

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

[Soundbyte from Jericho's Q&A]

“If I am a poet of witness, or a poet at all, then I am not telling the truth if I only witness atrocity. It is there if you want it, but there must be something else there because we keep facing. And part of what I write about, because I have to tell the truth, is what keeps us facing the atrocity and moving through the atrocity and surviving the atrocity, and surviving in spite of the atrocity.”

Rebecca Hoogs, Host

Almost exactly a year ago, on May 21, 2019 we closed our Poetry Series with a reading by Jericho Brown, followed by a conversation with Copper Canyon editor and poet Elaina Ellis. It was a riveting and joy-filled evening in celebration of Jericho's third book, *The Tradition*. That book went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry.

I'm Rebecca Hoogs, the Associate Director of Seattle Arts & Lectures—and this is *SAL/on air*, a collection of engaging talks and readings from the world's best writers from over 30 years of Seattle Arts & Lectures.

Here we are, a year later, in a starkly different world. A world where we cannot gather together in the shared space of a theatre to hear poetry. A world where Jericho's poems of rage and grief at the pandemic of violence against Black people in this country are newly resonant. A year ago, when I introduced Jericho, I wrote that “like the poppy ticking in my garden, the bomb-bloom on these poems is beautifully ominous and keeps coming back read after read, year after year—resilient, fierce, tender.” It's still true—even more so now. The brutality of our country keeps coming back. The best poetry—Jericho's poetry--can be a space of healing and a space of learning--a space of revelation and anger that inspires action.

Wherever you are listening to this podcast, I invite you to put on your imaginary flower crown, to imagine the shared space of change that we are making, and to get ready to encounter the devastating genius of Jericho Brown.

This is *SAL/on air*.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Jericho Brown

There's great kids here in Seattle. Y'all have a lot of this, particularly Seattle has been particularly good to me and my work, and I'm always happy to come here. So thank ya'll for being here tonight. I'm gonna read you some poems. Is that okay? My poems are the best representation I have of my soul on Earth. So, I am happy to share my soul with you. Where I'm from, no matter what we began, we always began it with prayer.

So, "Prayer of the Backhanded."
Not the palm, not the pear tree
Switch, not the broomstick,
Nor the closet extension
Cord, not his braided belt, but God,
Bless the back of my daddy's hand
Which, holding nothing tightly
Against me and not wrapped
In leather, eliminated the air
Between itself and my cheek.
Make full this dimpled cheek
Unworthy of its unfisted print
And forgive my forgetting
The love of a hand
Hungry for reflex, a hand that took
No thought of its target
Like hail from a blind sky,
Involuntary, fast, but brutal
In its bruising. Father, I bear the bridge
Of what might have been
A broken nose. I lift to you
What was a busted lip. Bless
The boy who believes
His best beatings lack
Intention, the mark of the beast.
Bring back to life the son
Who glories in the sin
Of immediacy, calling it love.
God, save the man whose arm
Like an angel's invisible wing
May fly backward in fury
Whether or not his son stands near.
Help me hold in place my blazing jaw
As I think to say, *excuse me*.

"Labor."

I spent what light Saturday sent sweating
And learned to cuss cutting grass for women
Kind enough to say they couldn't tell the damned
Difference between their mowed lawns
And their vacuumed carpets just before
Handing over a five-dollar bill rolled tighter

Than a joint and asking me in to change
A few lightbulbs. I called those women old
Because they wouldn't move out of a chair
Without my help or walk without a hand
At the base of their backs. I called them
Old, and they must have been; they're all dead
Now, dead and in the earth I once tended.
The loneliest people have the earth to love
And not one friend their own age — only
Mothers to baby them and big sisters to boss
Them around, women they want to please
And pray for the chance to say please to.
I don't do that kind of work anymore.
My job is to look at the childhood I hated and say
I once had something to do with my hands.

I'm glad y'all are a clapping audience. I'm reading 49 poems, you're gonna see if... [Audience laughs]. One of the things that I find that I'm doing in my work over and over again is resurrecting and reclaiming much of the language that I heard when I was growing up. I lived— I grew up in Louisiana. I lived, for a long time, for a little while, in East Texas. And when I left there I moved to San Diego, California. That's where I found out I had an accent. But I also found out that there were all these words and phrases that were a part of the community where I grew up that weren't actually in the dictionary, that weren't actual words. And this, the title of this next poem is one of those phrases.

"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.

When I left Atlanta, I moved—when I left San Diego—I moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where I live now. "Hero."

She never knew one of us from another, so my brothers and I grew up fighting
Over our mother's mind
Like sun-colored suitors in a Greek myth. We were willing
To do evil. We kept chocolate around our mouths. The last of her mother's lot,
She cried at funerals, cried when she whipped me. She whipped me
Daily. I am most interested in people who declare gratitude
For their childhood beatings. None of them took what my mother gave,
Waking us for school with sharp slaps to our bare thighs.
That side of the family is darker. I should be grateful. So I will be—
No one on earth knows how many abortions happened
Before a woman risked her freedom by giving that risk a name,
By taking it to breast. I don't know why I am alive now
That I still cannot impress the woman who whipped me
Into being. I turned my mother into a grandmother. She thanks me
By kissing my sons. Gratitude is black—
Black as a hero returning from war to a country that banked on his death.
Thank God. It can't get much darker than that.

