A Small Needful Fact

SUMMARY

One minor but essential thing people should know about Eric Garner is that for a while he was a horticulturist for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. This might mean that he used his big hands to carefully place plants into the soil. It's very possible that some of these plants are still alive and growing today—that they're still going about their usual plant business: providing shelter to tiny but important creatures; giving people something nice to touch and smell; and undergoing photosynthesis (the process of turning sunlight into energy), which produces oxygen and thus makes it so that we all can breathe.

THEMES

RACISM AND INJUSTICE

Without ever mentioning it explicitly, "A Small Needful Fact" offers an implicit rebuke of racism. The poem is about Eric Garner, a Black man whose death at the hands of a New York City police officer sparked nationwide protests against police brutality and the systemic oppression and criminalization of Black Americans. Poet Ross Gay focuses on a particularly cruel irony of Garner's death by chokehold, which is the "fact" that he once worked as a horticulturist (someone who cultivates plants)—meaning that he likely made it "easier" for others "to breathe" even as he was denied that same right himself. Racism, the poem implies, unjustly robs Black people like Garner of their full humanity—and it also robs the world of people like Garner.

Right away, the poem takes care to subtly reject racist stereotypes of Black men as inherently dangerous—stereotypes that have historically led to (and been used to excuse) the use of excessive violence against them, often by law enforcement. Noting that Garner's "very large hands" were, "in all likelihood," gentle with the plants they placed "into the earth," the speaker presents Garner's horticultural work as careful and delicate. This gentle image also provides a sharp, devastating contrast with the violence of Garner's death, during which an NYPD officer used a prohibited chokehold.

Garner's work, the speaker continues, likely supported more life: the plants Garner tended might even "continue to grow" to this day, and in doing so might provide shelter to "small and necessary creatures" (such as birds and bugs). Plants also make the environment more pleasant for people to live in, and they release oxygen into the atmosphere. Humanity couldn't survive without them.

The irony here is that each of these important functions reflects something that the killing of Garner denied him. He can no longer provide shelter to his own "small and necessary creatures" (his children), nor can he enjoy the simple pleasure of smelling a flower. And, of course, the poem's allusion to his last words—"I can't breathe"—highlights the brutality of his death by chokehold.

The poem thus illustrates the cruelty and injustice of racism, which took away Garner's most basic human rights. At the same time, the poem seeks to show how racism robbed the world of a man who, in one "small needful" way, made the world a better place.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

THE TRAGEDY OF HUMAN LOSS

Despite the tragedy that inspired it, Ross Gay's "A Small Needful Fact" can ultimately be read as a celebration of life. The poem is about Eric Garner, a Black man who was infamously choked to death by a police officer in 2014. Garner's killing sparked widespread protests and public anger, and his last words—"I can't breathe"—became a slogan in the fight against police brutality and racism. But Gay's poem doesn't actually mention any of that. Instead, it imagines Garner's work as a horticulturist with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation—a job that, the speaker suggests, led to a more beautiful and livable planet. The poem thus asks readers to remember that Eric Garner was a real human being with a meaningful existence—that is, to remember the individual behind what has become a symbolic tragedy.

Rather than describing the widely publicized circumstances of Garner's death or the protests that followed, the poem focuses on a "small needful fact" about his life (one that Gay learned from reading an obituary for Garner). It thus implicitly values Garner's life as something more than the discourse around his killing. Gay himself has said of the poem, "What that poem, I think, is trying to do is to say, there's this beautiful life, which is both the sorrow and the thing that needs to be loved."

The poem thus poses an alternative—and additional—legacy for people to appreciate about Garner. His work, "in all likelihood," continues to make the world a better place. That is, the plants and flowers he put in the soil might *still* provide shelter to small creatures, create a pleasant environment for people to live in, and, by "converting sunlight into food," add oxygen to the atmosphere—without which human beings cannot breathe.

Of course, the poem approaches its subject with a degree of uncertainty, using words like "perhaps" and "most likely" throughout. The poem doesn't claim any supreme knowledge about Garner, but rather makes assumptions while acknowledging that they *are* assumptions (though reasonable ones). In this way, the poem treats Garner as a human being and not exclusively as a symbol or a talking point, affording the man—rather than the myth—respect, tenderness, and appreciation. In short, it gently reminds readers that Garner was a real person and not just a news story.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Is that Eric ...
... Horticultural Department,

In this poem, the title is not separate from the main text: it's the beginning of the poem's one long sentence. The "Small" signals that what follows is—compared with the storm of events surrounding Eric Garner's death—modest and gentle (qualities the poem then attributes to Garner's work as a gardener). "Needful" suggests both that there is a need to remember the human being behind the story *and* that the actions described in the poem are themselves necessary and important.

