'Devastating' Claudia Rankine

TESTA MENT

PICADOR POETRY

Jericho Brown

The New Testament

PICADOR

In memory of

Messiah Demery (1981–2008) One's lover—or one's brother, or one's enemy—sees the face you wear, and this face can elicit the most extraordinary reactions.

JAMES BALDWIN

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Colosseum

I don't remember how I hurt myself, The pain mine Long enough for me To lose the wound that invented it As none of us knows the beauty Of our own eyes Until a man tells us they are Why God made brown. Then That same man says he lives to touch The smoothest parts, suggesting our Surface area can be understood By degrees of satin. Him I will Follow until I am as rough outside As I am within. I cannot locate the origin Of slaughter, but I know How my own feels, that I live with it And sometimes use it To get the living done, Because I am what gladiators call A man in love—love Being any reminder we survived.

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—my body, Dear dying sacrifice, desirous As I will be, black as I am.

Heartland

This is the book of three Diseases. Close it, and you're caught Running from my life, nearer its end now That you've come so far for a man Sick in his blood, left lung, and mind. I think of him mornings I wake panting like a runner after His best time. He sweats. He stops Facing what burned. The house That graced this open lot was A red brick. Children played there— Two boys, their father actually Came home. Mama cooked As if she had a right to The fire in her hands, to the bread I ate Before I saw doctors who help me Fool you into believing I do anything other than the human thing. We breathe until we don't. Every last word is contagious.

Another Elegy

Expect death. In every line, Death is a metaphor that stands For nothing, represents itself, No goods for sale. It enters Whether or not your house Is dirty. Whether or not You are clean, you arrive late Because you don't believe her When, sobbing as usual, she Calls to say if you don't stop Your brother, she will kill him This time. Why rush? By now, You think she likes it, his hands Slapping her seven shades of red. Besides, your brother is much Bigger than you—once you tried Pulling him off the woman he loves And lost a tooth. Expect to lose Again as you stand for nothing Over his body, witness Or reporter, murderer or kin.

Cain

First, a conversation. Now, A volcano. Call me quick-Tempered vegan. Turnip Lover. Fruit licker. Mound Maker. Quiet. I can predict An earthquake. I can cook A rose. I'm first to kill A weed. The collards Should come quick this year. The beans may be lean. I plant seeds and wait All winter to eat. Some Slaughter sheep for dinner. Some chew leaves. Firstborn And patient, I give ground Color. Pull pink from Green. Azalea, vibrant As a lamb's tongue. My kid Brother killed one, but I Dug the hole, soil still Young, lava beneath it Near each finger when little Brothers tortured most Of God's creatures, and small Men watched them bleed.

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.

The Interrogation

I. WHERE

In that world, I was a black man. Now, the bridge burns and I Am as absent as what fire Leaves behind. I thought we ran To win the race. My children swear We ran to end it. I'd show them The starting point, but no sky here Allows for rain. The water infects Us, and every day, the air darkens... The air, the only black thing Of concern— Who cares what color I was?

II. CROSS-EXAMINATION

Do you mean love? Certainly a way of loving.

Did it hurt? When doesn't it?

We'll ask the questions. Did it hurt? When death enters a child's room,

The child feels a draft. *So you chose for it to hurt.*

I chose my brother over my desire To be invisible.

We thought your brother was dead... He is.

And his death made you Visible?

You only see me When I carry a man on my back.

But you arrived alone. That wasn't me.

That was the man who lost My brother.

III. STREET DIRECTIONS

Will black men still love me If white ones stop wanting me

Dead? Will white men stop Wanting me dead? Will men

Like me stop killing men like You? Which made us brothers—

That you shielded my body With yours or that you found

Me here, dying on the pavement, And held my empty hand?

IV. REDIRECT

Tell us, then, how did that man lose your brother? I imagine

I lost him in the fire. *The record suggests*

You lost him to a bullet. The record was written

In my first language. The bullet is How I lost myself.

