

Blooming in the Whirlwind

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Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “The Second Sermon on the Warpland” enters through my head and my feet, its truth shooting through my chest, out of my throat and my fingertips. I know discussions of poems tend to have a linear trajectory, but that’s not how I experience this poem. A torrent of lines and images from all directions, it moves through my spirit like a squall, leaving it drenched and renewed: “This is the urgency: Live!/and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.”

I come from a family of preachers and teachers. Those were the professions that black families fortunate enough to have access to education strived for in West Virginia at the turn of the twentieth century. After my paternal grandfather served in the segregated U.S. Army, he returned and

became a Methodist minister, finding a liberation through theology. His sisters were teachers. All of them were griots of the area, keeping the oral histories alive through stories—the successes and the losses. People would seek them out to find out about their family histories, grateful for whatever they could recall.

My mother, an elementary-school student during Brown vs. Board of Education, grew up on the front lines of integration, an honor student and college activist in the sixties, who made sure that her children understood how important it was to develop what W.E.B. Du Bois called double consciousness—to read all of the books at school and the books she bought for our home library, to sit and listen at the knees of elders who could share their lived wisdom.

I was born a Black working-class queer

woman poet in the post–Civil Rights era South—as James Baldwin once said of himself with irony in an interview, I’d “hit the jackpot” in terms of my vantage point and understanding of the U.S. experience. I would always have so much to observe and write about, drawing from these rich, hard-won legacies. Like Baldwin, I would have to “find a way to use it” and, like Gwendolyn Brooks, “stylize the flawed utility,” as my heroes had done before me.

Brooks is a national treasure. Born in Topeka, Kansas, and a long-time resident of Chicago, she loved the English language and wielded it with a groundbreaking grace that will be remembered for the ages. From Phillis Wheatley onward, black poets learned fluency in a tongue that refused to pronounce their original names. Finessed writing the drum into our poetic lines, whether muted or bold. We’ve always been unique amalgamations of the transatlantic American journey that doesn’t exist anywhere else but in our bodies and souls over the generations. Classically African, Brooks’s work is a masterful model for braiding all of these threads into a powerful lasso of language and culture that gathers together human experience.

Brooks’s 1968 collection *In the Mecca* includes three Sermons on the Warpland. The warpland—such a precise moniker. The second of the three is the sermon on how to persist and thrive in an often-hostile home, the liturgy to remind us that we’ve always found ways to use chaos to our advantage,

transform mayhem into miracle. She is speaking to the landscape of this nation, of the black body and soul. The poem is a literary cousin to the sermon that the character Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* gives to her recently emancipated and still-in-grave-danger community, imploring them to love themselves: “Yonder they do not love your flesh. . . . *You* got to love it.”

The poet has the powers of the preacher to reveal what’s sacrilegious and what’s holy, to offer solace, encouragement, insight and motivation to a fledgling flock. This poem gave me permission to be proud and daring, to go to places that didn’t conceive of my presence as a possibility. I had to do that, and the people who loved me here had to do that, and their people had to survive and hope for that to happen. To have the audacity of hope, like the title of the first Black U.S. president’s memoir. The speaker intones, “but know the whirlwind is our commonwealth,” because in the whirlwind, we can claim great agency. To live in the whirlwind is to never know one’s place, to always decide where you want to go.

There are days when I sit in my office at a top liberal arts college as a professor of creative writing, shelves filled with Brooks and Bishop, Shange, Olds, Sanchez, and Sexton, Clifton and Dickinson and Plath and Rukeyser and Merwin and Komunyakaa and Auden and Gay and Ríos and . . . , weeping from gratitude and from being the exception, the only black woman in the English Department. As Brooks writes,

“It is lonesome, yes.” I know that positions like mine are scarce, period, yet I still marvel at being the only one and the first in the twenty-first century at my institution.

With being an exception there comes a certain loneliness. As the first black person, or the first woman, in many spheres, Brooks knew that loneliness particularly well. She wrote this poem for a future she wasn’t sure would arrive, anticipating the necessity for a polyconsciousness in our present era of intersectionality, decades after Du Bois’s original thesis of this phenomenon.

