailed for a murder that he swears “upon [his] soul” (NN 104) that he didn’t commit.

Yoshinobu Hakutani’s “No Name in the Street: James Baldwin’s Image of the American Sixties,” one of the first and longest critical essays on
Baldwin’s book, only briefly mentions Tony Maynard. Maynard’s case, according to Hakutani, “provides the narrative with a sense of immediacy and attests to Baldwin’s personal involvement with contemporary affairs.” He goes on to say, “Since Tony Maynard is treated as a victim of the indifference and hatred that exists in society, this episode also becomes a structural thread to other episodes that otherwise appear fragmentary.” It is this sense of structure and focus that I would like to consider, for Maynard’s case is really at the center of the essay, both thematically and physically (beginning on page 100 of a 197-page text, in the Laurel paperback edition). Zaborowska considers the book’s structure as a way of linking Baldwin’s “encounter with the South” to the prison-industrial complex: “Read in such a symmetrical manner, the two parts of No Name in the Street offer parallel intra- and international contexts for reading the ways in which white males exercise their power through spatial practices of segregation and incarceration of people of color.”

Although it is difficult to summarize briefly what Baldwin’s rich and complex essay is “about,” its most consistent motif is separation: between black America and white America, within black America (as Baldwin’s autobiographical segment indicates), between Europe/America and Africa, or between the conditions of imprisonment and freedom. Meditating on the distance between himself and a childhood friend, Baldwin writes, “How can one say that freedom is taken, not given, and that no one is free until all are free? and that the price is high” (NN 21). The most obvious and sensational examples of the taking of freedom are the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, but Baldwin consistently turns to the example of Tony Maynard, whose prison experience acts as an intensifying metaphor for the black experience, which amounts to this: “Blacks have never been free in this country, never was it intended that they should be free” (NN 177). Such bold statements, Baldwin notes, are not meant to “[advocate] violence” (NN 191), but rather “to face certain blunt, human facts” (NN 192). The antidote to the disease of separation in American society, according to Baldwin, is the truth.

Baldwin cannot state his thesis this simply because of the complexity of both race relations and imprisonment in the late twentieth century. He describes how a white woman he was involved with once slapped his face in public, causing him to run with the knowledge that he “was a target for police” (NN 109). Perhaps recalling the fate of Frank Stafford whose brutal beating led to the Harlem Six incident, he claims that he is “astonished until today that I have both my eyes and most of my teeth and functioning
kidneys and my sexual equipment: but small black boys have the advantage of being able to curl themselves into knots, and roll with the kicks and the punches. . . . I was black and visible and helpless and the word was out to ‘get’ me, and so, soon, I, too, hauled ass. And the prisons of this country are full of boys like the boy I was” (NN 108–9). This passive resistance or flight response recalls Leo, who learns that only luck or good connections prevents any black man from being in prison, or from being irrevocably damaged by prison.

In the context of the essay, Tony Maynard’s experience carries the weight of being, to some extent, representative. Maynard is still in prison at the end of the narrative despite Baldwin’s attempts to plead his case. Moreover, he is innocent in Baldwin’s eyes and has been brutally beaten in prison, bearing the scars that Baldwin miraculously escaped years earlier. When Baldwin and his German editor try to visit Maynard, the guard initially tries to prevent them from seeing him. When they insist, Maynard is finally brought before them, “beaten very hard; his cheekbones had disappeared and one of his eyes was crooked; he looked swollen above the neck, and he took down his shirt collar, presently, to show us the swelling on his shoulders. And he was weeping” (NN 115). The essay is divided into two major sections with thirty-three subdivisions of varying lengths. Baldwin immediately begins the next subdivision with Maynard’s own narrative of the beating in his own voice. The beating occurred after the guard took away Maynard’s religious medallion; he says, “I started beating on the door of my cell, trying to make him come back, to listen to me, at least to explain to me why I couldn’t have it, after he’d promised. And then the door opened and fifteen men walked in and they beat me up—fifteen men!” (NN 116). The fragmentary nature of No Name in the Street and the multivocal nature of prison narratives come together at this crucial moment in Baldwin’s essay. The truth cannot be delivered any other way to a white audience who finds the truth “difficult to swallow.” Baldwin’s aim is not only for authenticity but also for a complex reality that illuminates the darkest corners of prison and the occasionally bleak despair of black America in the late 1960s.