And this preoccupation with color, Was that before or after you lost yourself?

The women who raised me referred to Jesus As "our elder brother."

And what about race? What you call a color I call

A way. Forgive us. We don't mean to laugh.

It's just that black is, After all, the absence of color.

V. FAIRY TALE

Say the shame I see inching like steam Along the streets will never seep Beneath the doors of this bedroom, And if it does, if we dare to breathe, Tell me that though the world ends us, Lover, it cannot end our love Of narrative. Don't you have a story For me?—like the one you tell With fingers over my lips to keep me From sighing when—before the queen Is kidnapped—the prince bows To the enemy, handing over the horn Of his favorite unicorn like those men Brought, bought, and whipped until They accepted their masters' names.

VI. MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Metal makes for a chemical reaction. Now that my wrists are cuffed, I am Not like a citizen. What touches me Claims contamination. What A shame. A sham. When the police come They come in steel boots. Precious Metal. They want me kicked, So kick me they do. I cannot say They love me. But don't they seek me out As a lover would, each with both hands Bringing me to my knees, under God, Indivisible? I did not have to be born Here. Men in every nation pray And some standing and some flat On their backs. Pray luscious Silver. Pray Christmas. A chain A chain. Even if it's pretty. Even around The neck. I cannot say what they love Is me with a new bald fist in my mouth. Pray platinum teeth. Show me A man who tells his children The police will protect them And I'll show you the son of a man Who taught his children where To dig. Not me. Couldn't be. Not On my knees. No citizen begs To find anything other than forgiveness.

VII. LANDMARK

What Angel of Death flies by each house, waving My brother's soul in front of windows like a toy— A masked, muscle-bound action figure with fists We wanted when we were children—some light Item, a hero our family could never afford?

Paradise

That story I told about suffering Was a lie. I never wandered The woods with a box of matches. Truth is I was born in the forest, And there, I ran the weather. Deer left apples in my hand, so I didn't think to cook the deer. The secret of my life was My life, hair falling past my neck, Beyond my back. I can't say The nights grew cold, but Lord, I was bored. What words I spoke I yawned. And while I claimed To have walked away hearing a voice Or a fiddle, that too is untrue. When a man leaves, he leaves looking For more languages than there are Tongues. When a boy leaves, we Call him a man. You know that story As well as you know my smile, how It fit my face once I cut each tooth In your well-wrought world, right Along with this scar and this One and this one and this...

To Be Seen

Forgive me for taking the tone of a preacher. You understand, a dying man

Must have a point—not that I am Dying exactly. My doctor tells me I'll live

Longer than most since I see him More than most. Of course, he cannot be trusted

Nor can any man Who promises you life for looking his way. Promises

Come from the chosen: a lunatic, The whitest dove—those who hear

The voice of God and other old music. I'm not Chosen. I only have a point like anyone

Paid to bring bad news: a preacher, a soldier, The doctor. We talk about God

Because we want to speak In metaphors. My doctor clings to the metaphor

Of war. It's always the virus That attacks and the cells that fight or die

Fighting. Hell, I remember him saying the word *Siege* when a rash returned. Here

I am dying while

He makes a battle of my body—anything to be seen

When all he really means is to grab me by the chin And, like God the Father, say through clenched teeth,

Look at me when I'm talking to you. Your healing is not in my hands, though

I touch as if to make you whole.

Langston's Blues

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

Lie sound in the mouths of men Repeating 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 what water They know. O weary drinkers

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

With fathers of our own to miss? I remember mine 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 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."

'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 catch. 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. Π

The Ten Commandments

But I could be covetous. I could be a thief. Could want and work for. 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.

Homeland

I knew I had jet lag 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 Cortisone. My Klonopin. My Flexeril. My Zyrtec. My Nasarel. My Percocet. My Ambien.

