

## “Confounded by Love”: An Interview with Poet Jericho Brown

Tracy Floreani and Cameron Brown

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“What would I do if I could feel?” from *The Wiz* swelled from the speakers as local students, teachers, and area writers and poetry fans move to their seats in the auditorium on Wednesday, March 29, 2023. The atmosphere is nearly as smooth as the tender vocals that reverberate across the room—and yet also electric and expectant. The music comes from the playlist that accompanied the publication launch of *The Tradition* (2019), which went on to win the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in poetry. In the front row, cool and grooving to the music, visiting poet Jericho Brown prepares the selections he will read.

After spending the previous evening leading a workshop on how to write a *duplex*, the form that he originated and which is featured in *The Tradition*, Brown delivers a tantalizing reading of old and recent poems—on topics ranging from police violence, to the beauty of gardens planted by Black women, to the joys of “cuddling” (which he declared his favorite thing next to poetry). He even previews a dazzling new piece, still in the revision process, about the 1970s television show *The Jeffersons*. After the reading, members of the audience got the chance to engage with Brown and ask questions; every ear turned as he delivered responses that ranged from advice, to anecdotes, to all-out comedy. That same personality of depth and heartache and joy that shines through his written work lit up the stage and left listeners buzzing and brimming with inspiration.

A short book signing followed, and after a hearty lunch at Oklahoma City’s own Cheever’s Café (complete with heated debates on the value of fried okra), Brown returned to

campus for a sit-down with Tracy Floreani, director of OCU's Thatcher Hoffman Smith Poetry Series, and Cameron Brown, assistant to the director and recent graduate of the university's BFA in Acting Theatre program.

He regaled them with stories from childhood, reflections on life after receiving a Pulitzer, meditations on his role as a teacher, and thoughts on how all of these have influenced his writing process. The conversation sobers as they touch on topics of poetry's role within civic dialogue, the polarizing state of hip-hop, what it's like to invent a new poetic form, and his journey to declare identity within his art.

**Cameron Brown:** It's been nice to meet you! And it's really great to be able to speak with you – especially in person after the past two or three years of all the Zoom nonsense. I wanted to know, what were some of your favorite moments of joy throughout the pandemic?

**Jericho Brown:** Well, that's a great question! You know what I did like about the pandemic as it relates to that? Although it was exhausting, too, I did feel the need that people have for poetry—which is a real need, often a need people don't know they have. And the pandemic seemed to me an opportunity for a lot of people who otherwise would not have found out to find out how much they needed poetry in their lives. There's a way that poets were really sought after for these events, including myself but also many other of my poet friends, who were always on Zoom giving people, who otherwise wouldn't have gotten it, poetry—often giving readings to some of the largest audiences we will ever read to, you know? And I liked that element of it. I liked that people were quick to find a way for the dissemination of this very eternal and yet very contemporary thing that we are doing. So that was nice, during the pandemic! But I mostly just hated the pandemic other than that, it was horrible for me. I was sick all the time. Not with COVID but just . . . I had a bunch of health issues in 2020, so I had to get past that. But I think

the good thing about even that was that it put me in a position where I had to get back to, and deep into, prayer and meditation in a way that I had gotten away from while I was on tour.

**CB:** It's interesting what you said about poetry rising to the top during that time. I remember Patrick Stewart was reading Shakespearean sonnets on his Instagram and that was gaining traction. And I noticed you posted Alfre Woodard reading one of your poems for a fundraiser – and I thought that was really cool!

**JB:** Yeah, that was great! I like her a lot. I think she's such a good actress. And of course, I was so excited to see her reading one of my poems. I was like "Oh my God!" The fact that she knows I exist was really exciting for me. I met her—I think it was that same year, but earlier. I think I had met her maybe in January, maybe it was the fall, maybe it was 2019. But I had met her and I didn't know that she would remember me because she's a celebrity! [laughs] So, when she was reading the poem and said, "This is from my brother . . ." I was like, "Oh my GOD! She knows—not only does she know this poem, but she knows the person who wrote it and it's me?!" I was very excited because as a person who works very hard at doing their job, she's always been an inspiration to me as an artist. I like the fact that she has so much of a career laid down that, if you pay attention, you can see those transformations. You can see her get even better at what she does. And you know, I should also say—because you asked about highlights during the pandemic—it's not like there were only bad things, it's just like . . . I'm a person who likes to be outside and I couldn't get a lot of writing done. Mostly because, and I found this out through the pandemic, my writing is often a response and an escape. So, I'm escaping from the business of life, and then I'm responding to it or responding with the poem. And there wasn't anything to respond to, there wasn't anything to escape from in the same way because I was just home all the time. But I did win the Pulitzer Prize in May of 2020, so I should probably mention

*that* when you asked about things that were good in the pandemic. That was definitely a good thing. I would never give that away. And! I should also add that the best thing that could've happened was me winning. At the time it felt like kind of a regret that this great thing happened and I couldn't use it, or benefit from it, or celebrate with my friends. You'd think if you win a Pulitzer Prize, you'd be getting laid! Do you know what I'm saying? [laughter]