To construct his narrative effectively, Baldwin must be willing to disrupt conventional narrative devices and to destroy the unity of time and space in addition to the uniformity of plot and voice. Notions of time and place are especially unstable in prison narratives, for one of prison’s most devastating psychological effects is to disorient the prisoner’s sense of time and place. Bell Chevigny writes, “The state reduces the stuff of time, as it does the captured human, to number. It makes time the prisoner’s only
possession, while emptying it. . . . Doing time is also doing space, for the
temporal distortion is paralleled by tyrannical control of space.” Early in
his narrative Baldwin writes of the confusion of time and memory, “Time
passes and passes. It passes backward and it passes forward and it carries
you along, and no one in the whole wide world knows more about time
than this: it is carrying you through an element you do not understand into
an element you will not remember. Yet, something remembers—it can even
be said that something avenges: the trap of our century, and the subject
now before us” (NN 22). Late in the narrative, walking through the streets
of San Francisco and meditating on the recent past, Baldwin expresses this
disorientation in a way that comments on the structure of No Name in the
Street:

I suspect that there really has been some radical alteration in the struc-
ture, the nature, of time. One may say that there are no clear images;
everything seems superimposed on, and at war with something else.
There are no clear vistas: the road that seems to pull one forward into
the future is also pulling one backward into the past. I felt, anyway,
kaleidoscopic, fragmented, walking through the streets of San Fran-
cisco, trying to decipher whatever it was that my own consciousness
made of all the elements in which I was entangled, and which were all
tangled up in me. (NN 178–79)

The essay is an attempt to represent the alteration of the nature of time
that creates this tangle in Baldwin’s mind, an alteration that the incarcer-
ated individual experiences as soon as he or she enters prison.

It is important to compare this late passage with the moment that
Tony Maynard enters Baldwin’s text because the two passages link the
confusion in Baldwin’s mind to Maynard’s prison experience. The essay
engages a tug of war between exact dates or moments on one side and
vague memories on the other. The moments when Baldwin heard about
the assassinations of Evers, Malcolm X, and King, for example, are dis-
cernable and precisely dated, but the book begins with a childhood
memory about which Baldwin speculates, “I must have been about five, I
should think . . . but I may have been younger . . . or I may think I was five
because I remember tugging at my mother’s skirts once and watching her
face while she was telling someone else that she was twenty-seven” (NN
3). Other events in Baldwin’s life are exactly dated, and his proclamation
of Maynard’s innocence depends much on exact dates and the slippage
of time between the murder and Tony’s arrest. Baldwin points out that
a deposition signed by an eyewitness dates the crime “on the morning of April 3, 1967” which contradicts the fact that “the crime is alleged to have taken place on the morning of the fourth” (NN 110). Baldwin continues to scrutinize the deposition: “This document, to say nothing of the date of its appearance [October 31, 1967], strikes me as extraordinary. It appears six days after Hanst’s warrant and four days after Judge Weaver’s cable—to say nothing of the fact that this authoritative identification of the murderer, by means of a photograph, occurs seven months after the event” (NN 111). The way time slips and is manipulated when serializing evidence in a murder trial reflects a kind of disorientation in Baldwin’s overall narrative, and when he introduces Maynard into his text, he begins with a vague temporal marker: “sometime during all this” (NN 100). During this section of the essay, which shifts rapidly between voices and incidents, three of the other subdivisions begin with nonspecific references to time: “many years ago” (NN 106), “a long time ago” (NN 107), and “about four years earlier” (NN 109). The contrast between these nonspecific times and the very specific details of the murder and deposition dates has the effect of compressing and expanding time, or of “radically altering its structure, its nature.”

The description of the world surrounding the prison has a similar effect, and brings us back to Baldwin’s mind-set in San Francisco. Before Baldwin leads us into Maynard’s prison or his life, he describes his own feelings as he walks to the prison in Hamburg, Germany where Maynard is imprisoned. Baldwin had to fly from London to get there, and he begins the Maynard section with these observations: “London was cold, but damp and grey. Hamburg was frosty and dry as a bone, and blinding with ice and snow; and the sun, which never came to London, loitered in Hamburg all day long: über alles. Germans say that Hamburg is the German city which most resembles London. It is hard to know, from their tone, whether they are bragging or complaining, and it did not really remind me of London, lacking London’s impressive sprawl” (NN 101). He continues to contemplate these two cities and as he gets closer to Maynard, he places the prison in the context of two other great western cities and reveals the deterioration beneath their stately exteriors: “The prison is part of a complex of intimidating structures, scattered over quite a large area—a little like the complex on l’Île de la Cité in Paris, or the complex on Center Street in New York—but it resembles neither of them. It is more medieval than either, and gives the impression of being far more isolated—though, as I say, I could walk to it from my exceedingly fashionable hotel. Yet, the streets were torn up all around it—men at work; I learned to walk from
there because taxis seemed never to come anywhere near it; there was a tramline, but I did not know how to use it, and it also seemed to skirt the prison” (NN 102–103). Baldwin takes us deeper and deeper, behind the “great barred door” (NN 102, 104) and into the visiting room. To add to the disorientation, “the turnkey smiled at [Baldwin] as he turned the key in the lock,” then Maynard “smiled” and “grinned”; Baldwin ends the description by observing, “I saw that [Maynard] hadn’t turned his face to the wall” (NN 104). All of this smiling provides a ghastly contrast to the cold, sterile, formidable surroundings. While Maynard’s smiles and the fact that he faces Baldwin directly are evidence of his hope and his innocence, they also heighten the despair of his beaten, weeping, averted face when Baldwin visits him days later, and the smile of the turnkey becomes especially sinister when we consider that he may have been one of the fifteen guards who beat Maynard.