"As a Human Being"

There is the happiness you have
And the happiness you deserve.
They sit apart from one another
The way you and your mother
Sat on opposite ends of the sofa
After an ambulance came to take
Your father away. Some good
Doctor will stitch him up, and
Soon an aunt will arrive to drive
Your mother to the hospital
Where she will settle next to him
Forever, as promised. She holds
The arm of her seat as if she could
Fall, as if it is the only sturdy thing,
And it is since you've done what
You always wanted. You fought
Your father and won, marred him.
He'll have a scar he can see all
Because of you. And your mother,
The only woman you ever cried for,
Must tend to it as a bride tends

To her vows, forsaking all others
No matter how sore the injury.
No matter how sore the injury
Has left you, you sit understanding
Yourself as a human being finally
Free now that nobody's got to love you.

The title of this next poem is another one of those words that I heard growing up. That word is "'n'em." In the South—some of you are from the South, so you know this word. In the South that word means "that person and everyone you associate with that person." In a sentence it sounds a little bit like, "Hey, how's you doin'? How's your momma 'n'em?"

"'N'em"

They said to say goodnight
And not goodbye, unplugged
The TV when it rained. They hid
Money in mattresses
So to sleep on decisions.
Some of their children
Were not their children. Some
Of their parents had no birthdates.
They could sweat a cold out
Of you. They'd wake without
An alarm telling them to.
Even the short ones reached
Certain shelves. Even the skinny
Cooked animals too quick
To get caught. And I don't care
How ugly one of them arrived,
That one got married
To somebody fine. They fed
Families with change and wiped
Their kitchens clean.
Then another century came.
People like me forgot their names.

I'll read a few poems that are for, and about, and inspired by, some of those people that I think of as my own, personal 'n'em.

"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.

This next poem deals with the myth of Ganymede. I think, even if you don't know, it's a Greek myth, which you can look up at another time. But even if you don't know this particular myth, I think everything you need to know about it is in the poem.

"Ganymede"

A man trades his son for horses.
That's the version I prefer. I like
The safety of it, no one at fault,
Everyone rewarded. God gets
The boy. The boy becomes
Immortal. His father rides until
Grief sounds as good as the gallop
Of an animal born to carry those
Who patrol and protect our inherited
Kingdom. When we look at myth
This way, nobody bothers saying
Rape. I mean, don't you want God
To want you? Don't you dream
Of someone with wings taking you
Up? And when the master comes
For our children, he smells
Like the men who own stables
In Heaven, that far terrain
Between Promise and Apology.
No one has to convince us.
The people of my country believe
We can't be hurt if we can be bought.

Y'all stopped clapping. [Audience laughs] Janis Joplin recorded the Gershwin Standard
"Summertime" with Big Brother and the Holding Company for their 1968 chart-topping album

"Cheap Thrills." I got some Janis Joplin fans out there already. [Audience claps] Look at it. She died of a heroin overdose in 1970. She was 27 years old.

"Track 5: Summertime, as performed by Janis Joplin"

God's got his eye on me, but I ain't a sparrow.
I'm more like a lawn mower . . .no, a chainsaw,
Anything that might mangle each manicured lawn
In Port Arthur, a place I wouldn't return to
If the mayor offered me every ounce of oil
My daddy cans at the refinery. My voice, I mean,
Ain't sweet. Nothing nice about it. It won't fly
Even with Jesus watching. I don't believe in Jesus.
The Baxter boys climbed a tree just to throw
Persimmons at me. The good and perfect gifts
From above hit like lightning, leave bruises.
So I lied—I believe, but I don't think God
Likes me. The girls in the locker room slapped
Dirty pads across my face. They called me
Bitch, but I never bit back. I ain't a dog.
Chainsaw, I say. My voice hacks at you. I bet
I tear my throat. I try so hard to sound jagged.
I get high and say one thing so many times
Like Willie Baker who worked across the street—
I saw some kids whip him with a belt while he
Repeated, *Please*. School out, summertime
And the living lashed, Mama said I should be
Thankful, that the town's worse to coloreds
Than they are to me, that I'd grow out of my acne.
God must love Willie Baker—all that leather and still
A *please* that sounds like music. See.
I wouldn't know a sparrow from a mockingbird.
The band plays. I just belt out, *Please*. This tune
Ain't half the blues. I should be thankful.
I get high and moan like a lawn mower
So nobody notices I'm such an ugly girl.
I'm such an ugly girl. I try to sing like a man
Boys call, *boy*. I turn my face to God. I pray. I wish
I could pour oil on everything green in Port Arthur.