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

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

Host

We want pictures of everything Below your waist, and we want Pictures of your waist. We can't Talk right now, but we will text you Into coitus. All thumbs. All bi Coastal and discreet and masculine And muscular. No whites. Every Body a top. We got a career To think about. No face. We got Kids to remember. No one over 29. No one under 30. Our exes hurt us Into hurting them. Disease free. No Drugs. We like to get high with The right person. You Got a girl? Bring your boy. We visiting. Room at the W. Name's D. Name's J. We DeeJay. We Trey. We Troy. We Q. We not Sending a face. Where should we Go tonight? You coming through? Please Know what a gym looks like. Not much Time. No strings. No place, no Face. Be clean. We haven't met Anyone here yet. Why is it so hard To make friends? No games. You Still coming through? Latinos only. Blacks will do. We can take one right Now. Text it to you. Be there next Week. Be there in June. We not a phone Person. We can host, but we won't meet

Without a recent pic and a real name And the sound of your deepest voice. Football Season

But the game includes killing Boys in another country. At the end of this beer, I pay a tax, make sure They're dead. A man asks to change The channel, unaware of his own safety. Barflies look at him as if he's spilled The final pint of ale. Loneliness Is a practice. Like medicine. Like law, the law of the land Live in twenty-four time zones. The last man standing is The first one alone. Which of us Is too drunk to stagger Home? Not me. I can drink A few more, see the Patriots Or the Cowboys or another Very long war right Here on this stool, watching My money work for me, the heat Up and me comfortable enough To complain about it.

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 some 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, everyone wishing 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?

What the Holy Do

for Previn Keith Butler (1978–2009)

Back when I was God, I had friends. We wrote our own Bible And got thrown out of church. Then I saw one of us again—a man Pushing into him From behind. He turned

His final face to the camera Like a teenager coming Upon a pimple in the mirror. The lonely worship alone. I search out such filth in the cathedral Of my home, but this time,

With a sheet, I covered the screen. That's what the holy do to the body After shutting its eyes, And that's this scribe's last vision Of another poorly recorded life As I talk to myself in late July, dragging

A fan behind me like an oxygen tank.

Reality Show

An editor... wrote back that she liked the "Negro" poems best... requested that Gwendolyn [Brooks] approach Knopf again when she had more of these.

AMY SICKELS

NEWS

It is like a love for men, this Love of language, and we are Men at war, says the news. No matter how long we speak English, English means not To count us or to count us Darkly, but I know what I want and so does channel 4. They give it to me, one heap After another: soldiers who, Following another battle, shed, Sweat, and spit like fountains.

THE HOUSEWIVES All dese negroes calln us cute But aint nobody tryna pay de light bill

Brothas on both coasts sayin Damn you Sexy But not one payin dis light bill

And here our grinnin asses go after each Compliment Lettin de fine ones cop a feel

TALK SHOW We can talk love If you want, Though I need fuel, Need bread, bed, And sex. I go To my pocket For change. One nickel Fails me, so I find Another, dead man At my finger, monument Against my thumb. Take, For instance, our love. Take or give it away, Or sell it for all I care, for the next Nickel I pinch, not much Money to debate or make You stay long Enough to turn on The TV where we see The real world done And watch a man Grin then run A finger through His enemy's hair.

THE BACHELOR All dese negroes swear Im cute But none of em payin dis light bill

Liars in Lithonia and doctors in Detroit say Damn you sexy But dey wont pay dis light bill

Still my ass go grinnin after each Goldtoothed word I can feel feel feel

Willing to Pay

It's your face I wanted. Spent Days at the dentist hoping He'd hammer the smile right. Your face and that thing You do with your eyes When I get you livid. Don't be Flattered. Don't be afraid. It's 1979 or so. I'm known To lie about my age. My parents Are trying again. How's that For language, the moans They made making me. If only One of them lasted longer, If they preferred the dog to some Other position, then maybe I'd be The same on both sides or A babyface the rest of my life. This is the night of a thousand Noses. You want entertainment, But how can I watch TV knowing A guy cuter than me is getting paid To wink, and I'm the one Willing to pay? I wonder awhile At football. At least, I'd have had A lovely set of calves. Everybody Who eats loves an athlete Naked and newly showered. What's fair? You got the face And the body and the cameras Calling while I got you

Waiting for me to put the *w* Behind the *o* in words like *Now*. Now look, I bought you Something else, something perfect For hanging on that wall you wanted Up. The painter did the damnedest Job pulling your lips close to mine.