I mean, I guess that sounds crass, but you know! When I watch the Grammys and people win a Grammy, I'm like, "He's getting laid tonight! She's getting laid tonight!" You know what I'm saying? So I won this Pulitzer Prize, but it's not like I was gonna go touch or talk to anybody any closer than six feet. I think it was good, though, for two reasons. Reason number 1 is I would have gotten arrested. If it was any (what we think of as) normal times and I won the Pulitzer Prize, I would've been walking down the middle of Peachtree [Street] naked, holding a long island iced tea and singing—like I would've gotten arrested in my celebration because I would not know otherwise how to react other than "wild night!" Then the other thing that people have to remember about 2020 is that it was also the summer of racial injustice. The summer of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd and . . . and, and, and, and! You know what I mean? My book came out in April of 2019. It was announced that I won the Pulitzer in very early May of 2020. I feel that the material of this particular book was just right for readers and new readers of poetry who were experiencing much of what they hadn't experienced before because of the racial justice [work] that was going on in the summer and the fall. I feel that the Pulitzer gave me kind of a platform or a stage for a wider audience that I otherwise would not have had for the book. So the moments necessary were all in line for this book. And I really appreciated that [because] I never have worked harder on anything else. I've been working since I was a kid. When I say work, my dad cut yards for a living; we did flowerbeds, we cleaned out gutters. And we would

do that from the time the sun came back till the sun went down. In the summer, that's a long day! Six days out of the week. Sometimes Saturdays were shorter. But if we hadn't gotten everything done through the week, Saturdays were just as long as any day. We wouldn't work on Sunday at all. When [I was] in school, I couldn't be in auxiliary activities. I couldn't be in plays. I was in this one play, and I'll never forget my dad was so mad the whole time because I had to go to rehearsals. Then I would skip the rehearsals so I could go to work with my dad. Then everyone else in the play was mad at me, and they'd be particularly mad at me because I knew my lines before everybody. [laughs] So I would not have been in rehearsal, but I would show up ready! And that would drive them crazy because many of them weren't always ready. They were catching up or figuring it out—but I had gotten really very ready to be in this play. I was like, “Oh my God, I really wanna do this thing. But there is no way I'm going to these rehearsals; my dad will die!” [laughs] So when school let out at 3 o'clock—whatever time, whatever year I was getting out of school—when I walked out of the doors of that school, I got into the back of a truck and started changing clothes into what I was gonna cut yards in for the rest of the day. Because we couldn't lose the time and we needed the labor. So, I worked really hard. But I still don't think that I've worked harder on anything than the work I did on this book. In my whole life. So it meant the world to me to have that recognition after having done all that work. And then I'm always trying to do what I'm supposed to do as it relates to the promotion of a book after it's out in the world. But the tour that I went on for *The Tradition* was ridiculous; the way that I was really campaigning for the book via social media, giving readings all over the place—I was doing something like three cities a week.

**CB:** That's crazy!

**JB:** Yeah, it was really dumb! But I wanted it! In retrospect, I'll never do it again. I shouldn't have done it. But I wanted that for this book because of the experience I had writing it. I felt like everybody in the world needed to see this thing. I was proud of it; I was excited about it. And I also had made this decision—interestingly enough, since we're talking about the Pulitzer—and this is what I always tell my students: when you're a young writer, you see all these people who have won prizes and you think that is the idea of glamour or celebrity for person. You know, Alfre Woodard is a great example of what I'm talking about here. As far as I know, she doesn't have an Oscar. And yet, here we do have somebody who's very good at their job and everybody in that industry knows it. And I tell my students, [as] I always tell myself, there are only two ways to get any writing done: you either write as if you have already won every award, or you write as if you know you are never going to win any award. And I decided when I was writing *The Tradition* that it was a book that really came out of a belief that there were no awards. That the work, and the work I do *for* the work, would have to be bigger than any award could make a book. That I would have to *do* it, that I would have to *be*, that I would have to *become* the award. So, I was sort of acting as the Pulitzer when I was writing this book. And acting as the Pulitzer when I was promoting this book—before the Pulitzer touched anything.

**CB:** That's interesting when thinking about post-Pulitzer as you return to making more work. Does that mentality become harder to hold onto now that you're "Pulitzer Prize-winning Jericho Brown"? Is it hard to not carry that with you when you're writing?

**JB:** Yeah, I think the worst thing about winning the Pulitzer Prize is fighting the idea. You know, I wanna be a good man. My fight in life is always to have some integrity and to be a good man, that's all I'm trying to do. Daily. But I don't wanna be a role model—I mean, you can't help but be a role model, but I don't wanna think about myself that way. And it's really difficult

to not think about yourself that way after you have a Pulitzer Prize, particularly when you are of color. Natalie Diaz is the only indigenous person with a Pulitzer Prize in poetry. And recently, we've had an indigenous Pulitzer Prize winner in fiction (Tommy Orange). When you win those awards and you're of color, you become for your people the height of the example of the person who does that thing. So, it gets difficult. In order to write, you can't think like that. Because you need to be able to say inappropriate things, you need to be able to be rebellious, you need to be able to break rules. And if you're thinking of yourself as some kind of role model, you're not gonna be able to do it. And I think that's probably the only thing that's made writing a bit more difficult. I thank God that I'm queer because I think that kind of makes it easier. I know that whatever I do I'll never be "clean." [laughs] Sometimes I think a lot of black people have this idea that there's some amount of respectability that is somehow going to make them "clean" in the eyes of white people, when there's not. But when you're queer and black, you know! You don't have to worry about having any illusions about that—or delusions.

