

Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry

Jericho Brown

(in *The New York Times*)

I don't know whose side you're on,
But I am here for the people
Who work in grocery stores that glow in the morning
And close down for deep cleaning at night
Right up the street and in cities I mispronounce,
In towns too tiny for my big black
Car to quit, and in every wide corner
Of Kansas where going to school means
At least one field trip
To a slaughterhouse. I want so little: another leather bound
Book, a gimlet with a lavender gin, bread
So good when I taste it I can tell you
How it's made. I'd like us to rethink
What it is to be a nation. I'm in a mood about America
Today. I have PTSD
About the Lord. God save the people who work
In grocery stores. They know a bit of glamour
Is a lot of glamour. They know how much
It costs for the eldest of us to eat. Save
My loves and not my sentences. Before I see them,
I draw a mole near my left dimple,
Add flair to the smile they can't see
Behind my mask. I grin or lie or maybe
I wear the mouth of a beast. I eat wild animals
While some of us grow up knowing
What gnocchi is. The people who work at the grocery don't care.
They say, *Thank you*. They say, *Sorry*,
We don't sell motor oil anymore with a grief so thick
You could touch it. Go on. Touch it.
It is early. It is late. They have washed their hands.
They have washed their hands for you.
And they take the bus home.

Literature exists, partly, outside the cacophony of contemporaneous time. All poems, all novels, all dramas are written in the midst of a tumultuous present. Yet studying literature – poems, novels, plays – also lifts us outside of present that all too often overwhelms us and separates us from a deep connection to the human. To be consumed by the concerns of the moment is, too often, to be cut off from a longer perspective on what life, morality, human existence, is.

A week ago I spoke with my son, David, about a bracelet I bought for his mother. We bought the bracelet in Paris, on the Île de la Cité, which is an island in the middle of the Seine. ‘I know a poem about the Seine,’ I told him. ‘It’s by Guillaume Apollinaire.’ ‘Is that the guy who wrote the [poem about the car?](#)’ he asked. ‘It is. But this is a very different kind of poem. I will send it to you.’

So I sent him “[Mirabeau Bridge](#),” with a note saying it was perhaps the most beautiful poem ever written. I also sent, from the same web page, the wondrous translation by Richard Wilbur. Both are on the web page I have just cited, for your consideration....

I had written prefatory paragraphs about how a poem that was beautiful in itself, and that was about the unstoppable passage of time, a great love poem, was worthy of being read, in these difficult times. Such a poem, I maintained, was important even in a time of plague. I believed what I had written, and believe it still.

Yet who was I kidding? We live in a time of pandemic, the coronavirus-19. At the same time, all across America there are massive demonstrations insisting, rightly, that Black Lives Matter. And I was sending out a poem from ninety years ago about time and love and a flowing river?

“Poetry makes nothing happen,” W. H. Auden wrote in a wonderful poem. I’ve struggled with that line – which I think, in the context of the entire poem, is definitively contradicted – almost all my life. There is a realm of beauty which exists apart from life, yet is also a part of it, and that makes all poems readable, even in (especially in) the worst of times. In fact, the second poem I sent out to this list, [Zbigniew Herbert’s “Five Men](#),” makes the point, emphatically, that beauty has its place in the world, and that even if beauty is judged by ‘usefulness,’ it can stand in a significant place.

Still, still, it felt somehow wrong to send out a poem that for me was marked especially by its beauty. In America tens of millions are unemployed

because of a virus that can kill, and hundreds of millions are sequestered by caution in the face of that virus. A nation is transfixed that a man can take the life of another man with nonchalance and impunity just because the man he is killing is black. Surely it would be wrong to send out, in this moment, Apollinaire's beautiful poem?

Then I read the poem I have put at the head of this essay, Jericho Brown's "Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry." I found it in *The New York Times*. No matter. Poems come to us from strange places, not only in slim volumes with faded covers.

I love the poem. It manages to address, simultaneously, the pandemic and the racism and classism that indelibly mark the American nation. And it does so in a language so close to the vernacular – to what we speak – that it speaks to us without literary pretension. Although, as we shall see, it is pretty literary.

Let's start by looking at that remarkable title. "Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry." No punctuation. In high school or freshman English, the teacher would say this is a run-on sentence and is therefore in need of correction. But is it in need of correction? I don't think so. The line merges gratitude ("thank you) and apology ("I'm sorry") or perhaps even remorse. A strange conjoining, and one that undergirds the poem, which as it proceeds mentions neither gratitude nor remorse. Yet both are there: the first as its underlying major key, its deep awareness; the second as what we should be doing. We should be able to say we are sorry for not being sufficiently grateful.