Dear Dr. Frankenstein

I, too, know the science of building men Out of fragments in little light Where I'll be damned if lightning don't

Strike as I forget one May have a thief's thumb,

Another, a murderer's arm, And watch the men I've made leave Like an idea I meant to write down,

Like a vehicle stuck In reverse, like the monster

God came to know the moment Adam named animals and claimed Eve, turning from heaven to her

As if she was his To run. No word he said could be tamed.

No science. No design. Nothing taken Gently into his hand or your hand or mine, Nothing we erect is our own.

Another Elegy

I want to relax, but it's April. My students cross and un-

Cross bare legs, one thigh, In turn, holding the other

Down. Each limb, Every stem on Earth

At battle, studded With buds, all cocked

To win as the world Splits into its stains. I live

With a disease instead Of a lover. We take turns

Doing bad things To my body, share a house

But do not speak. We eat What I feed. Spring is a leg

And can't be covered. One day, I was born. That was long ago.

Motherland

Our mother swears the woman's nose is wide enough To dam the Red River.

Our mother says you could drain a swamp through The gap in Angel's teeth.

She's too bottom-heavy for her clothes. Even in a housedress, She looks like a whore fit for music videos.

Our mother keeps asking why so many music videos Are filmed at pools and beaches.

Mama doesn't care that Angel has two kids Or that she dropped out of school before Meeting my brother—and while I want someone To say what a shame it is that she outdrinks Our dad at Thanksgiving—Angel's looks are all

Our mother will criticize, turning watery eyes From my brother to me,

Pray my other boy won't bring anybody as ugly home. And I never do.

He was a fool for a tall woman, and Angel stood taller than him in any pair of shoes. He saw her the way children see the trees they climb, their mothers cussing down below.

After his car quit, I'd pick him up for work. He'd light his morning cigarette and fidget with my stereo for something repetitive, explicit

—the kind of music born when we were, the one sound we had in common.

I shouldn't, but I'm thinking About the woman who got shot Fighting over that sweat-soaked Headscarf Teddy Pendergrass threw Into the crowd at one of those Shows he put on for "Ladies Only" the year I was born. How Many women reached Before the tallest two forgot Their new fingernails matched Purses and shoes? I'm no good. I thought I'd be bored with men And music by now, voices tender As the wound Pendergrass could feel When he heard what caused gunfire Was a trick he rehearsed. Love, Quick and murderous, bleeding Proof of talent. He wanted to be What we pay to see—Of course, That's not special. I imagine Someone who desires any Worn piece of man must be Willing to shoot or be shot.

As we veered onto Line Avenue, he stopped the music, *Sometimes*, *I call Angel those names*. *She throws forks and plates when I do*.

He got out of my car laughing, but with his head in the window like it was his last chance at giving advice, *It feels good to have a woman fine as she is so mad at you*.

Before he saw Eve, the serpent walked upright And climbed and crawled like a man with limbs. He tangled himself in reaches for green, prized The curves of his quick and endlessly slim

Body. Days were years then. The woman spent Most days in giggles or gorged on something Significant placed in her palms. The serpent Admired her wandering, her ease at being

Described, entered. No one wanted, but even that garden Grew against the ground's will, and this, Child, I tell you since soon you'll grow and harden— No matter how low she seemed squatting to piss,

The damned snake couldn't stop staring, and she couldn't Understand—though he inched close enough To whisper something wet and true. He needed to confront Her with what he knew, needed her stuffed

On a sweet that made her see herself, see him And every beast in the young world watching. That wasn't the day she killed him. They fought and called the police on each other for years. Nobody paid any mind.