Other than that, it's been great. I think the only other thing is that—and I've only realized this in the last few weeks—I used to try more out in front of audiences; reading poems I was working on in front of audiences would help me write the poems. It's much easier to see what's wrong with a poem when you're reading it in front of 500 people. And I didn't mind that! I didn't mind taking that risk. But now I'm much more afraid to take that kind of risk. I didn't want people thinking, "Wow, what a dud of a poem. What they give *him* a Pulitzer for?!" And that's the kind of thing I have to get over. I think it's a good idea for me, and for anybody doing whatever work they're doing, to get over any idea of perfection of the work or the self. Because those things don't exist. All of this has to be about the journey itself, the doing of the thing, y'know? If you can make it about that, then the mistakes can become the work. In this new poem

that I previewed today, “Sitcom,” there was just a typo where I said one thing, but I meant another thing. This can happen when you’re reading a poem out loud: you mean to say one word, but you say another word. But that other word might be the word that needs to be in the poem! Because imperfection is actually what gets us there. Success is not born out of success. Success comes from a series of failures!

**Tracy Floreani:** So, you are talking about the way the [Pulitzer] Prize affects you socially, like with performing, when you’re reading—when you’re thinking about your role socially—but what about you and the page alone? Do you find that you’re still forgiving of and wanting failures on the page, or do you sometimes think, “I should be able to crank out a poem better than this by now, I’m a Pulitzer Prize winner!”?

**JB:** I think when I’m alone, it’s okay, it’s just that I have a clock now. And I used to not care about that ‘Oh, it’s taking this long for another book to come out.’ Who cares how long it takes for another book to come out? And I still believe that, but I don’t act like that unto myself, which is why I’m probably not getting as much work done, because I’m not as carefree as I used to be. And I should be. I mean, I want to make that clear in this interview, that I *should* be more carefree, but the Pulitzer sort of . . . I think I’m getting over that now. The thing about it is that I should’ve been able to get over it sooner, but because of the pandemic—and this is what I don’t like about the pandemic—my Pulitzer years are just stretched a little too long! I mean, if I were on the road in 2020 and 2021, then by 2022, everybody would be bored with me. I’d be sick of reading poems from *The Tradition*. But I think I’m not sick of it yet because it’s been spotty. You know, we go out a little bit, then there’s a threat, then we go back in. I wouldn’t get rid of this world for anything, you know I’m very happy to have a Pulitzer Prize, I’d love to have



another one. Another *two*. You know, give me a Pulitzer Prize every time I write a book, I'm all for it. You know, it's been *really* wonderful.

**TF:** Well, for people who visit our series, there's a pretty good track record going on to become Poet Laureate or to get a MacArthur Genius Grant . . .

**JB:** I would love—I would *love* a MacArthur Genius Grant. If anyone's out there, willing to write for me, please write beautiful things that lead judges to believe that I should get such an award.

**TF:** Back to what you were talking about, the mindset you tell your students: that you have to write as if you're going to get an award, or as if awards don't exist—aren't a possibility. Can you pinpoint what happened to you and your process between *New Testament* and *The Tradition*? Do you think there was a shift in the way you thought about those things as you were writing?

**JB:** You know, *New Testament* did win a prize. It won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, which I was really excited about. It's a prize I share with Martin Luther King and Toni Morrison and Oprah Winfrey, and generally people who win that prize do go on to win the Pulitzer. I'm pretty sure Tyehimba Jess did. Tracy K. Smith won it, but I think maybe she won hers after [she won] the Pulitzer. But other than that prize, I remember not winning prizes for the *New Testament*, sort of looking at the long lists. And I didn't think I was going to win a prize, but I was under the impression that I might make a long list here and there, but I didn't make a long list here and there. Which is fine, whatever. But I do think that's the thing that helped me, because then I just kept writing. And so then I was able to write as if prizes did not matter, because I didn't win a big, major prize for *New Testament*, and I knew I had done everything I could with it, and, therefore, prizes ain't the answer to every question. People have to remember that only a few people ever win those prizes. Literature is vast! You know, I don't think Joan Didion ever won

any of those prizes. Obviously, before those prizes existed, nobody [won]. Look, by the time Lucille Clifton won a National Book Award, she was already *Lucille Clifton*. Do you know what I mean? What her work meant to my heart did not matter. So I think the difference is [between] writing, thinking, “Oh, one day maybe I’ll win a prize,” and writing, thinking, “Oh, I don’t ever have to win a prize and I’ll be alright—*alright*—for the rest of my life, as long as I have vision. And hopefully even after, if I can learn Braille or something I guess.” I’ll always, always write.

**CB:** So, the “Civic Dialogue Edition” of *The Tradition* just dropped in 2022. Could you talk more about your thoughts on the role poetry plays in civic dialogue, and what you think this art form can do that others can’t?

**JB:** I don’t know if I could talk about what the art form can do that others can’t, other than to say that it is lovely that you can hold a poem in your head. It’s hard to hold [all of] *Sula* or *Beloved* in your head. But you can actually think of the entirety of “Fire and Ice” while picking avocados. And so, there’s a way that poems go with us, which is why lines from poems come out of our mouths in the midst of conversation or even when we’re by ourselves and we’re expressing feelings aloud when we’re by ourselves. There’s this line from Tracy K. Smith’s book *The Body’s Question*, “The wood was never spent.” Sometimes things will happen, and my response to that is, “the wood was never spent.” I just say that out of my mouth to myself, and it’s almost as if I’m reconciling myself to the moment that I’m experiencing in the world, and those words make that moment real for me. You know what I’m saying? So those are some of the ways that poetry’s different from anything else, but I would also add that poems, and all literature, ask us to think. I don’t know what people think thinking is. Sometimes people think it’s like, “Oh, do I want chocolate or do I want pistachio?” And that *is* thinking. But if those are your options, chocolate and pistachio, then you can understand that that happens on every level, all the time.