The fact that Maynard’s narrative is so dramatically fragmented—much more so than the rest of the essay—places the burden of connection on the reader. First the reader must connect Maynard’s story to Baldwin’s and to the global parable that Baldwin tells. Both are built on analogies to prison. Baldwin discusses how his falling in love represented “the key to life. Not merely the key to my life, but to life itself” (NN 22), and love leaves the individual paradoxically “both free and bound . . . a bondage which liberates you” (NN 23). In his sophisticated definition, love is not merely a key that sets one free; it is a key that unifies the opposing forces of bondage and liberation, just as his essay seeks to engage with the distance between outsiders and the inside of prison, or white and black experience. On a global level Baldwin examines France and the United States, countries whose foreign and domestic policies and general cultural arrogance lead to the insurgency of French Algerians, or the Viet Cong, or the Nation of Islam. Because these policies and attitudes promote separation, for example, “One was either French, or Algerian; one could not be both” (NN 37). As far as America goes, Baldwin quotes Dostoyevsky: “I don’t believe in the wagons that bring bread to humanity. For the wagons that bring bread to humanity, without any moral basis for conduct, may coldly exclude a considerable part of humanity” (NN 85). Baldwin sees the seething anger of this part of humanity in the American ghetto, and makes the connection for the reader: “what America is doing within her borders, she is doing around the world” (NN 86). The prisoner as the central figure of Baldwin’s book is a representative for the millions of those angry and oppressed at the expense of those who seek to gain from the underclass and to keep them in their place. He continues: “it must be remembered—
it cannot be overstated—that those centuries of oppression are also the history of a system of thought, so that both the ex-man who considers himself master and the ex-man who is treated like a mule suffer from a particular species of schizophrenia, in which each contains the other, in which each longs to be the other” (NN 87). It is, of course, this “system of thought” that has created the modern prison and stratified modern American society according to race and class. Baldwin sees the complex tragedy of the situation and he prophesies violence. While Baldwin was completing the book, Tony Maynard was transferred to Attica prison. Baldwin realizes the open-ended nature of his inquiry: “this book is not finished—can never be finished, by me. As of this writing, I am waiting to hear the fate of Tony Maynard, whose last address was Attica” (NN 196). The 1971 Attica riot had just occurred, leaving forty-two people dead, and Baldwin leaves his readers with a chilling, angry message—a violent amplification of the concluding lines of “Stranger in the Village”: “the Western party is over, and the white man’s sun has set. Period” (NN 197). The crisis could be avoided, Baldwin inners, but not before white readers understand the significance of Tony Maynard’s story and make the proper connections both within this story and between it and the other sections of Baldwin’s essay.

The anger and defiance at the conclusion of No Name sets the stage for Baldwin’s final considerations of the criminal power of the law and how best to respond to it, a motif that realizes its fullest expression in If Beale Street Could Talk. In the final two decades of his life, Baldwin would move beyond the fear evident in his early writings and the outrage he expressed in the middle of his career, or the combination of fear and outrage he expresses in the works discussed in this chapter. As if to obliterate the vision he had of Tony Maynard, beaten and emasculated in prison, Baldwin imagines a new figure in the person of Fonny Hunt who manages to greet his girlfriend Tish through the glass partition of the visiting room of his prison with his fist in the air. Christopher Bigsby argues that African Americans’ “social subordination thus stands as a symbol of society’s control over its own anarchic impulses. As a consequence he is offered a role whose significance is not limited to its social utility. Thus, when he resists that caricature the consequent appeals by the dominant society to ‘law and order’ have metaphysical as well as pragmatic implications. In Baldwin’s work the self resists the peripheral role which seems its social fate, and the primary agent in this resistance is the imagination.” Baldwin’s imagination has the capacity to transform Maynard into Fonny, signaling hope where there had been despair.
Before his deep consideration of prison in a fictional context, though, Baldwin did everything in his power to free his friend. He co-signed an open letter with Ossie Davis, Valerie Maynard, and William Styron, and his own 1968 open letter was frequently quoted in other articles on the Maynard case, which Baldwin painstakingly collected. James A. Wechsler, in *The New York Post* magazine, chronicled the case for years, and it is clear that Maynard’s case consumed Baldwin not only because Maynard was a friend, but because it was a grossly magnified version of the same treatment Baldwin had received in Paris. The two men swore they were being wrongfully held; they had no voice; and they had to wait a long time between their arrest and their trial. Baldwin had to wait eight days; Maynard had to wait two and a half years. The witness to such horrors had to speak, and not only to the judge, but to all his countrymen. Baldwin had incorporated Maynard’s voice in *No Name in the Street* within his own narrative, but he was not done talking, and in fact, in his final years, his own voice on the subject of the law had never been louder or more insistent.