I wrote this next poem after finding out about, and being confounded by, the very long list of people who have supposedly committed suicide while in police custody. It includes people like Jesus Huerta in North Carolina, who, after having been patted down, and while handcuffed, on the walk from the police cruiser to the building where he was to be booked, somehow

managed to shoot himself in the back corner of his head. And Victor White III in Louisiana, where I'm from, who, after having been patted down, while handcuffed, sitting in the back of a police cruiser, somehow managed to shoot himself in his upper back. And Sandra Bland in Texas, who, after a day of fighting for her life, according to a video—actually not according to a video—she hanged herself with a trash bag in a cell that has video of her up until the moment that the coroner says she hung herself with a trash bag. Somehow or another the video goes out just before that point.

"Bullet Points"

I will not shoot myself
In the head, and I will not shoot myself
In the back, and I will not hang myself
With a trashbag, and if I do,
I promise you, I will not do it
In a police car while handcuffed
Or in the jail cell of a town
I only know the name of
Because I have to drive through it
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,
But I promise you, I trust the maggots
Who live beneath the floorboards
Of my house to do what they must
To any carcass more than I trust
An officer of the law of the land
To shut my eyes like a man
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet
So clean my mother could have used it
To tuck me in. When I kill me, I will
Do it the same way most Americans do,
I promise you: cigarette smoke
Or a piece of meat on which I choke
Or so broke I freeze
In one of these winters we keep
Calling worst. I promise if you hear
Of me dead anywhere near
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took
Me from us and left my body, which is,
No matter what we've been taught,
Greater than the settlement
A city can pay a mother to stop crying,
And more beautiful than the new bullet
Fished from the folds of my brain.

So it's new that everybody's really proud of having been a nerd. It's like the popular thing to be now. It wasn't so great when we were actual nerds in school, though. And I think I was a very special kind of a nerd. I know everybody thinks their nerd was special. But you know, I couldn't—we couldn't afford video games, so I couldn't be a video game nerd. And I remember asking my mom for a video game. I have never heard her laugh like that before. And I, you know, you can build community around video games.

You can be, if you're a comic book nerd, you know, you would go to the comic book store and you would build community because you'd see the other people at the comic book store. So I was indeed a very special kind of a nerd because I was a riddle nerd. I would memorize the riddles in "Highlights" and I really thought—Can you imagine? [Audience laughs] It's true though.

Wow. So when I was, when I realized I wanted more than anything in the world to be a poet, I wanted to write a poem that was also a riddle. So I had been trying for a long time to write a poem that was also a riddle. And I had been failing over and over again. Because in order to write a riddle, you have to know the answer in order to create the questions. But in order to write a poem, you can't know where you're going at all. Right? So I decided that the poem was more important than the riddle. So I have a poem that's a riddle, but I don't know the answer to the riddle. So maybe y'all can figure it out and write to me and let me know, or something.

"Riddle"

We do not recognize the body
Of Emmett Till. We do not know
The boy's name nor the sound
Of his mother wailing. We have
Never heard a mother wailing.
We do not know the history
Of this nation in ourselves. We
Do not know the history of our-
Selves on this planet because
We do not have to know what
We believe we own. We believe
We own your bodies but have no
Use for your tears. We destroy
The body that refuses use. We use
Maps we did not draw. We see
A sea so cross it. We see a moon
So land there. We love land so
Long as we can take it. Shhh. We
Can't take that sound. What is
A mother wailing? We do not

Recognize music until we can
Sell it. We sell what cannot be
Bought. We buy silence. Let us
Help you. How much does it cost
To hold your breath underwater?
Wait. Wait. What are we? What?
What on Earth are we? What?

As Rebecca mentioned, I invented a form, which is another feature of this particular book. The form is called a duplex. I hope all of you will write one. It's a form that is at once a ghazal, a sonnet, and a blues poem. And I think you'll be able to hear all of those forms come through. I was thinking about how to merge time and space into one single form. And I was also thinking about being one body that carries several identities, and carries several subjectivities, and carries all of them whole.

"Duplex"

I begin with love, hoping to end there.
I don't want to leave a messy corpse.

I don't want to leave a messy corpse
Full of medicines that turn in the sun.

Some of my medicines turn in the sun.
Some of us don't need hell to be good.

Those who need most, need hell to be good.
What are the symptoms of *your* sickness?

Here is one symptom of my sickness:
Men who love me are men who miss me.

Men who leave me are men who miss me
In the dream where I am an island.

In the dream where I am an island,
I grow green with hope. I'd like to end there.

"Dark"

I am sick of your sadness,
Jericho Brown, your blackness,
Your books. Sick of you
Laying me down

So I forget how sick I am.
I'm sick of your good looks,
Your debates, your concern, your
Determination to keep your butt
Plump, the little money you earn.
I'm sick of you saying no when yes is as easy
As a young man, bored with you
Saying yes to every request
Though you're as tired as anyone else yet
Consumed with a single
Diagnosis of health. I'm sick
Of your hurting. I see that
You're blue. You may be ugly,
But that ain't new.
Everyone you know is
Just as cracked. Everyone you love is
As dark, or at least as black.