The small, needful fact about Garner—which Ross Gay learned from an obituary—is that he:

> [...] worked
> for some time for the Parks and Rec.
> Horticultural Department [...]

That is, he was a horticulturist, or gardening specialist, for the Department of Parks and Recreation (in New York City, where he lived).

This fact is stated plainly, without any poetic devices apart from the enjambment of the first two lines. If not for the line breaks, this could be the kind of spare prose found in obituaries. This understated style contrasts with the heated public language (e.g., in court and on social media) surrounding Garner's death. Its gentleness, in itself, seems intended as a quietly powerful act—like planting flowers in a garden. Amid the debate about his death, the poem seems to want to commemorate something "Small," yet important, about his life.

"Some time" is an important phrase here. It's carefully non-specific, because the poem doesn't presume to know anything definitive about Garner's life. It makes a cautious inference based on one "Small Needful Fact," and resists the temptation to turn Garner into a poetic symbol. This restraint still allows the "Fact" to take on symbolic properties, but in a way that seems considerate and attentive to Garner as a real person. By *not* knowing—or not saying—the precise details of Garner's work, the speaker subtly reminds the reader that the poem can only speak from a certain distance. Unlike some public commentary, the poem claims no *authority* over what Garner's life and death represent.

LINES 3-9

which means, ...
... continue to grow,

In the section stretching from "which" (line 3) to "grow" (line 9)—all part of the poem's single sentence—the speaker makes a reasonable inference about Eric Garner's work. As a gardener with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, he probably planted things in the ground, and some of these plants and flowers might well be growing still. His name is known around the world due to his death at the hands of police, but his life, the poem argues, was more than that. The poem thus sets up an implied contrast between the violence of his death and the simple, gentle act of planting.

The poem develops this contrast through its choice of details. For example, the speaker mentions Garner's "very large hands." Big hands *could* suggest power and menace, but here, they're tools to nurture growth. (Contrast this image with the way NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo used his hands violently, killing Garner with a prohibited chokehold.)

The poem also notes that planting requires tender care, as opposed to rough treatment, which can damage or kill plants. Garner would have had to "put [the plants] gently into the earth," affording them a respect for life that was denied him during his arrest and killing. The thought that these plants "continue to grow" represents a small, yet meaningful, triumph of kindness and love over brutality and racism.

The poem, too, is gentle and careful in how it approaches its subject. Words/phrases like "perhaps" and "in all likelihood" acknowledge that the poem is making assumptions. Combined with caesura, they set a tone of cautious uncertainty. The speaker isn't *certain* that Garner put plants in the earth, or that those plants are still alive—but it's a reasonable hypothesis based on the "Fact" of Garner's previous job.

The close repetition of "perhaps," "some," "in all likelihood," and "most likely" (an example of polyptoton) highlights the speaker's lack of firm knowledge. Caesurae and enjambments slow the verse (and the poem's single sentence) down, reflecting a restrained, step-by-step approach.

In short, the poem treats its subject with the same kind of care and humility that gardening requires. It's as if the poem itself is gradually growing, requiring the poet's gentleness to come to life. Notice, too, how lines 6-9 evoke gentleness through steady,

subtle /t/ consonance: "put gently into [...] plants [...] most [...] continue to grow."

LINES 9-12

continue ...
... touch and smell,

In lines 9-12, the poem draws more inferences from the "Fact" that Eric Garner worked as a gardener.

Because he probably cultivated some plants that continue to grow, the plants can go on doing "what such plants do." They form a small but vital part of a broader ecosystem, sheltering and feeding "small and necessary creatures." But each thing the poem lists about plants also relates to humans—to what people *ought* to be able to do without suffering racism and violence.

Again, there's a contrast between Garner's actions as a gardener and his treatment at the hands of the police, which denied him many of the same things he gave to the world. While his plants can continue to nurture life, he can no longer take care of his own children, or the community in which he was a key figure.

The plants also continue to delight people who see, smell, and touch them. The simple pleasure of nature is yet another thing Garner's tragic death took away from him. His legacy—or part of his legacy—is the continuation of life in "small and necessary" forms, whereas the legacy of the individual (and system) that killed him is death and suffering.