And if you're doing real thinking, you are always choosing. And part of what literature does, is it makes it clear to us that we are choosing. When we are reading literature, we are automatically reading outside of ourselves in order to get back to ourselves. Sometimes, reading outside of ourselves [helps us] to finally see someone else other than ourselves. Right? So I will say that if a poem moves you, and it moves you well, then it will lead to thought. You will begin to think. And if you begin to think about anything long enough, you have to answer to what you think in your life with your actions. And that's the most I can tell you about civil discourse. Poems come up, you and I, we have a conversation about the poem, you see something in the poem that I didn't see, but after you show it to me, I have to think, "Why didn't I see that?" And now that I see it, what do I think about it. And now that I think about it . . . oh my god that's not how I've been living! So, do I think that or not? Maybe I should live like I think.

There's a lot of conversation about art being political, or whether or not it can or should be political, but it's not as if art could be anything other than political. How could it not be? I mean, you're either challenging or supporting the status quo. If you want us to support the status quo, that's going to be your business, but I can look around and see a lot of trouble with the status quo. But I don't write to make trouble with the status quo; I write to tell the truth! The most important thing to me, when writing, is that I'm telling the truth, line by line. And I think what happens is that the reader, being faced with truth, has an option. And they decide, "Now that I have this option, do I take it?" And often that option is political action. What is political action? Political action is indeed lying down on the street when the police are crossing the street. That is indeed political action. Voguing, sure, political action. Political action is also deciding, "I'm not going to have my children go to a school where they're banning books. Books that simply say things that are real, that actually happened. I'm not gonna send my children to a

school where, when history gets taught, the teachers get in trouble!”—the fact of saying that there were people who owned other people in this nation. Somebody says you can’t say that anymore, in an American History class?! Good luck! It is a political action to say, “Hey! Y’all are lying!” I know nobody wants to believe it, but it is a political action to pray and to believe in your prayer. As long as your prayer’s got something to do with you, and not everybody else around you. So you have to be open and wide about what you think political action is, about what you think civil discourse is. And then if you can be open, you can really get into what literature is meant to do.

**TF:** It’s so interesting to hear you talk about it this way because of our relationship with poetry as a civic form in American culture. In other countries it’s so much more a part of civic ritual, it’s so much more embraced as an everyday literature form that’s not mysterious. I think in the United States people think it’s like listening to jazz, like you have to know “how” to read it or listen to it. Do you think our attitudes about poetry are changing in this culture?

**JB:** I think because of hip-hop, because of slam poetry, and because of spoken word poetry, people do feel that they have access to the work. This has been [growing since] at least since the 1950s. There are slam teams completely made up of teenagers now, which wasn’t the case 30-40 years ago. And so, yes! There are more opportunities and there’s more access. In that way, it has changed. But I think poetry’s scary, and I think it *should* be! I’m really sorry! There’s a feeling that you have when you are going to the movies to see a Tyler Perry movie. You expect what you’re gonna get. And you laugh and then you leave the movie. Now, let’s say you’re going to see Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight*. You have another set of expectations, and some of those expectations include surprise! I expect to get something and not know what I’m gonna get. And then you sit there and watch the movie and you can’t just watch and laugh—you have to interact

with the damn thing! Because it's high art—that's the difference by the way. You're interacting as it happens. In every form. I don't care if it's hip-hop, I don't care if it's slam, I don't care if it's spoken word, I don't care if it's a sonnet, I don't care if it's confessional, I don't care if it's one of the descendants of language poetry, a so-called avant-garde or experimental poem, I don't care! You tell somebody, "Here's a poem," and suddenly all of their feelers go up. Even I, a person who loves poetry, you tell me, "Hey you wanna watch this TV show?" I'm gonna have one set of expectations. "You wanna watch *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* with me tonight, Jericho?" Okay, I'll watch that with you! You hand me a poem? "Hey Jericho, here's a poem I like." I'm like, "Oh shit! Jericho, get it together, you're about to read a poem." Now, I'm a poet. I've read a *lot* of poems. If I'm saying, "Oh shit!" imagine the person who hasn't read *any* poems—which is most people. Imagine the person who hasn't read a poem since elementary school. Imagine those people who only read poems when they were in that one English class their freshman year of college. And poetry always has more work to do than any other form of literature. Because the expectations are larger. People read a poem and they wanna be wise at the end. It's totally unfair.

**TF:** Or they feel excluded because they don't get it.

**JB:** Well, that's the other thing! There are two things. One is, "I'm gonna read this poem. I'm gonna commit to it. I'll do that for you. Sure. And you think that by that last line, you should be somebody else." [laughs] Nobody thinks that after they read a novel. Nobody thinks that after they read a memoir. Nobody even thinks that after they've seen a play or a movie. They don't think watching even great television, they don't think, "Oh now I should be zenned-the-fuck-out!" But something about poetry makes them think that. That's number one; number two: people set themselves up for the difficulty of poetry even when they don't have to. I get

frustrated because I write a line of poetry that says, “I walked outside with my dog.” Then I hear people talk about it and they’re like, “Well maybe he means . . . ,” “Maybe what he means here is . . . ,” “Walk is clearly a word. . . ,” and [I’m] like, “Girl, what is happening?!”