I think I'll finish with some love poems. Can I read you some love poems? Is that okay? It's good to ask for consent. So, y'all said yes, right? Remember, you said yes. If anybody's here on a date, I hope this works.

"Your Body Made Heavy with Gin "

I can relax. I smell liquor on your breath.
Soon your arms will be too heavy to lift,
And I'll watch the weight of you
Shiver while you sleep. But first
I want to see that stagger—
Like a boy sent off to battle, shot,
Then sent back. I kept one once.
He'd never get a good doze. Only quake
And dream of hands aimed at his throat.
He'd cough and gag. I'd shake him awake.
He was as you are. he could have died
In my bed. He could have never stopped
Dreaming. He'd take me
For the enemy. We'd fight.
But you and I won't fight tonight.
I'll remember some limping lover and talk
All I want about war. Or maybe
I won't. Maybe I don't care
Who survives—I only need to watch your body
Made heavy with gin as I hold you up

From your fall at the threshold
Because I love you and I love you best
With liquor on your breath
When I can get a good look at you
Just the way I found you, reeking
And too drunk to go after the roaches
With the heel of your hand. And too drunk
To take me for one of the roaches.

This is a poem about cuddling. It's my favorite thing to do.

"Stand"

Peace on this planet
Or guns glowing hot,
We lay there together
As if we were getting
Something done. It
Felt like planting
A garden or planning
A meal for a people
Who still need feeding,
All that touching or
Barely touching, not
Saying much, not adding
Anything. The cushion
Of it, the skin and
Occasional sigh, all
Seemed like work worth
Mastering. I'm sure
Somebody died while
We made love. Some-
Body killed somebody
Black. I thought then
Of holding you
As a political act. I
May as well have
Held myself. We didn't
Stand for one thought,
Didn't do a damn thing,
Derrick, and though
You have left me,
I'm glad we didn't.

And I'll finish with a duplex. It's the last poem in the book and therefore also the last duplex in the book. As I mentioned to y'all, the poem takes on three forms into one, but this particular duplex is also a cento. But rather than taking lines from poems by other other people, this duplex, this cento, takes its lines from all of the other duplexes in the book. Because I'm attracted to difficulty. Which is a wonderful trait to have if you want to be a poet. Not so good if you want to be in a relationship.

"Duplex Cento"

My last love drove a burgundy car,
Color of a rash, a symptom of sickness.

We were the symptoms, the road our sickness:
None of our fights ended where they began.

None of the beaten end where they begin.
Any man in love can cause a messy corpse,

But I didn't want to leave a messy corpse
Obliterated in some liliated field,

Stench obliterating lilies of the field,
The murderer, young and unreasonable.

He was so young, so unreasonable,
Steadfast and awful, tall as my father.

Steadfast and awful, my tall father
Was my first love. He drove a burgundy car.

Thank y'all so much.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Rebecca Hoogs, Host

We'll hear more from Jericho Brown and Copper Canyon editor and poet Elaina Ellis, in a moment. But first, I wanted to take a moment to tell you about our Community Access Tickets program, or CAT. At SAL, we believe that reading, writing, and creative thinking are indispensable to a curious, engaged, democratic society. Our goal is to make these experiences available to as many people as possible. If you're living in the Seattle area, and you find yourself facing economic hardship, we encourage you to apply for CAT. CAT allows folks to be entered into a drawing for free tickets to any of our events. Look for a link at the bottom of our homepage at lectures.org to sign up. We hope you can join us. And now, back to Jericho Brown.

Elaina Ellis

How many of you had never heard Jericho read before? Oh, so lucky. So I wanted to say to you, before we, before I ask you the tough questions, that I feel so lucky. And I now know that so many of you in this room are so lucky. We are all so lucky to be living while you're living, Jericho Brown, and while you're writing. So lucky that you're alive and writing. I'm so grateful for that. Grateful to be in poetry while you're in poetry. So thank you.

Jericho Brown

Thank you, Elena. I feel this way too about this time. This is—I was actually telling somebody this. Actually, I was just telling you this as I was walking by the Copper Canyon Press book table, and I saw the books. I was like, "Oh, I love this book. Oh, here's another." And I didn't realize it was the Copper Canyon Press book table. I think this has been such a wonderful year for poetry, but obviously for poetry at the best press in the whole wide world. You know?

Elaina Ellis

We are so grateful to be working with you. And so, "The Tradition" is your third book. Have y'all seen this beautiful cover?

Jericho Brown

Isn't that nice, isn't that special? Y'all haven't seen it. They can't see it from that far away. So they're not wiggling out—

Elaina Ellis

It's so beautiful, you'll have to go to the table and purchase it from Open Books tonight.