“The Second Sermon on the Warpland” is even more resonant in 2019 than it was over fifty years ago in 1968, when hope collapsed with the bodies of Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, and others. When the buildings on the south side of Chicago burned to the ground, ablaze from a compounded grief that had no place to go, people crying out from being in peril for far longer than any human spirit should ever have to. Rev. Victor L. Cyrus-Franklin, Jr.—senior pastor at Inglewood First United Methodist Church in Inglewood, California, and a first cousin of mine—has a compelling sermon that references a gospel song by the Mighty Clouds of Joy, in which they sing that they’ve “been in the storm too long!” Even as a child, Cyrus-Franklin realized the irony of a group with such a triumphant name belting this lament through the speakers. On so many levels, black people and others have been in the storm too long in this country. Two of the few places of respite, places to hear the truth and find untapped

reserves of hope, have been the church and the words of our emotional legislators and historians, the poets and artists. As Brooks writes:

All about are the cold places,
all about are the pushmen and
jeopardy, theft—
all about are the stormers and
scramblers but
what must our Season be, which
starts from Fear?

As our nation ebbs further from its ideals and founding principles under the current administration, we need this poem more than ever. As state-sanctioned extra-judicial murders of unarmed black people barely make the national news; as elections are stolen, in the words of Cyrus-Franklin, “in broad daylight, right in front of everyone,” without recourse, and white supremacists parade through college campuses with torches; as the losing flag of terror still waves from capitol buildings, we can draw sustenance from Brooks’s words.

When we find ourselves in sick, unnatural circumstances, she instructs, “define and/medicate the whirlwind.” Don’t give up—as Toni Cade Bambara said, “Do not leave the arena to the fools”—because then all is lost. The poem is a reminder that you are the one to write your own narrative—hence the perfect choice of the verb “conduct.” You conduct the orchestra of your life no matter what distractions, obstacles, literal and figurative “whips,” despite any “noise” that may interfere with you hearing and honoring your own sound.

Brooks knew her powers. She wrote frank, fearless, free, exquisite and essential poems. She seemed to be saying, *Watch me sing our sorrows in a powerful creole of our tongues*. She knew that she was also a mouthpiece of God. One of her poems is a pulpit as worthy as any other. She employs the repetition and rhetorical poses of the preacher alongside the diction, syntax, and alliterative techniques of the poet. There is, too, what has been called code-switching happening in these lines, but that term doesn't feel quite right to me—it denotes secrecy, the tool of spies. The work is only unclear or coded to one who hasn't been paying attention or isn't interested in learning literary or linguistic lineages other than their own. I am reminded of these words from writer and critic Cyril Connolly: "Art is the conscious apprehension of the unconscious ecstasy of all created things."

"The Second Sermon on the Warpland" is the opposite of shame—there is no whispering or winking here. This poem is a directive born out of myriad dirges. This poem centers Big Bessie, who appears in an earlier poem of Brooks's—her beauty and fortitude as she withstands being "in the wild weed." This poem places the pathology where it belongs—in the whirlwind, with those responsible for the chasms between this nation's ideals and realities. I love how she points out that it is the "scrutiny" Big Bessie and others like her are under that is "unruly"—not this woman who is "a moment of highest quality; admirable." The economy of the line "and red and shriek and sheen"—it encompasses the strife and

striving happening simultaneously in the neighborhoods she frequents in Chicago, and all of the neighborhoods that resemble them elsewhere. Brooks set out to write the poem that spoke to the banker and the numbers runner, the maid and the professor. As she writes, "a garbage man is dignified/as any diplomat." Speaking to as many different kinds of people as possible, this sermon declares that it will be our imaginations and our ability to "salvage in the spin" of various oppressions that will save us. Paradise can be fashioned inside of paradox.

