

Get to Know Jericho Brown

by Abby Wheeler

Welcome to our monthly series, Get to Know! Here, we'll turn the spotlight on contemporary poets and writers, with the goal of amplifying under-represented voices in literature. These writers' books are currently available in the Women Writing for (a) Change library.



Photo by Brian Cornelius

"A poem is a gesture toward home." So begins Jericho Brown's "Duplex"—one of many poems in his 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Tradition* that take the name of his invented form. Brown, Director of Creative Writing and professor at Emory University, was inspired to create a new poetic structure that was "black and queer and Southern," like he is ([The Bennington Review](#)). The [Duplex](#), which Brown describes as a combination of sonnet, ghazal and the blues, is his answer to the question: "Since I am carrying these truths in this body as one, how do I get a form that is many forms?" Consider the poem in its entirety:

A poem is a gesture toward home.
It makes dark demands I call my own.

Memory makes demands darker than my
own:

My last love drove a burgundy car.

My first love drove a burgundy car.
He was fast and awful, tall as my father.

Steadfast and awful, my tall father
Hit hard as a hailstorm. He'd leave marks.

Light rain hits easy but leaves its own mark
Like the sound of a mother weeping again.

Like the sound of my mother weeping
again,
No sound beating ends where it began.

None of the beaten end up how we began.
A poem is a gesture toward home.

Finding ways to make poetry his own may be a theme in Brown's life. Born in Shreveport, Louisiana, his first poems were published under his given name, Nelson Demery III. Seeing his father's and grandfather's name, he realized he wanted the poems to be *his*: "When I was first writing, I wanted more than anything to be able to give all of myself to my poems." Brown's work includes references to his sexuality and life with HIV, which was transmitted to him via rape—topics often difficult or unwelcome in his upbringing. He goes on to explain, "me giving myself that name was a way for me to become somebody who wasn't connected to anything that would say to me that I shouldn't be doing what I was doing... I needed to be Jericho Brown, because I needed to have that freedom named."

We can see this freedom of speech in the poem, "Like Father":

My father's embrace is tighter
Now that he knows
He is not the only man in my life.
He whispers, *Remember when*, and, *I love you*,
As he holds my hand hungry

For a discussion of Bible scriptures
 Over breakfast. He pours cups of coffee
 I can't stop
 Spilling.
 My father's embrace is firm and warm
 Now that he knows. He begs forgiveness
 For anything he may have done to make me
 Turn to abomination
 As he watches my eggs, scrambled
 Soft. Yolk runs all over the plate.
 A rubber band binds the morning paper.
 My father's embrace tightens. Grits
 Stiffen. I hug back
 Like a little boy, gripping
 To prove his handshake.
 Daddy squeezes me close,
 But I cannot feel his heartbeat
 And he cannot hear mine —
 There is too much flesh between us,
 Two men in love.

Brown is unmistakably a line-by-line poet; he often speaks of his process of using sound to lead him from one line to the next, which opens the poem up to discovery (see his [OnBeing interview](#), for starters). As he says in the Bennington Review, "If you put language first, then you can discover your ideas. But if you are thinking about your ideas, then you're going to be at the mercy of the language you already know instead of one that you can figure out. ... I want the world in the poem to expand. I want the world in the poem to change. ... If I start with my mom, then I might end with the police. If I start with the police, then I might end with my lover. But if I start with the police, I don't imagine I'm done with my poem if I'm still talking about the police." This philosophy is beautifully evident in his title poem, "The Tradition":

Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium. We thought
 Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning
 Names in heat, in elements classical
 Philosophers said could change us. *Star Gazer.*
Foxglove. Summer seemed to bloom against the
 will
 Of the sun, which news reports claimed flamed
 hotter
 On this planet than when our dead fathers

Wiped sweat from their necks. *Cosmos. Baby's Breath.*
 Men like me and my brothers filmed what we
 Planted for proof we existed before
 Too late, sped the video to see blossoms
 Brought in seconds, colors you expect in poems
 Where the world ends, everything cut down.
John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.

Another way of exploring poetry's nature of discovery is through its complexity. Regarding societal divisions, Brown speaks of "an attraction to knowing who's on what side... that it be made clear who's on what side, that the poem is on the right side, or that the poem is on my side. And while I think that's important... of course that can also be concerning. Poems have to be complex in order to be poems, poems have to make revelations that a poet wasn't prepared to make, and things like that might go beyond what side you're on" (Bennington Review). In other words, "Every poem is a love poem. Every poem is a political poem, so say the masters. Every love poem is political. Every political poem must fall in love" ([Kenyon Review](#)). Or, "when I say, 'If you love me, you have to love me politically' — it's easy to know Jericho Brown, because 'I'm cool. Hey, how you doin' — but I have a history. I have an ancestry, and you gotta take all of that, when — if you're coming with me, that's what we're taking with us. And I'm going to take that part of you, as well. And I think, if we could just love each other a little more, whole, we all would be a lot better off. That's what I want my poems to point to" (BR). What better sendoff than Brown's beautiful, pastoral, political love poem:

Foreday in the Morning

My mother grew morning glories that spilled onto
 the walkway toward her porch
 Because she was a woman with land who showed
 as much by giving it color.
 She told me I could have whatever I worked for.
 That means she was an American.
 But she'd say it was because she believed
 In God. I am ashamed of America
 And confounded by God. I thank God for my
 citizenship in spite
 Of the timer set on my life to write

These words: I love my mother. I love black women
Who plant flowers as sheepish as their sons. By the
time the blooms
Unfurl themselves for a few hours of light, the
women who tend them
Are already at work. Blue. I'll never know who
started the lie that we are lazy,
But I'd love to wake that bastard up
At foreday in the morning, toss him in a truck, and
drive him under God
Past every bus stop in America to see all those
black folk
Waiting to go work for whatever they want. A
house? A boy
To keep the lawn cut? Some color in the yard? My
God, we leave things green.

Jericho Brown is the author of three collections of poetry: *Please* (New Issues, 2008), which won the American Book Award; *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon, 2014), named one of the best poetry books of the year by Library Journal and received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award; and *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon, 2019), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and was a finalist for awards including the National Book Critics Circle Award. Brown is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and the National Endowment for the Arts, and is the winner of the Whiting Award. He earned a PhD from the University of Houston, an MFA from the University of New Orleans, and a BA from Dillard University. For more information, including links to interviews and prose: <https://www.jerichobrown.com>

Jericho Brown's review of *Moonlight*, 2018 winner of eight Academy Awards
<https://blacknerdproblems.com/life-through-the-prism-of-moonlight/>

[Copper Canyon's Line / Break](#): "In this episode, Jericho talks about saying no and his intention to laugh every day—and sings some Diana Ross"

[TEDx: The Art of Words](#): Jericho makes direct comparisons of the church he grew up in and his experience of poetry.

[Bennington Writing Seminars Graduate Address](#): In a world with so much to fight for, is writing poetry a narcissistic endeavor? Jericho reflects.

[The Kenyon Review](#): Jericho imagines his credo.

[Jericho Brown's *The Tradition: Civic Dialogue Edition*](#): The "Pulitzer-winning book, reissued with a new guide to spark community-wide conversations on poetry, racism, and social change."