Jericho Brown

When you see it you'll say, "You know, even if I don't like these poems, I should really have this cover." I'm serious about that. I mean—

Elaina Ellis

This is your third book. And I've heard you talk about the way that this book pursued you, or haunted you, in a way that was different than your first two. And I wonder if you'll tell us about that. And I want to know, what did it want from you?

Jericho Brown

Yeah. My editor Michael Wieggers called me, I think, in September. He asked me how far along I was toward a new book. And he said, you know, let me see what you got, 'cause I might have a space for you. "We have a space for you. If you have something, we'll have a space where something can come out in 2019." And I looked at the number of pages I had, and I said, "Michael, I don't have anything, so I'm sorry." Which was fine with me because I write, I generally write pretty slowly. I mean, for me, writing is much more about enjoying failure than it is anything else. I mean, that's— that sounds funny. But I mean that sincerely, like I'm sort of having a good time with sounds and not trying— I'm not under the impression that I have to

record "I Will Always Love You" every day. I don't think every time I get up from the writing table I should have a poem. Do you know what I mean?

Elaina Ellis

I love that that was your analogy.

Jericho Brown

Yeah, I know. I don't wake up Whitney Houston, you know. So, he called back in October and he said, "Are you sure?" And I said, "No." He called me in November. He's like, "Hey, we got a space for you. How's the writing going?" I was like, "Michael, leave me alone." And I think I wrote something like 46 pages of poetry, in addition to what I had already been writing since the last book, somewhere between Thanksgiving of 2017 and Martin Luther King Day of 2018. And it was the most exhilarating and exhausting, and honestly quite scary, time of my life.

It was exhilarating because I was writing poems. And that's all I want to do all the time. So I was very happy. At the same time, you know, I'm very good about servicing a line or, you know, I would pull over to the side of the road, or I would leave out of the movie theater and run to the bathroom and try to write notes in the iPhone of my, in the Notes app on my iPhone. And I was writing all the time, and I had just gotten this new job.

So I had to be at like, eight, nine o'clock in the morning meetings. So I was getting up, I would like, turn over the draft at 7:30 and start getting dressed, you know what I mean? Because I would write all night and go to meetings then write all night and go to meetings. So I was completely grateful. But I was also texting my friends so that if I died, there would be evidence that I knew it was coming.

And the only reason I thought I was going to die—I have to tell y'all this. I grew up in a very religious household. So I grew up in the church. And if you grow up in the church in Louisiana, that means that which is religious intersects with that which is superstitious. So I was very—I was convinced. You know, one of the things that I've known about myself for a very long time is that I'm a poet, and I've been very comfortable and happy. Oh, thank God, at least I know, once I figured it out. I was like, "Oh, good. I figured that thing out. That's what I'm supposed to be doing."

Do y'all know what I mean? So when there's one thing that you know you're good at doing and you're suddenly doing it in a way that you never have before, and you're producing so much, I was under the impression that God was trying to take me out of here. Do you know what I'm saying? So I was really afraid that I was going to write, like, all of these poems one after another and then just fall out or something. But I didn't.

Elaina Ellis

Wow, thank you, God, for—

Jericho Brown

Yeah, yeah, hallelujah.

Elaina Ellis

—both the book and Jericho Brown.

Jericho Brown

And when I got the book in the mail, I mean. You know, we were— We had been working on the book, doing all of the production, doing copy edits, looking at covers; all kinds of stuff. But it wasn't until I got the book in the mail that I was like, "Oh my God, I'm not dead. Thank you. Oh my God, I get to go in a store." Do you know what I mean? So yeah.

Elaina Ellis

Yeah, so now that you know that it wasn't about a farewell masterpiece...

Jericho Brown

Yeah.

Elaina Ellis

What was this? What was that calling? Like, why did this book need to keep you up all night and need you to leave the movie theater to write things down?

Jericho Brown

I think I just had a very different, I mean, I was growing up as a human being. I was becoming more and more an adult. And I was having a different experience of politics and art and where they intersect. You know, when *Moonlight* came out, I think I saw it seven times in seven days. I was reading Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* over and over again. I was dealing with politics, and the view of politics that we've all been dealing with, in ways that I had not before. I was also being angry about people finding out about things that I had been telling them my entire life about politics. I was also in a position where, for the first time in my life, I had my own yard.

And, you know, the earliest forms of this book were really supposed to—and still are, they are, but they do other things as well—but they're pastoral poems in the Southern tradition. They're poems about flowers, you know, poems about trees, poems about the fact that at dawn and dusk you see rabbits in my yard. You know, poems about the process of landscaping and doing what has been handed down all the way to me for generations in my family. When I began this book, it was really a book that was about flowers. And the fact that when I say "flower," we all get a different flower in our heads. You know, I'm thinking dahlia right now but somebody's got a rose and somebody else has a water lily. Do y'all know what I mean? And I realized somewhere along the way that the same thing happens if I say "Black man." And so I wanted to over and over again juxtapose these images from the natural world with these images of Black men and Black boys. And I wanted them to stand together and see what they would do in the work if they stood together. And I think all of those things came to form. And I think the fact

is—and you know, whenever we can, we have to be honest about this—it was the first time I was ever writing poems from a position of complete privilege.