Time, like most things, is both for and against us. The poet repeats this idea and refrain throughout: "This is the urgency: Live!" All we have is now; and yet there is a timelessness about all of human struggle, which is why the time, Brooks says, "sways in wicked grace" and "cracks into furious flower." She continues: "Whose half-black hands assemble oranges/is tom-tom hearted/(goes in bearing oranges and boom)." I love the allusion in these lines to Langston Hughes and his famous 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Hughes makes the case for why there is no other avenue to freedom, innovation, or any other kind of change but to be one's uninhibited, unique self:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If

colored people are pleased we are glad.
If they are not, their displeasure doesn't
matter either. We build our temples for
tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we
stand on top of the mountain, free within
ourselves.

Brooks acknowledges the limitations that society imposes, implicitly or explicitly:

Not the easy man, who rides above
them all,
not the jumbo brigand,
not the pet bird of poets, that
sweetest sonnet,
shall straddle the whirlwind.

Her sermon-poem is permission to anyone who may be feeling confined by these strictures to “Nevertheless, live.”

A critique of the status quo and those who uphold it—the beneficiaries, the apathetic and those who dwell in denial—the poem was written after Brooks attended a writing conference at Fisk University that sparked an evolution of her consciousness around identity. That shift led some critics to conclude that her prosody suffered at the mercy of politics. How dare she be the center of her own concerns and life—forget her place as assistance, as collateral, as mimic without any agency in her own transformation? That critical response is proof of Toni Morrison’s assertion:

I’m already politicized, before I get out of the gate. I can accept the labels because being a black woman writer is not a shallow

place but a rich place to write from. It doesn’t limit my imagination; it expands it.

I believe at every juncture, with every epiphany, Brooks wrote the best poems she could about whatever truly mattered to her, which makes her entire oeuvre universally indispensable to any thinking, feeling person working to be unbound by the strictures woven into the fabric of this nation. I love this poem so much because it speaks to how daunting and relentless this work is—the daily negotiations, weathering everything from microaggressions to bare-faced bigotry, assaults that distract from one’s life purposes and warp one’s ability to revel in what’s right and beautiful about the world. This poem helps me find additional reserves of strength, bravery, compassion for myself and others when I feel depleted. This poem says, I see you in your fatigue and despair, yet you can make it through. It reminds me that the victory is not only to live, but also to bloom. It functions as any great anthem, battle cry and salve at once, like the gospel songs of my youth—the choir singing “Lift Evr’y Voice and Sing,” by James Weldon Johnson, or James Cleveland singing, “I don’t feel no ways tired!/I’ve come too far from where I started from.” This poem stands among the songs, poems and art that remind us of who we are and the best of what we’re made of. This poem champions “the last of the loud.” This poem is a reminder to ride the currents, to “straddle the whirlwind” without being blown every which way by it, or apart. ●



GWENDOLYN BROOKS

The Second Sermon on the Warpland

1.

This is the urgency: Live!
and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.

2.

Salve salvage in the spin.
Endorse the splendor splashes;
stylize the flawed utility;
prop a malign or failing light—
but know the whirlwind is our commonwealth.
Not the easy man, who rides above them all,
not the jumbo brigand,
not the pet bird of poets, that sweetest sonnet,
shall straddle the whirlwind.
Nevertheless, live.

3.

All about are the cold places,
all about are the pushmen and jeopardy, theft—
all about are the stormers and scramblers but
what must our Season be, which starts from Fear?
Live and go out.
Define and
medicate the whirlwind.

4.

The time
cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face
all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace.
Whose half-black hands assemble oranges
is tom-tom hearted
(goes in bearing oranges and boom).
And there are bells for orphans—
and red and shriek and sheen.
A garbageman is dignified
as any diplomat.

Big Bessie's feet hurt like nobody's business,
but she stands—bigly—under the unruly scrutiny, stands in the wild weed.
In the wild weed
she is a citizen,
and is a moment of highest quality; admirable.
It is lonesome, yes. For we are the last of the loud.
Nevertheless, live.
Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.