But if I turn too quick on Line with the worst music, I can hear him again, explaining the satisfaction of hurting a woman who's still there the next morning. I think that's why he loved Angel, ugly or fine. What man wouldn't love a woman like that? And why can't I?

I Corinthians 13:11

When I was a child, I spoke as a child. I even had a child's disease. I ran From the Doberman like all children On my street, but old men called me Special. The Doberman caught up, Chewed my right knee. Limp now In two places, I carried a child's Bible Like a football under the arm that didn't Ache. I was never alone. I owned My brother's shame of me. I loved The words *thou* and *thee*. Both meant My tongue in front of my teeth. Both meant a someone speaking to me. So what if I itched. So what if I couldn't Breathe. I climbed the cyclone fence Like children on my street and went First when old men asked for a boy To pray or to read. Some had it worse— Nobody whipped me with a water hose Or a phone cord or a leash. Old men Said I'd grow into my face, and I did.

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, and dip as if none of them has a brother in prison.

I eat with humans who think any book full of black characters is about race. A book full of white characters examines insanity—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.

III

Another Elegy

This is what our dying looks like. You believe in the sun. I believe I can't love you. Always be closing, Said our favorite professor before He let the gun go off in his mouth. I turned 29 the way any man turns In his sleep, unaware of the earth Moving beneath him, its plates in Their places, a dated disagreement. Let's fight it out, baby. You have Only so long left—a man turning In his sleep—so I take a picture. I won't look at it, of course. It's His bad side, his Mr. Hyde, the hole In a husband's head, the O Of his wife's mouth. Every night, I take a pill. Miss one, and I'm gone. Miss two, and we're through. Hotels Bore me, unless I get a mountain view, A room in which my cell won't work, And there's nothing to do but see The sun go down into the ground That cradles us as any coffin can.

Obituary

Say I never was a waiter. Say I never worked Retail. Tell the papers and the police, I wrote

One color and wore a torn shirt. Nothing Makes for longevity like a lie, so I had a few

Fakes and stains, but quote me, my hunger Was sudden and wanting. I waited, marked

Time with what heart-Beats I could hear, bumped my head nodding

At home. Some boys walked to my bedroom In boots. Some of me woke wheezing the next

Morning wherever snow didn't fall by the foot In a day. Beyond that, a name. For proof, a finger

Pointing forward. When you measure the distance Between this grave and what I gave, you'll find me

Here, at the end of my body and in love With Derrick Franklin, gift of carnelian,

Lashes thick as a thumb. Some men have a mind For marriage. Some never

Leave home. If the body is a corporation, I was the guy in charge of blood, my man

The CEO of bone. He kept a scandal

In my pocket. I sucked in my gut because I wanted

The lights on. Should a fool come looking For money, say I was a bag boy and a nanny.

Beyond that, a nation looking backward. A smile That would shine like the last line of cocaine. Psalm 150

Some folks fool themselves into believing, But I know what I know once, at the height Of hopeless touching, my man and I hold Our breaths, certain we can stop time or maybe

Eliminate it from our lives, which are shorter Since we learned to make love for each other Rather than doing it to each other. As for praise And worship, I prefer the latter. Only memory

Makes us kneel, silent and still. Hear me? Thunder scares. Lightning lets us see. Then, Heads covered, we wait for rain. Dear Lord, Let me watch for his arrival and hang my head

And shake it like a man who's lost and lived. Something keeps trying, but I'm not killed yet.

A Living

A scribble, a pat on the back—and no more Itches. I should have been a doctor. Better,

A preacher, a man who calls men to lift Hands in surrender disguised as praise.