Quite a lot for a title. Quickly, we move on to the first line, "I don't know whose side you are on." We are face to face with direct address: the poet is speaking to us, as readers other than himself, the one who is speaking. In this poem he addresses his readers as "you" and perhaps accuses them as well. In this line there is a resonance to an old song I have referred to before, one of the great American songs, written by a (white) woman in the early 1930's in the midst of union struggles against mine-owners and the law enforcement officers who back up their property and privilege: "Which Side Are You On?" ([Here is Pete Seeger singing it.](#)) Here are the opening stanzas, as written by Florence Reece:

Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

My daddy was a miner
And I'm a miner's son
And I'll stick with the union
Till every battle's won

They say in Harlan County
There are no neutrals there
You'll either be a union man
Or a thug for J.H. Blair

“I’m for the people,” Jeremiah Brown tells us. I want to call your attention to something that happens at the end of the second line. The line is enjambed – it continues into the third line. But it hangs, just for a millisecond, on the “I am here for the people” before it settles onto just which people he is for. That enjambment and that hanging for just a moment characterize much of this poem. The phenomenon occurs again and again in the succeeding lines. It occurs so often, this enjambment and its momentary hanging, that the phenomenon shapes the poem. I revel in these enjambments, for they make me want to read the poem over and over again. The poem tells us things, and these enjambments, and the ensuing hangings, are so important that I urge you not neglect them when you read the poem.

Long ago I had wonderful teacher, Stanley Fish, who had a brilliant mind. Yet somehow he seemed so fervidly caught up in his own brilliance that he never really knew which side he was on. (Probably he thought he was on the side of the people? I sort of doubted that.)

In his brilliance, Stanley Fish wrote a book about John Milton called *Surprised by Sin*. I forget a whole lot of what I read, or maybe I never understand it in the first place. But here is what I remember learning from that book. Sometimes lines end and in the interim between the end of one line and the beginning of the next, there is a moment of possibility: the line can go in different directions. I don’t know that Jericho Brown has read Stanley Fish, and sort of doubt that he has: But he understands, very well, the capacity of an enjambed line to hang, for a moment, before it resolves itself in the following line.

There are two such hanging moments connected to enjambments in the first five lines. They are, like many of the other enjambments in the poem, not ‘natural,’ part of the manner in which the lineation of poetry adapts to the

vibrancy on ongoing spoken language. These two instances, and others in the poem, are part of what drives the poem and gives it deep resonance.

I don't know whose side you're on,
But I am here for the people*
Who work in grocery stores that glow in the morning
And close down for deep cleaning at night*
Right up the street and in cities I mispronounce,

Those people whose side he is on? Working people. They work in grocery stores, which will be the locus for this poem. They clean, deep clean, at night (notice the night/right rhyme which occurs in the next enjambment). They are “right up the street,” close to him, even though they are also elsewhere in our nation. These ‘deep cleaners,’ a reference which takes on special meaning in our pandemic times. We are secure because people clean, deep clean, so we do not get the coronavirus. [I will refer to several other poets in what follows, but here I should note the overwhelming presence of Gwendolyn Brooks, hovering over the poem, who understood that those who lived and worked in almost-invisibility around her in the ‘Bronzeville’ section of Chicago were *real* people, lived real lives, faced real tragedies – even if the majoritarian culture too often overlooked them and indeed rendered them invisible.] The long first sentence of this poem indicates that these “working people” are everywhere in America. Not just in grocery stores, but in slaughterhouses...still, the grocery store will be Brown's locus of concern and imagery as the poem proceeds.

Ah, those hanging enjambments. Consider the next, “In towns too tiny for my big black/Car to quit.” Here what has not been chosen enters the poem, a possibility at once celebratory and racist: “My big black ass.” Yes, the poet is black; Yes his voice is strong. But before we head down to a (celebratory) racist conclusion to the phrase “big black” he substitutes “car.” Strange, interesting, disquieting.

The poem goes on to consider the center of the country, Kansas.

and in every wide corner*
Of Kansas where going to school means*
At least one field trip*
To a slaughterhouse.