**TF:** It’s not a metaphor! [laughs]

**JB:** [laughs] Yeah! I just walked outside with my dog! “Hmm, his dog. Maybe he means—” No!

**TF:** But you have to admit that thinking about poems on that level is fun, too.

**JB:** No, it is a lot of fun. But I also think that thinking about poems on that level stops people from reading poems. People don’t understand that you just read the thing. People [sometimes] don’t get to the second line of the poem because they start interpreting the first line. Girl, don’t interpret yet! At least get to the end! You have a seven-line poem in front of you and you’re on line three trying to figure out what the poem is about. What?! So, I just think our expectations of poetry are not like anything else. Which is why I love poets so much. We’re doing wizardry. We’re doing magic. We’re either filling or subverting those expectations over and over again. Now that’s something I love about poetry. I think it’s a place that brings up the political, but I also think it’s a place where people have a lot of fear. And I don’t think that fear is unfounded. We shouldn’t lie! Because people want more accessibility to poetry, they wanna lie about what poetry is and what it can do. But poetry will *wreck your life!* Poetry is difficult! Much of the poetry I love is hard to read. I’m editing the selected poems of a poet I love named Reginald Shepherd, who died in the early 2000s. He’s difficult. Sometimes I’m reading those poems and I’m like, “I don’t know what the hell this man is talking about.” And yet I can come away from a poem loving it, thinking, “Now, you wrote that!” No idea what he said, but I know I love the poem. It’s like listening to Anita Baker. I don’t know what she’s saying. [But] this is my favorite Anita Baker song. Do you understand what I mean? So, I just think that poetry is political, I

think it's difficult, I think it's scary, and I think it asks a lot of us. And I think if you give it the attention that it requires, yes! It changes your life! And I would be afraid of something to come out of nowhere and change my life. Especially if it's only seven to fourteen lines long. Who wants to read a sonnet and then not be the same? People come to poems wanting zen, wanting wisdom, they want to read a poem and be a monk at the end of it, you know? But then they're also afraid of that!

**TF:** All of the forms you talked about, that are making poetry more accessible, are really public and performative, and I wonder, to some extent, whether the confessional poetry movement right after World War II made people feel like poetry's really private. And it's not something you talk about, it's not something you put out there. But that performance poetry has shifted that, somewhat. Maybe not.

**JB:** Maybe so, but performance poetry is scary! People like performance because it's performance. I don't know if y'all have ever watched Fox News, but the reporters there—or whatever you call that, I guess you can't really call them reporters, but whatever—I watched that channel once, and there was a whole segment about why you should not be listening to Beyoncé. Those people are afraid of hip hop! And they should be!

**TF:** Wow, I thought Tipper Gore's campaign died out a long time ago. They've revived it! Remember that, when she was against rap?

**JB:** Maybe she should be! You know, these things are asking you to question your way of life. And when they're not asking you to question your way of life, they're showing you that there are other ways of life. A lot of people like to rally around spoken word, a lot of people like to rally around slam, but it's not enough people for you to think that there aren't people who are afraid of spoken word and slam. People are scared of poetry. People see that energy, and they have fear

about it because they know [that] those people over there are telling the truth. And if they get too far, if enough people find out that that is the truth, everybody's gonna know [they've] been living a lie! We were talking about this earlier today, like if one of the major tenets of your life is about suppressing the fact that certain people exist, going so far as to say that, like, trans people are just not there, or to talk about my ancestors as if they didn't exist. My ancestors who were literally enslaved. To say, "We're not going to talk about that anymore in the school," is to say that they didn't exist! Therefore, I don't [exist]. I can't be descended from anyone if they never existed. And the reason you don't want these people to exist is because their very presence calls into question your life, your wealth, your familyhood, your everything. Your way of thinking. Your way of building. The way you hold a conversation. Nobody wants that! Nobody wants that. Except for me. You know, I grew up in a situation where I understood that poems were doing that for me, were making me grow. And that was uncomfortable. But I wanted it. But I also grew up in a situation where I understood that growth came with uncomfortability. If you aren't uncomfortable, you probably ain't did no growing.

**TF:** A lot of poets find form, working in formal poetic forms, very uncomfortable, because it might limit how you use your imagination. But some find it a really great challenge. You like riddles, so you obviously like form. But I wanted to talk about form, too, because you're getting so much recognition for the Duplex. Can you talk about your relationship with form as a poet?

**JB:** I like it! I don't feel... cramped by it, or somehow limited by it, only because of how I conceive of writing itself. I imagine that if I'm looking for a rhyme, and I choose a word only because it rhymes, then I'm dealing with a word that might not have anything to do with my autobiography. And so that means I have to figure out what to say about this word with which I have no history. And if I have to say something about a word with which I have no history, then



that means I am about to make a sentence that I didn't know I was gonna make. That means I'm about to imbue a narrative I did not expect to imbue. Do you see what I mean? So I'm interested in form, not because of the way it limits, but because it asks me to make shit up. It asks me to think of narratives that I otherwise would not think of. It asks me to see and know that music has something to do with the telling of a story. That's what rhyme is about. That memory! It's not just, "Oh, can I tell you this story?" but, "Can I tell you in a way that you will remember?" If I'm telling you a story in rhyme, then you can go and you can tell that story to somebody else because you're gonna remember it. And what you do not remember? You can have an idea of what happened based on rhyme. "I don't remember this line but I know it rhymes with that last line, so I'll be able to figure it out." So that's part of my attraction, I have a particular attraction to repeating forms like pantoums and villanelles as a reader. And I think that's why the Duplex ended up being a repeating form, a form with repeating lines.