Everyone loves Jesus. He saves. He's A healer. I lose when my man is right:

I cannot pay an electric bill, mine or his, One of us sick, the other sicker, neither

Knowing how to sew or salve a wound, only How precise the sound of him punctured.

After the Rapture

veritas sequitur esse

Nobody drowned in the flood. In the beginning, the sky could not fail. The first raindrops took men

By surprise. Everyone died Of shock. But when man was born Again, he liked words enough

To see if *wilted* might indeed modify *Trees*, so he drove toward an edge, Ran out of gas, turned back

To look at the desert, and like a nation Testing its best weapons In locations empty, unmarked,

Vast, he shredded himself With glass, spilled into and over Unnameable stretches of land,

Concrete, water, hands. Then, The real killing began. The cacti Leaked and lost their needles. A few

Men prayed. And we prayed to win.

Hebrews 13

Once, long ago, in a land I cannot name, My lover and my brother both knocked At my door like wind in an early winter. I turned the heat high and poured coffee Blacker than their hands which shivered As we sat in silence so thin I had to hum. They drank with a speed that must have Burned their tongues one hot cup then Another like two bitter friends who only Wished to be warm again like two worn Copies of a holy book bound by words to keep Watch over my life in the cold and never ever sleep

Angel

I'm nine kinds of beautiful, And all my hair is mine. The finest girl in Cedar Grove, All my hair mine. My mama jumped in a river, So I don't mind dying.

Yes, she read the Bible, Read all about war in heaven. Mama named me Angel To spite that war in heaven. Ask how many fights I won Before I turned seven.

When you got hips like these, Men want to take advantage. He called my hips a pair of shelves. The fool tried to take advantage. Police don't ever show until A bullet does some damage.

A few rules are schoolhouse. Others you learn in church. I got one rule for my babies When a kid steals their lunch: If anybody hits you, hit him Back. Never wait to punch.

Mama drowned, but before that, She taught me how to punch. She lost a love then killed herself, But she taught me to punch. I hear my man laughing above. I hit back hard, now he won't hush.

Receiving Line

California, November 4, 2008

Whenever a man wins, other men form lines To wring his right hand like a towel wet With what we want after washing. None

Of us clean, we leave soot older than color Caked in his palm, so the winner we waited for Can't see his own life line. This is mine,

Suited, on time: *My name is Jericho Brown*. *I like a little blues and a lot of whiskey*. *I read When my children let me. I write what I can't*

Resist. I'm as proud of you as a well-built chest, and I am in unlegislated love with a man bound To grab for me when he sleeps. Take my right hand,

The one that wakes him, the one I use to swear—

Make-Believe

Somewhere between here and Louisiana, I changed Clothes, each quarter I counted and counted on gone.

Women carry cartons and kegs, bananas and eggs.

I only need sugar, some smokes, a can of Coke To get through the margins where I write,

Metaphor = *tenor* + *vehicle*, for children who beg

To touch my hair and ask if I play basketball. Tomorrow, I will explain the word *brother*

Is how we once knew black as someone

Frowns, raising his freckled hand: *So*, *you don't Have a brother?* Milk warms behind me. Babies

Begin to cry. I dig again, this time coming back

With lint. *I am not a liar*, I tell the cashier. The next Day to my students I'll say, *No*, *I don't have a brother*

In the world. Myth is not make-believe. My

Mother and father had only one son. This, My brother, is a metaphor. I am the tenor.

Brother is how you get to me if you are black

And you leave Louisiana and you lose what little Tender you thought you had to spend, broke With a line to remember, people who need to eat.

Found: Messiah

blog entry at The Dumb, the Bad, and the Dead

A Shreveport man was killed When he tried to rob two men.

Decided he could make money

Easier stealing it. Police responding to

Gunshots found Messiah

Demery, 27, shot once in the chest Trying to rob Rodrigus

And Shamicheal. Rodrigus got

A gun, but police found Some marijuana, so he's going to jail

Too. This story would have been nicer

With some innocent people involved, But one less goblin is one

Less goblin is one less.