You know, my first book was about finishing a dissertation and then getting a job teaching. I'm a college professor. And then my second book was about getting tenure. Do you know what I mean? This is the first book I wrote for no reason other than—I didn't think about—I wasn't thinking about keeping the lights on. And I wasn't thinking about eating. I was, I wrote this book because I'm a poet. Do you know I mean? And I think something about that freedom met all these other things in a way that didn't necessarily feel free when I was writing the poems.

Elaina Ellis

Yeah. I love this. So you write about and talk about staying vulnerable to poetry. And you have this beautiful quote in an interview about likening, you know, committing to a relationship to poetry, to falling in love. And you say you can't fall in love and not be vulnerable.

Jericho Brown

Yeah.

Elaina Ellis

But this is what came up for me today when I was reading this.

Jericho Brown

Or have fights.

Elaina Ellis

Yeah, yeah, okay, so exactly. You can't fall in love and not be vulnerable. But what about staying in love? So when—so what about this, like, lasting relationship that you have now with poetry, and how do you, over time, stay vulnerable to it? And how do you — yeah. How's your relationship going? Are there fights? Are you in therapy?

Jericho Brown

Yeah, yeah.

Elaina Ellis

Like not you personally, but you and your poetry.

Jericho Brown

Poetry and I, are we having marriage counseling sessions?

Elaina Ellis

Yeah. Like what? Yeah.

Jericho Brown

Always. So, yeah, it gets hard. You know, because part of what you're doing as a poet is every time you go to write a poem, you're reinventing what poetry is to you. That gets particularly difficult and you don't always have the drive. You always—you actually, you do always have the drive to do that. But you don't always know exactly what it is that you're looking for. You know that you're seeking something. As a writer I do a lot of reading. But no matter how much I'm reading, I'm missing something. And part of what I've learned as a writer is that my job is to fill in "the something" I'm missing. That I need to be making the poems I want to read in the world. So I have to, I mean, the real truth about staying vulnerable for me is that I have to keep a lively and vibrant reading life, which is quite difficult to do. But it takes some work and some, quite honestly, some discipline. You know, you have to plan to get reading done and to remain a part of the conversation.

Elaina Ellis

Yeah.

Jericho Brown

Right? So I mean, that's part of the way you stay in love. You literally seek the love out. And you don't get bothered by the fact that you come across poems that you don't love. That doesn't mean you don't love poetry. We understand this just fine with music, by the way. But you know, I've been taking a lot of planes lately. And one thing that I figured out, if I want people not to talk to me on the plane, is when they ask me what I do I just tell them I'm a poet, and they just leave me alone. They just never look at me again. So like, they don't know what to do with that information. But I also find that there's this thing, this funny thing'll happen, I love it, it's so hilarious to me.

"So what do you do?"

"I'm a poet."

"I hate poetry."

Like, I just told you! Do you know what I'm saying! But let me tell you what I started doing. Let me tell— oh, it's so funny, this is hilarious. You got to try this out. They say "I hate poetry" and I'll say, now I'll say, "Really, you don't like any poem?" And you know, people will recite a poem.

Elaina Ellis

I do know this.

Jericho Brown

Or two.

Elaina Ellis

I do know this.

Jericho Brown

And I'm like, you think you hate poetry but it looks like this has been sustaining you for the last 53 years. Do you know what I mean? So, do you know what I'm saying?

Elaina Ellis

Yeah.

Jericho Brown

And I think our relationship to art is that way. I don't know why we have this heavier responsibility on poetry than we do any other art. Like nobody thinks— you know, when we're, when you're in your car and you're listening to music, or you're washing dishes and you're listening to music, or you're in the shower and you're listening to music, it's the music you chose. I mean, especially this generation.

Elaina Ellis

Yeah.

Jericho Brown

It's the music you chose to listen to. And you don't hear it. You're like, you're doing your thing. And you don't hear the music that you put on your playlist. Except every once in a while something comes up, and you're suddenly rocking out.

Elaina Ellis

Mm-hmm.

Jericho Brown

That's the relationship we literally have to music. Nobody says "I hate music."

Elaina Ellis

Yeah. Yeah.

Jericho Brown

That's the relationship we have to visual art. We're walking by and seeing visual art every day, all over. I mean, especially in a city like this. It's everywhere. Sculpture, painting.

Elaina Ellis

And nobody says "I hate art."

Jericho Brown

Nobody's like, "I hate paintings." Nobody says that! And they don't say—trees. Y'all see, we see trees, like people have real, 100 percent—If I say, "Think of your tree." Look at that. Inn't that something? Everybody can just—there it is. That's your tree. You see what I mean?

