

Black History Month: Two Laureates, Two Poems

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Martin Luther King, Jr

Black history is American history.

Morgan Freeman

When asked to recommend a poet or a poem to honor Black History Month, I find myself feeling inadequate, knowing there's so much to say and so much that should be read. Should I recommend Langston Hughes? Lucille Clifton? Patricia Smith? Terrance Hayes? Where does one even begin?

This time around, I'd like to recommend poems by two laureates, one a contemporary and one whose work most certainly still resonates. These poets are Ashley M. Jones (b. 1990), current Poet Laureate of Alabama, and Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989), the first Poet Laureate of the District of Columbia.

Jones' poem, which appears below, comes from her outstanding debut collection, *Magic City Gospel*, published in 2017. This book launched an urgent voice; in her work, she names names, and naming is a most salient way to concretize humanity, to remember, to honor, to hold. Readers enter poems both tender and terrifying, poems whose inhabitants include Sam Cooke, Sally Hemmings, Pearl Bailey, and Gregory Hines. But also named are George Wallace and Robert Chambliss. Jones' poems require attention. Pay attention, they say, or remain nescient.

Brown's poem, "Southern Cop," first appeared in 1938 and can be found in *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown*. Due to copyright issues, that poem doesn't appear below, but the homework is to find it, read it. (Note: both of these poems address violence and brutality.)

These poems share thematic concerns—injustice, atrocity, the power of privilege and ignorance—and they make their meaning by being both direct and ironic, Brown's poem particularly so. When I introduced these poems

to an undergraduate poetry class, the students noted the dated language in Brown's poem, but they were startled to learn that there was a span of 79 years between these poems. This recognition brought the class to silence, a silence of heartbreak and shame.

These are not easy poems to read, and that's the point. These poems are not *pretty*. But they are *beautiful* in their honesty, their craft, and their absolute urgency. These poems, these poets, need hearing.

The men come for Emmett and Tamir and Michael and Eric and John and Trayvon and...by *Ashley M. Jones*

Tonight, he dreams of sunshine, the blood
browned in a pan of grandma's neckbones,
field flowers and the quiet
river, the stars and their nighttime school.

Tonight is dark and still and mild,
the air unfazed by the pursuit
Emmett hears before he sees.

Brown prince, whistling that whistle
that hadn't meant anything,
but set men's pulses beating fast.

What is a black boy but a villain?
His black eyes. The way he goes about
his black business. His towering
black height. His slang-cluttered speech.

Tamir Rice was a man, the police write,
larger than a child, a wolf. What softness,
after all, is there in a villain?

What was four and a half hours in the sun
to Michael who never guessed he would die
from the metallic tantrums
of an officer's gun? Maybe there was something
in the air that whispered open season.

In Staten Island, they laid into Eric.
They laid their hands on him like hurried pastors.
And, his body laid heavy on his wife
in her dreams, in her pocketbook, in her children, though
it was too late to do anything about it,
to hear those last three words.
Did John have time to raise his hands
in the aisles of plastic darts and BB guns?
Is a black boy not loved by his black mother?
Does his soul glitter with something startling and black?

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