Another Angel

I found myself bound to Him and bound to His Bidding. He left water without color and land With no motion to mention but kept me going

Like a toy wound tighter than His one odd eye When I failed to deliver a message on time. He built bugs and beasts; I understood my

Sexlessness. He invented men and women; I knew I had no father. He never told me What I was, what He could be. So what—

Two boys in Oil City, Louisiana, complain About their bodies, featherless, modeled after The reflection He passes in streams. They got

Sick playing barefoot in mud, and they hate Their symptoms. I am that kind of pain Put to purpose but unloved, bound to the Lord—

He looks at those brothers, never noticing his own— Bound like their strange sister told to bathe them Once, filthy and feverish, they finally come home.

Eden

One winter, we decided to plunge, to swim or drown, Bare-dicked and beautiful. Then we slept as if the town Were warm, though before either of us got born, heroes Thought to end all threats by building one final weapon. We said what any man should when waking cold, his lover Pressed against him close—*Promise*, and, *I could die this way*.

*

Let's celebrate, O ye gentlemen of Thunder Bay. Show me a brick. A bottle. Knuckles and feet. Put on a pair of Nikes made for catching prey. Don't just scare me. Find your keys and beat The limp out my wrists. I worked all Friday, And this is North America, for God's sake, treat Me like it, like I looked at you that able way You look at women to prove yourselves straight.

Another Elegy

To believe in God is to love What none can see. Let a lover go,

Let him walk out with the good Spoons or die

Without a signature, and so much Remains for scrubbing, for a polish

Cleaner than devotion. Tonight, God is one spot, and you,

You must be one blind nun. You Wipe, you rub, but love won't move.

At the End of Hell

So what if I love him, The one they call bad, The one they call black, The one with the gap In his teeth only I get To see. What if I risk Taking the head of death Here in the dark, far And deep, where Burrowing beasts build House after filthy house, And nobody witnesses My underworld gangster Play kidnap, play Mama's Baby turned queen, and If I scream, Pastel—he Swears he's sorry, unties My feet. What if that's Worth a few bruises Better than the light Called spring, and I love It, every drop of God Weeping over me.

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.

Nativity

I was Mary once. Somebody big as a beginning Gave me trouble I was too young to carry, so I ran Off with a man who claimed Not to care. Each year, Come trouble's birthday, I think of every gift people get They don't use. Oh, and I Pray. Lord, let even me And what the saints say is sin within My blood, which certainly shall see Death—see to it I mean— Let that sting Last and be transfigured.

Apocrypha

The beginning and ending of "Langston's Blues" are from the conclusion of Terrance Hayes's poem "A Small Novel."

"Always be closing"—in "Another Elegy" (This is what our dying...) —was a favorite piece of advice Liam Rector gave to his poetry students. The line was made popular by a monologue in the film version of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glenn Ross*.

Cedar Grove, in the poem titled "Angel," is a neighborhood in Shreveport, Louisiana, bordered by Hollywood Avenue, 85th Street, Line Avenue (mentioned in "Motherland"), and Mansfield Road.

"Receiving Line" is set in California, November 4, 2008, when citizens directed the state's 55 electoral votes to Barack Obama, who became the first African American U.S. President. They also voted that day to pass Proposition 8, which eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry. The New Testament

Jericho Brown is the recipient of a Whiting Writers Award and of fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, and the National Endowment for the Arts. His poems have appeared in *The New Republic, The New York Times, The New Yorker*, and *The Best American Poetry* anthologies. His first book, *Please*, won the American Book Award. His second book, *The New Testament*, won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. He serves as poetry editor for *The Believer*. He is an associate professor of English and Creative Writing and the Director of the Creative Writing Program at Emory University in Atlanta.

ALSO BY JERICHO BROWN

Please

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