Elaina Ellis

Yeah, there was a way—

Jericho Brown

Do you know how many trees are not that tree? But nobody says I hate trees. Do you know— and I have to, that's the thing I have to remember, that I'm always, and the thing I'm always trying to tell my students: You have to be looking for the magic. It's not gonna be that, and what is magic to me might not be magic to you.

Elaina Ellis

Yeah. I, last night, had a conversation with a woman who teaches middle school and knew of a middle school teacher who every day of class read a different poem, that the class read the poem aloud. And, but they didn't talk about it, it wasn't about analyzing it. It was just about hearing a different poem every day. And we're talking about the brilliance of that for exactly this reason, because then you just get to know that there are a lot of different poems, like there are different songs and different trees.

Jericho Brown

Yes, yes.

Elaina Ellis

And,

Jericho Brown

And nobody ever looks at a branch of a tree and says, "Well, I'd like to contextualize this in the 19th Century."

Elaina Ellis

You kind of do in your work, but. I want to know, thinking about those middle schoolers who hear the poems every day, and the students who you worked with today, and our brilliant student poet tonight, I want to hear about little Jericho Brown. You've shared recently about being a six- or seven-year-old in the library.

Jericho Brown

Oh, yeah.

Elaina Ellis

Poetry coming to find you.

Jericho Brown

Yeah, I love poetry.

Elaina Ellis

Because it's one thing to figure out that there are a lot of poems in the world and that we're not going to hate all of them, but how did poetry come let you know that this was your passion?

Jericho Brown

Yeah. I fell in love with poetry when I was a kid because I was fortunate enough to have a mother who couldn't afford child care but was an improvisational genius. So she would take me and my sister to the library when she had to go run whatever errand she needed to run where she couldn't take us. And we also passed the Morningside branch of the public library on our way home from school, on the walk. So we would, instead of going home, we could just go to the library. And we would go into the library and there was no trouble because, you know—now, I don't think you can do this. But we, my mother—no one was worried about us tearing the library up because we were afraid of our mother. So the library itself was safe, you know.

And the librarians very quickly, you know—whether they knew it or not, they were our babysitter's—they very quickly figured out that I would sit and read books of poetry for hours on end. And part of that had to do with the fact that poems are short, and so I felt accomplished getting page—I mean, as a seven, you know, I was seven, I was six, I was eight, nine, ten. And so page after page, I would feel like, "Oh, I'm getting this done. This is over. Oh, baby, I read that." And so the beginning for me was not about analyzing or interpreting, it was about a real disinterested reading, and sort of catching images and liking them, or liking the sounds of things, not really knowing what poems were about per se.

But every once in a while coming across things that spoke to me in some way and being happy. Being happy with that as enough, at that time, and also getting a really good education in poetry because the librarians weren't really poetry readers, so they gave me the books—They would pile high these books of poetry of the poets they had heard of. So I had read all of the sonnets by Shakespeare. I had read Dickinson. I had read Walt Whitman. I had read. And then, you know, it came a point I had read Langston Hughes, I'd read Phyllis Wheatley, I'd read Rita Dove.

Elaina Ellis

All in that library.

Jericho Brown

Yeah. And they, you know, for them, they didn't think—so, you know, I mean, I wouldn't advise it for a depressed 10-year-old. But I was reading Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton. You know, Anne Sexton has poems with literal titles, like, "Wanting to Die." So, you know, but that happened. I'm just telling you. So, I mean, it worked out. I'm not dead.

Elaina Ellis

Yeah.

Jericho Brown

But do you understand what I'm saying? So I was reading, I mean, I loved Sexton because I could always get from the beginning to the end. And I felt like, "Oh, I know exactly what she's talking about." So I think, I mean, that was my early education in poetry.

Elaina Ellis

That's incredible. There are a lot of adults who wouldn't get from the beginning to an end of an Anne Sexton poem and say that: "I know exactly what she's talking about." So, I have all these wonderful questions that people wrote down, and I have been too interested in looking at your face and listening to you to look at them. So we're gonna see, okay.

Let's see. How has your experience...We're going with this one. How has your experience in the Black church affected your work? And do you intentionally infuse it or is it simply a part of your person?

Jericho Brown

I think it's simply a part of my person. I don't really intentionally do much of anything when I'm writing a poem until I'm at the point of revision. And for me, the point of revision is quite late. Jeanine Walker's here so she'll know what I'm talking about. And anyone who has worked with WITS knows that there's writing that you do before the thing you call the first draft. And in WITS we used to call that prewriting. And prewriting is really what I spend most of my time— that's the writing that I'm doing most of the time.

The writing that feels like writing you know, when you really feel like you're working, is revision. But in order to get to the point of revision, you have to do much more prewriting than you do revising. So maybe at the point of revising I'll notice certain things and I'll push in those directions. But those directions have already been made because of prewriting. And that even, this is even the case with formal work for me, you know.

