

Prayer of the Backhanded

Not the palm, not the pear tree
Switch, not the broomstick,
Nor the closest 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.

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.

'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.

Langston Blue

“O Blood of the River of songs,
O songs of the River of Blood,”
Let me lie down. Let my words

Lie sound in the mouths of men
Repeating their invocations pure
And perfect as a moan

That mounts in the mouth of Bessie Smith.
Blues for the angels kicked out
Of heaven. Blues for the angels

Who miss them still. Blues
For my people and whatever water
They know. O weary drinkers

Drinking from the bloody river,
Why go to heaven with Harlem
So close? Why sing of rivers

With a daddy of my own to miss?
I remember him and taste a stain
Like blood coursing the body

Of a man chased by a mob. I write
His running, his sweat: here,
He climbs a poplar for the sky,

But it is only sky. The river?
Follow me. You’ll see. We tried
To fly and learned we couldn’t

Swim. Dear singing river full
Of my blood, are we as loud under
Water? Is it blood that binds

Brothers? Or is it the Mississippi
Running through the fattest vein
Of America? When I say home,

I mean I wanted to write some
Lines. I wanted to hear the blues,
But here I am swimming in the river

Again. What runs through the fat
Veins of a drowned body? What
America can a body call home?

When I say Congo, I mean blood.
When I say Nile, I mean blood.
When I say Euphrates, I mean,

*If only you knew what blood
We have in common. So much,
In Louisiana, they call a man like me*

Red. And red was too dark
For my daddy. And my daddy was
Too dark for America. He ran

Like a man from my mother
And me. And my mother's sobs
Are the songs of Bessie Smith

Who wears more feathers than
Death. O the death my people refuse
To die. When I was 18, I wrote down

The river though I couldn't win
A race, climbed a tree that winter, then
Fell, flat on my wet, red face. Line

After line, I read all the time,
But "there was nothing I could do
About race."

Herman Finley Is Dead*1947-2005*

The birds know a day
Made for defeat.
Not one of them sings.
Instead, they make a toilet
Of your newly-washed car.
Don't cry over it. Listen
To the birds—you, too,
Should shut-up. But first,
Tell every alto you know
To hold her muddy breath.
Bid every obese soprano
A forty-day fast.
Get any man who ever sang
In a choir, head bowed,
None praying. Summon
Both the interpreter
And the speaker of tongues.
Pinch their burning lips.
Contact the necessary
Limp-wristed whose every suit
Is an Easter suit, bright
And loud enough to flame
In hell. I want them all
Wearing their worst black.
Call Nelson Demery
And Shanetta Brown.
Tell them to turn off the radio
Whether the station plays
Gospel or blues. Tell them
Herman Finley is dead. Then,
Tell them what God loves,
The truth: the disease
Your mother's mouth won't mention
Got bored with nibbling away
At the insides of his body
And, today, decided
To swallow Herman Finley
Whole. Tell them they must

Chop and torch each piano
Before helping me bolt the doors
Of all the Baptist Churches
From Shreveport to Monroe.
I don't want a single hum.
We will not worship
Save for silence. Watch
The birds shit in peace.
When the choir director's arms
Fall, the choir must not sing.

Tin Man

In my chest	a slit of air.	Don't say love.
Drop a penny.	I can't feel a thing.	Remember
Cities shine gray.	Never believe	the color green.
No green is god.	I've watched color die.	I've killed it.
And every tree must fall,	slicing the air.	In my chest
A missing beat.	Skip it—	Hush, love.
Man made me.	Add a little oil,	drop one penny,
Pull the lever:	I chop.	Men made me
So I stop.	I am tired	of your woods,
Your whole world	unpaved, green.	Cities shine
The color gray.	Don't you want	something heartless?
Can I get you	an axe handle	for destruction?
Tired of your body?	Use mine.	Manhandle,
Beat time—	I won't feel	one damn thing.

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.

Romans 12:1

I will begin with the body:
In the year of our Lord,
Porous and wet, love-wracked
And willing, in my 23rd year,
A certain obsession overtook
My body, or I should say,
I let a man touch me until I bled,
Until my blood met his hunger
And so was changed, was given
A new name
As is the practice among my people
Who are several and whole, holy
And acceptable. On the whole
Hurt by me, they will not call me
Brother. Hear me coming,
And they cross their legs. As men
Are wont to hate women,
As women are taught to hate
Themselves, they hate a woman
They smell in me, every muscle
Of her body clenched
In fits beneath men
Heavy as heaven itself—my body,
Dear dying sacrifice, desirous
As I will be, black as I am.