I may be overly subjective here, but I couldn't help but think of a great and underappreciated poem by James Dickey entitled, "Falling," about a stewardess blown out of a plane as it flies thirty thousand feet up over the middle west: "the greatest thing that ever came to Kansas."

with her clothes beginning
To come down all over Kansas into bushes on the dewy sixth green
Of a golf course one shoe her girdle coming down fantastically
On a clothesline, where it belongs her blouse on a lightning rod:

Kansas, where "going to school means/At least one field trip/To a slaughterhouse." Again, we have hints of the coronavirus, whose most virulent outbreaks have been nursing homes and slaughterhouses. Please notice the hanging enjambment after field trip. So often field trips are innocuous (though I suppose not to the kids who take them), safe, unremarkable. But not here, not in Kansas: A center of growing corn, a center of processing meat, so in Kansas of course a field trip to a slaughterhouse might be obligatory. Surely the school's teachers, who led that field trip, did not highlight the crowded, unsafe, underpaid work conditions where livestock are butchered. Yet *we* know: We are back again, to the second line, "for the people/ who work." And to that underlying note of pandemic: Deep cleaning, slaughterhouses. Who does that work?

Ah, but the poet would rather be elsewhere. His wants are little (although ostentatiously hip and class-bound):

I want so little: another leather bound
Book, a gimlet with a lavender gin, bread
So good when I taste it I can tell you
How it's made.

Yes, he is a bit of a sybarite, but that taste of bread (a gourmet bread, certainly) is also a gesture back to the world of work, the world where bakers work to make bread.

And now Jericho Brown slips into Allen Ginsberg, that great poet of both common language and critique of the world he lives in. I hear echoes of "[America](#)" everywhere in the poem, but especially in the next lines, *funny* and plain-spoken and tragic all at the same time. Pay particular attention to the hanging enjambments:

I'd like us to rethink*
What it is to be a nation. I'm in a mood about America*
Today. I have PTSD*
About the Lord. God save the people who work*
In grocery stores.

Here is Ginsberg:

I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.
America when will you be angelic?
When will you take off your clothes?
When will you look at yourself through the grave?
When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
America why are your libraries full of tears?

What does it mean to be a nation, asks Brown (as Ginsberg did before him, although for Ginsberg the question revolved about 'outsiders' and gay people like himself), where some are endangered daily, while others telework and telecommute so they do not have to encounter vectors of the pandemic? We understand the mood he is in: A nation that values its upper middle-class intellectuals, and takes for granted the 'frontline' workers who do not labor in hospitals but supermarkets, slaughterhouses, online warehouses. Of course he has "PTSD/ About the Lord." His is the predicament of Job. How can there be a God when some suffer and die, and others live calmly as their existence unspools one healthy happy day after another?

We live in an insane world. When we think of the Lord we are like severely injured, battle-worn soldiers: brain-addled, disconnected, unable to keep on going. Yet Brown invokes the same Lord: "God save the people who work/ In grocery stores." We are back to the beginning. With working people, working class people, predominantly black and brown. And, alas, God may not be answering his prayer: God may not save the "people who work."

Just because people work in grocery stores does not mean they are somehow less than the reader, less than human. "They know a bit of glamour/ Is a lot of glamour." (Gwendolyn Brooks could have written that line. Hmmm. Maybe she did. This is from *A Street in Bronzeville*, "At the Hairdresser's":

Gimme an upsweep, Minnie,
With humpteen baby curls.

Bout time I got some glamour.
I'll show them girls.

As I said, the spirit of Gwendolyn Brooks breathes into and over this poem.)

They know how much*
It costs for the eldest of us to eat. Save*
My loves and not my sentences. Before I see them,
I draw a mole near my left dimple,
Add flair to the smile they can't see *
Behind my mask. I grin or lie or maybe
I wear the mouth of a beast.

Working people know the price of food – not only how much it costs, but how necessary it is to endurance in a life of deprivation and living close to the edge. “Save/My loves and not my sentences.” I am not entirely sure what he is referring to, here. Perhaps it is the great struggle between life and art, Rilke’s “For somewhere there is an ancient enmity/ between our daily life and the great work.” More likely, it is the working people he is writing about, who have on him a claim greater than the need to write a ‘great’ poem.

Back to the poem, and that unseen smile. Masks are what we all (well, many of us) wear to ward off the coronavirus. But here the mask also hearkens back to that great early Black poem “[We Wear the Mask](#)” by Paul Laurence Dunbar, referring to a different mask, one that covers black faces from the peremptory white gaze:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—

Brown even echoes Dunbar’s words: “I grin or lie or maybe*”. Maybe “I wear the mouth of a beast.”

That beast? The most famous beast in a poem (well, there is always early English poetry) is the one cited by Yeats in his stunning conclusion to “[The Second Coming](#).”