I'll notice, "Oh, this rhymes or this could rhyme," or, "I'm repeating." I'll notice something like that, I'm repeating something. So if I'm repeating two lines, I'll say, "Does this want to be a villanelle?" I mean, those are the kinds of questions that I'm asking my poems. I'm also asking my poems, "Who is your speaker?" I'm asking my poems, "What is your occasion?" And I'm not assuming going into the poem that I know those things. I'm just starting with some— I usually try to find a way to create, some strange way to create a mess of text. And from that mess of text I create what will then be a first draft. Does that answer your question?

So, the Black church is a part of that, because that's a very basic part of my vernacular. And the way I see the world, and the way that I think about form, and the way that I think about discipline, from the order of service to the literal way that a sanctuary is made in the Black Baptist Church, to the way the music would work, the way it would be used to manipulate and create certain kinds of emotions.

But I do that without thinking about doing it, because it's part of who I am. And the same goes, I have to say, for anything that I write about. I sort of arrive at these things. I don't sit down trying to write poems about the time I "blank," or trying to write poems of some great political theme. If I were to sit down and do that I would never write any good. I mean, you know, I know we want wisdom from our poetry, but one way not to get it, is to sit down and say, "And now I will write my wise poem."

Elaina Ellis

Mm-hmm. Yeah. I like what you say about writing a mess. Creating a mess of text. Yeah.

Jericho Brown

A mess of text, yeah. That's the way to go.

Elaina Ellis

I want to ask you, too, about love and joy.

Jericho Brown

Those are good. I like 'em.

Elaina Ellis

Like, you can just go with that if you want to,

Jericho Brown

I'm all for it.

Elaina Ellis

But you as a person, and you and your body of work, somehow—absolutely, miraculously—buzz with love and joy. Even though, even though, even though, even though, even though. Right? Where? Why? How?

Jericho Brown

Because it's true... I don't know how it's true, but I know it is. I...I'm sorry, y'all. I get so emotional. I you know, when I...my grandparents were sharecroppers on both sides of my family. As young as I am, my grandparents were sharecroppers. And so when I think about the attitude that they had in the world, you know, they were hardworking people. And they created a great deal of violence and anger on this planet, but they also would have me holding my stomach in laughter.

And when I think about the lives that they lived, and the world that they created so that I could sit here and do stuff like this, then I understand that, as a part of the truth of life, and if I am a poet at all, if I am a poet of witness or a poet at all, then I am not telling the truth if I only witness atrocity. It is there if you want it, but there must be something else there because we keep facing it. And part of what I have to write about, because I have to tell the truth, is that thing that keeps us facing the— not just the atrocity, but what keeps us facing the atrocity and

moving through the atrocity, and surviving the atrocity, and thriving in spite of the atrocity, you know? So, it creates, even thinking about it just creates a well of gratitude for me.

Because I know I was, I mean what really brings me great joy and great gratitude is thinking about how—I was thinking about this when Naomi was reading her poem—how Langston Hughes picked Gwendolyn Brooks for a poetry contest. So Gwendolyn Brooks got to meet Langston Hughes. Isn't that something? You know what I mean? Inn't that something? That's just a fact. And it's just like, oh my God, isn't that the best? Can you imagine? Oh, like can you imagine, like little Gwendolyn Brooks like, "Ooh, ya'll, it's Langston Hughes." And Langston Hughes don't even know to be like, "Oh my God, it's Gwendolyn Brooks."

Elaina Ellis

That's right.

Jericho Brown

And so much was done that I will never be aware of. So much that people were conscious of, and that they were unconscious of, so that I can exist. And so then I live in that with a certain amount of celebration and joy and gratitude. But real gratitude looks like responsibility. And so I have a job to do and I have to do it to the best of my ability, because I have to honor what so many dead folk did while they were alive. And I have to die one day having done something for somebody else to be able to live. That's just the way it is. You know?

Elaina Ellis

I do.

Jericho Brown

Elena, you're gonna make me run my makeup.

Elaina Ellis

Jericho, your makeup still looks really good.

Jericho Brown

Thank you.

Elaina Ellis

And—

Jericho Brown

Everybody's like, "Does he really have makeup?" I just said that so y'all can get close, that means y'all got to get a book. So I can sign it.

Elaina Ellis

Yeah. Jericho is gonna be out there signing these books in a few minutes. And thank you. Thank for the readings, thank you for everything you shared, thank you for your joy.

Jericho Brown

Thank ya'll so much for coming. I'll see y'all outside. Thank you. That was sweet, thank you.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Rebecca Hoogs, Host

Thanks so much to Jericho Brown for joining us on the SAL stage. Thanks as well to the Seattle Arts & Lectures staff, board and community—and thanks to all of you for listening. This show would not be possible without you. Our show is produced by JackStraw Cultural Center with theme music by Daniel Spils. To hear more, make sure to subscribe from wherever you get your podcasts. While you're there, why not rate and review us five stars so that more people can enjoy *SAL/on air*.