Hustle

They lie like stones and dare not shift. Even asleep, everyone hears in prison.
Dwayne Betts deserves more than this dry ink for his teenage years in prison.

In the film we keep watching, Nina takes Darius to a steppers ball.
Lovers hustle, slide, dip as if one of them has no brother in prison.

I dine with humans who think any book full of black characters is about race.
A book full of white characters examines insanity near—but never in—prison.

His whole family made a barricade of their bodies at the door to room 403.
He died without the man he wanted. What use is love at home or in prison?

We saw police pull sharks out of the water just to watch them not breathe.
A brother meets members of his family as he passes the mirrors in prison.

Sundays, I washed and dried her clothes after he threw them into the yard.
In the novel I love, Brownfield kills his wife, gets only seven years in prison.

I don't want to point my own sinful finger, so let's use your clean one instead.
Some bright citizen reading this never considered a son's short hair in prison.

In our house lived three men with one name, and all three fought or ran.
I left Nelson Demery, III for Jericho Brown, a name I earned in prison.

The Rest We Deserve

Our walls are thin, and the man who won't say hello
Back to me in the morning as we lock ourselves out
Of our homes—won't even nod my way as black men
Do when they see themselves in you—sings "Precious,
Precious," the only song he must know, to the newborn
Other neighbors tell me is all he has left of a woman
Who died, went to rehab, or left him for another,
Depending on the fool telling the story and the time
Of day it gets told. I don't know why it bothers me.
I don't need him to love me the way he loves that child,
Pacing an apartment I imagine looks just like mine
With a baby in his arms, none of us allowed the rest
We deserve, him awful and off-key, her—is it a she?—
Shrill as any abandoned animal should be. I want
To hurt him, and I want to help. I think of knocking
To say he doesn't have to be polite to me, but he should
Try stuffing the kid in a drawer and closing it; or
Knocking to show him the magic made when you sit
An infant in a car seat on top of a washer while you do
A little late night laundry. Why do I think he owes me,
That all the words to Jackie Moore's one hit make him
Mine enough not to mind the man he sees me kiss good-
Bye while he rolls his eyes, a baby strapped to his chest,
A tie around his neck, and me yawning because somebody
Wouldn't let me sleep? I wish any voice in this building
Could sing for the thing growing in the smallest of us
When we open our mouths at odd hours to shriek.

The Ten Commandments

But I could be covetous. I could be a thief.
I could want and work for. I could wire and
Deceive. I thought to fool the moon into
A doubt. I did some doubting. Lord,
Forgive me. In New Orleans that winter,
I waited for a woman to find me shirtless
On her back porch. Why? She meant it
Rhetorically and hit me with open hands.
How many times can a woman say why
With her hands in the moonlight? I counted
Ten like light breaking hard on my head,
Ten rhetorical whys and half a moon. Half
Nude, I let her light into me. I could be last
On a list of lovers Joe Adams would see,
And first to find his wife slapping the spit
Out of me. I could be sick and sullen. I could
Sulk and sigh. I could be a novel character
By E. Lynn Harris, but even he'd allow me
Some dignity. He loved black people too
Much to write about a wife whipping her rival
On a night people in Louisiana call cold.
He'd have Joe Adams run out back and pull
Her off of me. He wouldn't think I deserved it.

Security

I knew I had jetlag because no one would make love to me.
All the men thought me a vampire. All the women were

Women. In America that year, black people kept dreaming
That the President got shot. Then the President got shot

Breaking into the White House. He claimed to have lost
His keys. What's the proper name for a man caught stealing

Into his own home? I asked a few passengers. They replied,
Jigger. After that, I took the red-eye. I took to a sigh deep

As the end of a day in the dark fields below us. Some slept,
But nobody named Security ever believes me. Confiscated—

My Atripla. My Celexa. My Cortizone. My Klonopin. My
Flexeril. My Zertec. My Nasarel. My Percocet. My Ambien.