**CB:** I am curious, for the Duplex, did you just sit down one day and think, "I need a new form of poetry, I'm gonna make it up right now"? Or did you go through certain iterations of it until you settled on one? What was that process like, of building something like that?

**JB:** I sort of decided, in my head, what it would look like before I ever wrote anything down. I knew what I wanted from a poem. And there was just one poem—for some reason, this has never happened to me before, generally I start with lines, and in the process of writing I see that a poem is leaning toward a form, and then I push toward that form. Usually the sonnet, in my case. With the Duplex, I was like, "Oh, I wish there was a poem that did this." And the *this* was the form. And then I went and found a bunch of lines that I hadn't used before, that hadn't worked out in other poems, and I used those lines to build the Duplexes, to build the first one. I was like, "Oh! This looks like this is gonna be a poem! I wonder if I could do that again in the same

form.” And it wasn’t until then that I was thinking of it as a [poetic] form; I was only thinking of it as a form for the one poem, just to see what it was like. And then after I did it, I was like, “Oh let’s see if I can do it again.”

**TF:** Do you remember which one was the first one? Is it one that’s been published or was it one that was like a practice run?

**JB:** Probably the first Duplex that’s in the book... um...

**TF:** “A poem is a gesture toward home?”

**JB:** “A poem is a gesture toward home.”

**TF:** That’s a great one.

**JB:** Yeah. I told you last night about how I was cutting up all these lines and I saw that line and I was like, “I don’t know what that means but I love it ‘A poem is a gesture toward home.’

What?!” And so, that was the first line. Then there were other lines that I was using. So, I had to figure [it] out. “Okay. What do I put [next]. . . ?”

**TF:** And it’s great how that “home” is an idea in that first poem because the form basically helped you get home!

**JB:** Yeah. Yeah!

**TF:** In *The Tradition*, another word that recurs in several of the poems that really stuck with me is the word “confound.” Like, “I’m confounded by God.” What confounds you these days? What’s been confounding you lately?

**JB:** Well, that’s a great question! I’m confounded by time. I don’t understand where it’s gone. When I was writing *The Tradition*, I had the same amount of time. I was a busy person, but I got it done. And now it’s sort of like, “Wait, what happened to my two hours here and my two hours there?” I’m not getting as much done. Time is the same but somehow I think maybe just because

I'm older—like regular old people aches and pains or something. Like they mount up. It literally takes me this much longer to get out of a chair and this much longer to sit in a chair... and that all mounts up! [laughter] Even getting out of the car, I notice I'm like, "Okay, okay..." and before I was out of the car with no preparation. I just beamed myself up out of the car. Sometimes I think it's that. But I am confounded by time. I'm confounded by love.

**TF:** I feel like people who aren't confounded by love...

**JB:** ...are in love. They have somebody! [laughs] They got somebody! No, I'm sort of confounded by love. Honestly, I'm not as much confounded by love as I am by other people's concern for my love life. People that I don't even know will have these big concerns for my love life. And because it's this sort of community concern I feel like, "Oh shit, maybe I should be concerned..." And then I'm confounded. Because I'm like, "Why wasn't I worried about all this stuff? All these people are worried." [laughs] So I'm confounded by that. I don't know, I'm a little confused about concert tickets. About travel. About my ability to go have a good time and what a good time should look like considering the fact that I travel for work, so my good times are mostly at home. I wanna be at home.

But I also wanna see things and do things that I couldn't afford to do before. Now that I can afford to these things that everybody used to do on Instagram, I don't wanna do them because I was in Oklahoma last week. You know? I'd like to be at my house. So, trying to figure out how to deal with that, with exhaustion, I'm confounded by. And just the general price of concert tickets. Because I wanna see everybody. I saw Anita Baker recently, and it's not like I couldn't afford it, but it's just so expensive. So me going is one thing, but then me going with my friends is another thing because they're like, "Jericho, we don't wanna spend \$1000 on a ticket to

see somebody who hasn't had a song on the radio for 20 years." And I'm like, "Yeah, but I can't sit by myself! So y'all have to go!" [laughter] So I'm confounded by that.

**TF:** Yeah! It's capitalism that's confounding in that case.

**JB:** Well capitalism is confounding! Things are more expensive. Chicken breast is very expensive. Eggs are *very* expensive. So, I'm just sort of confounded by the price of things right now and what that means for leisure. Because I'm suddenly interested in having leisure. Like I have never been, but I would like to be, a person who gets a massage once a month.

**TF:** Or have a weekend where you're like, "What should I do this weekend, I've got nothing?"

**JB:** Yeah!

**TF:** Boredom... it's a luxury.

**JB:** Yeah! I don't have a- Yeah! That would be so nice! And it's so funny, I thought life was gonna be that way. I remember people doing things for other people all the time when I was a kid. We'd be done with work, and we'd be like, "Oh they need us to help them do blah blah blah." If somebody asked me at 7 o'clock to come help them do "blah, blah, blah" I'd be like, "What?! You want me to come do what? The night is set up!" Do you know what I mean? It seems like there was more . . . time. Somehow there isn't. Like I'm always working. And I don't wanna always be working. I think that's why I'm confounded by time—or maybe I'm not actually so confounded. I don't wanna be working all the time, I used to really work around the clock. And I used to think of everything as work. There was very little I was doing that I didn't think of as work. For instance, I love visual art but I'm a poet. So me going to a museum should be leisure, but it's not. Me going to a concert should be leisure, but the way music appears in my work, it's just not. So I would just like to get to a place where I'm not working all the time. I'm confounded as to how anybody who is an artist ever gets to a place like that.