The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

But I think what Jericho Brown has in mind is something much closer to Rudolph Reed. Gwendolyn Brooks, in one of the greatest of all American poems, inscribed Reed's story in "[The Ballad of Rudolph Reed](#)." In the poem, a black family moves into a white neighborhood. First there are demeaning glances, signs of hatred. Then there are rocks thrown, and larger rocks. But then a bullet pierces the window, and Rudolph Reed charges his unseen persecutors when can take no more, having seen his daughter bleeding.

Notice the word "beast" in the following stanzas. This beast, of rage and murderousness, is also beneath the mask.

Then up did rise our Rudolph Reed
And pressed the hand of his wife,
And went to the door with a thirty-four
And a **beastly** butcher knife.

He ran like a mad thing into the night.
And the words in his mouth were stinking.
By the time he had hurt his first white man
He was no longer thinking.

By the time he had hurt his fourth white man
Rudolph Reed was dead.
His neighbors gathered and kicked his corpse.
"Nigger—" his neighbors said.

Despite nods earlier to lavender gin and leather bound books and homemade bread, Brown has deeper emotions as well. Yes, others living comfortable, upper middle class lives can eat gnocchi; he (a sophisticated poet) knows what gnocchi is. But beneath the mask he himself will "eat wild animals."

Behind my mask. I grin or lie or maybe
I wear the mouth of a beast. I eat wild animals
While some of us grow up knowing
What gnocchi is.

Yet the poem is ultimately not about the poet but about “the people/who work in grocery stores,” for he repeats the phrase which we encountered in the first three lines of the poem, and again in its middle. Now it occurs for the third time at the end of the poem.

The people who work at the grocery don't care.
They say, *Thank you*. They say, *Sorry*,
We don't sell motor oil anymore with a grief so thick
You could touch it.

Those people, working people, don't care about 'gnocchi' or 'lavender gin.' They do their work. And observe the etiquettes which govern human relations. The poignancy of their polite response, in the midst of a pandemic, “*Sorry,/ We don't sell motor oil anymore*” is heartbreaking – and also heroic. I think the line carries overtones of the pandemic, when some stores were precluded from selling durable goods and only allowed to sell food. But it also, on “the little lower level” (to cite *Moby-Dick*), denotes courtesy. Those who serve customers are decent and generous, while the customers themselves take this courtesy for granted. Such is the dynamic faced by “the people who work at the grocery store.”

We are at the heart of the poem here, for these people, these grocery store workers, say these words with courtesy but also “with a grief so thick/ You could touch it.” I cannot say how admiring I am of these words, this metaphor, where grief has weight and dimension. That is why we read poems, to be amazed at what we humans can say about the things we take for granted, what we can pass by without recognition. Not Brown. He recognizes what is there, in front of us that we cannot, or choose not to, see. “With a grief so thick/ You could touch it.” Those close to them are sick, dying, unemployed: these workers in the grocery stores are aware of what has been lost, and what is being lost, and what will be lost.

As he also recognizes how easily we readers, we who do not work in grocery stores or slaughterhouses, shy away from the human contact those in the grocery store offer us. He challenges us: “Go on. Touch it.” The grief? The hands of the black or brown – or white? – worker?

But we don't touch, don't recognize, what we encounter at the grocery store. We take it, and those who work there, for granted. And they, those

workers? They have washed their hands, a seemingly routine act in this time of pandemic. To serve us, the readers of this poem. To keep us safer.

It is early. It is late. They have washed their hands.
They have washed their hands *for you*. [My italicization]

There is an encounter in this poem, between working people and we who read the poem, who shop at the grocery stores and supermarkets. But the encounter is laden with consciousness in only one direction. The workers wash their hands “for you.” We, in return, do not touch their grief, or even acknowledge it is there. The poem ends with a line whose sadness cannot be overstated. Race, poverty, class: all consign the “people/ who work in grocery stores,” the people whom economic circumstance compels to wait on us, to ride home in buses. Unsterile, crowded buses. If Christ died for our sins, these people are simulacra for Christ.

“And they take the bus home.”

The buses, we know, are unsterile, unsafe. Just as working in a grocery store or slaughterhouse is unsafe. People work, and take buses rather than cars, because of economic necessity. The work they do sustains us – food, meat – and we ignore them and what they do, ignore the unsafe buses they travel on. Race and class and pandemic merge in this poem “And they take the bus home.” We ignore them, ignore the gratitude we should feel, ignore the apology we owe to those who make our lives possible.

“And they take the bus home.” A sadder line has never been written. The poem asks us to confront race and class in a time of pandemic. No wonder it is entitled, “Say Thank You Say I’m Sorry.”