Nobody in this nation feels safe, and I'm still a reason why.
Everyday, something gets thrown away on account of long

History or hair or fingernails or, yes, of course, my fangs.

Heart Condition

I don't want to hurt a man, but I like to hear one beg.
Two people touch twice a month in ten hotels, and
We call it long distance. He holds down one coast.
I wander the other like any African American, Africa
With its condition and America with its condition
And black folk born in this nation content to carry
Half of each. I shoulder my share. My man flies
To touch me. Sky on our side. Sky above his world
I wish to write. Which is where I go wrong. Words
Are a sense of sound. I get smart. My mother shakes
Her head. My grandmother sighs: He ain't got no
Sense. My grandmother is dead. She lives with me.
I hear my mother shake her head over the phone.
Somebody cut the cord. We have a long distance
Relationship. I lost half of her to a stroke. God gives
To each a body. God gives every body its pains.
When pain mounts in my body, I try thinking
Of my white forefathers who hurt their black bastards
Quite legally. I hate to say it, but one pain can ease
Another. Doctors rather I take pills. My man wants me
To see a doctor. What are you when you leave your man
Wanting? What am I now that I think so fondly
Of airplanes? What's my name, whose is it, while we
Make love. My lover leaves me with words I wish
To write. Flies from one side of a nation to the outside
Of our world. I don't want the world. I only want
African sense of American sound. Him. Touching.
This body. Aware of its pains. Greetings, Earthlings.
My name is Slow And Stumbling. I come from planet
Trouble. I am here to love you uncomfortable.

Lion

I wish you tamed. I wish what you fear—
A night alone in the forest.

A father who leaves you there. I wish you
Were ten years old again. And in love

With Marvin Gaye. I wish you saw his daddy
Shoot him. I wish you asthma. An attack

In the field. A lump in your chest. A doctor
Who won't touch it. I wish you'd live forever

Afraid of dying. See the circus and be content.
Animals crawling like infants for the men

Who made them. I wish you would
Sniff a man. I wish his whip

Sharper than fangs. I wish you could know
How bite-less I feel, the mouth

I don't close, his head in my throat.

Again

by Jericho Brown

You are not as tired of the poem
As I am of the memory.
A returning toothache
On either side of the mouth.
An ingrown hair beneath the chin.
Simple itch. Bruising scratch
And again I am bundled
In cousin Kenny's clothes
From last school year
My hand held by my mother's.
We walk as if the house behind us
Isn't warm enough
For my feet. In the dark
We make a few blocks
Around the one-story neighborhood
That I loved
Though nothing I've written
Tells you this.
I want to cut it out of me.
Because. Turns out it never mattered.
Right now my mother's asleep
On my father's chest.
His arm has landed
In the same place around her
Most of thirty years.
Give a man a minute.
She's asleep and I'm typing it
All over again. Everywhere
A man is shifting a bit
To make his woman comfortable
In his arms.
I should have told you this
Lines ago. We walked back
To the house we ran from.
Because.
My mother loves her husband
And his hands
Even if laid heavy against her.
I know you
Don't want to believe that
But give a man a minute.

We're not done.
My father loves his wife
And the shape of her body
Even if hunched in retreat,
Their son keeping up. I'm so sick of it—
Another awful father
Scarring this page too—
A bruising scratch.
We walked back
Through an open door.
And why don't I mention
He kissed my forehead
Before covering me
On the couch that was my bed?
Listen
And you can hear them
In the next room
Planning names for the youngest of us
Then making love loud enough
For the oldest to learn.

TRACK 1: LUSH LIFE

By Jericho Brown

The woman with the microphone sings to hurt you,
To see you shake your head. The mic may as well
Be a leather belt. You drive to the center of town
To be whipped by a woman's voice. You can't tell
The difference between a leather belt and a lover's
Tongue. A lover's tongue might call you bitch,
A term of endearment where you come from, a kind
Of compliment preceded by the word sing
In certain nightclubs. A lush little tongue
You have: you can yell, Sing bitch, and, I love you,
With a shot of Patrón at the end of each phrase
From the same barstool every Saturday night but you can't
Remember your father's leather belt without shaking
Your head. That's what satisfies her, the woman
With the microphone. She does not mean to entertain
You, and neither do I. Speak to me in a lover's tongue—
Call me your bitch, and I'll sing the whole night long.