**TF:** Speaking of things that make you work, how do you think that teaching has? It's clear to me that you really care about your teaching and you're also really talented at it. How do you think teaching has affected your own creative work and process?

**JB:** It gives me more to read and more to look for. It's the only thing that's really kept me up with contemporary poetry. My students always know who the latest and greatest poet is, because they know *I* have to read the latest and greatest poet because I gotta make sure I know a little more than they know. I also have to make recommendations to my students. Often their writing is very different than mine. So, what I recommend them to read has to do with their writing, not with what I want their writing to be. So I'm always going back and looking at stuff that I otherwise would not have looked at. I fell in love with Robert Duncan because I had a student who needed Robert Duncan. I had read Robert Duncan before, and I liked it fine, but I wasn't crazy about it, wasn't going back to it. And then a student of mine seemed to be doing things that were in that direction. So, I went back and was like, "You should read these Robert Duncan poems... and I should too." Before I knew it, I had read all of this Robert Duncan and fallen in love with him because now my life was such that I was ready for him. I think that's the wonderful thing about teaching. It keeps me interacting with broader aesthetics than I would otherwise probably get into if it were just left up to me. So, it keeps me busy in that way.

**TF:** I have found, too, while teaching, when I'm trying to help students learn something, I'll come up with new techniques for them that might help my own writing. Have you had that happen?

**JB:** Mhm! Yeah, I see my students one-on-one a great deal because every time they have a workshop, they have to meet with me within the week before the workshop meets again. Often, I'll find myself telling them things that I know are true but that I haven't tried. Then I'll say, "I'll

do this with you.” Because then I have to make sure it’s true. I have to make sure I’m not lying to my students.

**TF:** [laughs] Have you ever caught yourself in a lie in that way?

**JB:** [laughs] No, I mean the really wonderful thing about teaching . . . to answer this question: I will find myself in a workshop reading a student’s poem, and I don’t say it out loud—and I won’t say it, but I will *think* it, and I’ll stop myself from saying it—but I used to say, “You can’t do this in a poem.” And that was beautiful, for me; as soon as I think that, as soon as I say it, I automatically start doing it in a poem. The thing I would tell my students not to do would be the *very* next thing—I mean like that night, sometimes—the *very* next thing I was trying to do in my own poems. I would see them fail at something they wanted to try in a poem and I would see in the poems I was working on, “Maybe I can make this thing work.” And often, I could. And then by the time I would meet with the student I would say, “Hey, you *can* do this in a poem, but you have to do these things, too, if you do this move you’re trying to do.” And then by that time I might also have read some other poets who indeed had done that kind of work, which is the wonderful thing about social media, you know. I can ask on Twitter, “Are there any poems in which X happens?” And people will send me those poems, which makes teaching a lot easier than it used to be. Because it was just me before, me calling my friends on the phone. And now I have everybody on Twitter trying to help me teach my workshop.

**CB:** Which of your own poems do you look back on and think, “Damn. I wrote that?!”

**JB:** Oh, I don’t know. I think I feel that, in every poem in some moment, there are moments. If for some reason I come across an old poem, or sometimes people post poems online I haven’t thought of [in a while] and I’ll think, “Oh, that’s a nice moment” or, “that’s not so bad.” Usually I’m harder on myself, though; usually I’ll see a poem and I’ll think, “the fuck was I thinking?”

[laughter] Or I'll think, "They liked that? Girl, if that's what you like, I guess..." But I don't know if there's a single poem that I think of automatically. There are poems that I feel that way about, not because of the poem, but because I knew I was making a breakthrough when I was writing the poem. There's a poem in my first book [*Please*] called "Pause," and in that poem I make a certain set of moves that the day before I would not have been able to make in a poem. And I remember seeing myself make them. And I also remember it was the first poem where I made those moves and I didn't get so scared of 'em I stopped. Sometimes, when you're working well on something, you start doing better than what you have done before, and you're overwhelmed by it—you're like, "Wait a minute!" And you can't do that, because then you don't get to go all the way. When that happens you have to let go and you have to be overtaken by whatever that other force is getting things done. I remember writing that poem and I *remember* thinking, "Oh, you *writin'* now!" And I also remember thinking, "Okay, well just write, let it go, don't be too self-conscious about this moment, just keep writing." And every time I see that poem . . . There's this poem called "Your Body Made Heavy With Gin" in my first book that I wasn't reading for years. Even when the book was out I don't think it was a poem I really read that much. And now I wanna read it all the time. I kinda like it, you know?

**TF:** You know, it's funny, Cameron and I wrote these questions before we met you. Now knowing that you come to new poems with questions, and because you're looking for the language to lead you to a surprise, maybe that pervious question doesn't work, because of your attitude about poetry. The question assumes you'd be surprised at your own talent, but clearly, you're just wanting the surprises of where the language is taking you.

**JB:** Yeah, I mean, I am surprised at my—I mean, I said this at lunch—I *am* surprised at my—hallelujah, I did have a lot of feeling, when you [Cameron] did that introduction and you said,

“the black mind is a continuous mind.” I did in that moment think, “Wow! He *wrote* that!” and then I was like, “Wait--*I* wrote that?!” So I do think that the talent does surprise me, from time to time, but I don’t know that I can single it out. I can single that talent out in certain decisions that I make in any poem. A decision like, direct address, for instance, in that poem “Dark,” in *The Tradition*: “I am tired of your sadness, Jericho Brown.” I think that’s smart. [laughs] Jericho Brown’s saying it to Jericho Brown. I think that’s kind of interesting! So I can think of that as a “Wow” moment, but I don’t think of that poem—I mean at the time that I wrote the poem I was pretty impressed—but I don’t know that, because I’m making so many moves in so many poems at once, I don’t register it that way. Like, “Oh, this is a poem that has all of my newness, or all of my breakthroughs. Although, maybe that’s my goal. I mean I wanna write poems in which I do everything. I think about songs this way, you know. The reason why I really love the song “I Wanna Dance With Somebody” is because everything that Whitney Houston did in her career, everything she can do, she did in that song. But I don’t know that I have a single poem—I might, but I’ve never looked to see—that’s like, “Oh! This is Jericho Brown doing all of the Jericho Brown stuff.”

**TF:** Maybe it’s to come.

**JB:** Maybe so. You know, there’s a song by Brandy called “When You Touch Me.” I think that’s the name of the song. Everything Brandy does, she does it in that song. It’s the low registers, the high registers, the runs, everything’s there, you know? So maybe a singer could see a thing like that but I don’t know if a poet can. Or if a poet would ever even look. Because you’ve gotta keep going!

**TF:** Yeah, maybe it’s for the critics.



**JB:** Yeah, you gotta keep going. You have to let the poems go, because you gotta write another one.

**TF:** Well maybe we should wrap up by you talking about the writing you're doing now, because you mentioned that you're working on personal essays and a screenplay. Maybe you don't want to talk about those while they're in progress, because that's sort of a newer form for you?

**JB:** Well yeah, I mean I'm so early that I can talk about them because I'm not gonna mess anything up. But it is true I don't like talking about what I'm doing. Usually I just lie, I'll make stuff up that I'm doing that I'm not actually doing, so I don't have to talk about what I'm actually doing. Like I never talked about the writing I was doing in *The Tradition* before I made it. But I am writing a screenplay with my sister, who's a filmmaker, and I'm just doing it because this studio had the idea that maybe I should write a screenplay, and I was like, "Okay, I'll try that." I'm actually reading a book about writing screenplays, that's how early I am. Though I have written down things that will happen in certain scenes. And I'm writing, I'm always writing essays. It's just really a matter of compiling them and editing them, printing them out and looking at them. Which I honestly just haven't wanted to do. I just finished the Reginald Shepherd *Selected*, and you know that's gonna come with whatever work that it comes with, when it's time to promote it once it's out. It doesn't come out until 2024. But I have a book coming out [this summer] called *How We Do It*, which is an anthology of essays on craft by Black writers. So that's really been taking up a great deal of my time. So those things are what I have been doing, other than writing poems—which makes me roll my eyes. (I have to say that I'm rolling my eyes, because I guess that the people reading this can't see that I'm rolling my eyes.) But I am rolling my eyes, which is just how you feel in between books, you know.

Especially right after a book, I mean right after is not so bad, but then right *after* right after, the well is dry.

**TF:** And in the moment, you don't know how your writing's evolving, right? You've got to kinda wait it out.

**JB:** When I was writing, I mean 2020 was good at first, all the way up until maybe August I was writing, and then after that I just didn't have it. I mean, I was writing, but I was not writing anything that I would ever show another person. So there's valleys. Sometimes a valley is longer. But I wrote "Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry" in a night. I just sat down and wrote that poem. Which is very different for me. And other poems, you know, they take years. So, you just don't know. I wrote *The Tradition* fast, I wrote half of it over the course of four years, but the other half I think I wrote in . . . eight weeks? Just driving my friends crazy, driving my editor crazy. Because I didn't have work. You know, you write a poem, you send it to your friend, your friend writes you back or calls you (generally I talk on the phone, because I'm from a certain time), and they say, "Jericho, please don't send me no poems this bad anymore. I thought you were my friend--" [laughter]. My friends are very happy to tell me that it's a good thing that I have a Pulitzer Prize, before this last poem that I sent them. [laughs] But when I was writing *The Tradition* I would write a poem and send it to a friend, and then later that day, send them another poem, and then in the middle of the night, send them another poem. And my friends Michael Schumacher, Michael Dumanis, Malachi Black, Catherine Barnett, Claudia Rankin—the people who read my poems—were like "Jericho! When did you write these poems?" And I would say, "Today." And they would say, "Stop lying." [laughs] So you don't know what's going to happen! And you just have to be open to any possibility that poetry has, and I have to be open. I have to want the poems as much as I once wanted them. And I think my desire for them is only

growing again. I don't think I had as strong a desire for them as I do now. I'm always thinking, "Ooh, I wish I was writing poems."

**TF:** Well, we should let you get to writing some poems.

**JB:** Yeah, or take a nap!

**TF:** Well, they're both restorative, they're both rewarding.

**JB:** Amen!