Here, as earlier in the poem, repetition evokes gradual growth and continuity. The repetition of "continue" itself (line 9) highlights the plants' endurance, which is also the continuation of Garner's legacy. The repetition of "do" (line 10) and "like" (lines 10, 12, and 13) further reflects this continuity on the sentence level.

In line 12, the poem uses the same kind of /t/ consonance that appeared in lines 6-9:

> like being pleasant to touch and smell,

These /t/ sounds remain light and gentle, in keeping with Garner's "small, needful" legacy—and in contrast with the violence that caused his death.

LINES 13-15

like converting sunlight ...
... us to breathe.

Lines 13-15 state two more functions of plants:

> like converting sunlight
> into food, like making it easier
> for us to breathe.

These lines offer an image of the continuation of life. There's a tragic irony at work here: by describing healthy living things, the poem reminds the reader that Eric Garner is dead, and that no words can change that. Plants and sunlight work together in natural harmony; human society *should* be like this, the poem seems to imply, but it isn't.

In its final phrase, the poem alludes to the death (rather than the life) of Eric Garner. His last words—"I can't breathe"—have become a rallying cry that speaks to the injustice of his death (and the deaths of many others). They reflect both the specific violence of the chokehold that killed him and the wider violence of systemic racism. These final lines, then, imply a contrast: unlike the NYPD officer who choked Garner to death, or prejudices that figuratively suffocate their victims, Garner made it *easier* for people to breathe. (Notice how enjambment emphasizes the word "easier.") Through his work as a gardener, he gave the world a necessity (something *needful*) he was denied in the end.

Both of these last two phrases begin with "like," which is the most frequently repeated syllable in the poem (it also appears in "likelihood" and "likely"). This word often introduces a simile, but the poem uses it to introduce simple facts about what plants do for the world. In general, the poem avoids most conventional poetic devices, instead paying tribute to Garner through respectful restraint.

The use of "us" in the last line suggests that everyone, including the reader, owes something to Garner. By extension, everyone has a responsibility to confront the violence and racism that killed him. The poem ends with its only full stop; everything beforehand has been one long sentence. Even as it mentions the "breath[ing]" that Garner enabled, the poem itself seems to run out of breath—simultaneously celebrating Garner's life and evoking his tragic death.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

In a way, the whole poem is an allusion to a tragic real-life event: the death of Eric Garner at the hands of the NYPD. The poem assumes that its readers will know about Garner's story beforehand (or can easily look it up), though this background knowledge isn't strictly necessary. The speaker makes a point of not *directly* alluding to Garner's death, instead focusing on something more positive about his life—that is, until the last line, which pointedly echoes Garner's last words: "I can't breathe."

This allusion makes the poem's subtle irony explicit: Garner was denied all the things that, in their small and humble way, these plants provide for the world. It portrays the simple act of planting as positive and life-affirming, while implying that the actions of the NYPD, and the officer who killed Garner in particular, were the opposite. The former action improves the

world (even at a micro level), while the latter added to the world's tragedy and violence.

The allusion also situates the poem within the wider anti-racism movement. "I can't breathe" has become a rallying cry against police brutality and systemic racism. By echoing it, the poem affirms the commitments of that movement, while showing that Eric Garner was a human being, not just a news story.

Finally, the word "Needful" in the title likely alludes to Robert Hayden's poem "Frederick Douglass" (1966), which calls liberty "needful to man as air" and salutes Douglass's legacy as an abolitionist:

> [...] the lives grown out of his life, the lives
> fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

This subtle callback highlights the way Garner, too, left a legacy that "continue[s] to grow" (line 9). It places his death in the context of a larger struggle for freedom, even suggesting that understanding him is as "needful" (necessary) as freedom itself. (Hayden wrote "Frederick Douglass"—which Gay has called a "masterpiece"—as a politically engaged Black American poet during the Civil Rights era, so the echo here seems fitting on multiple levels.)

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "continue to grow"
- **Lines 14-15:** "like making it easier / for us to breathe."

CAESURA

The poem uses caesurae and enjambment to construct one long sentence with many clauses (16 in all!). Without caesura, this sentence would be pretty hard to sustain. The poem unfolds naturally and organically, like the plants it mentions. That said, there is one end-stop right at the close of the poem—and caesura's role in building *toward* this full stop makes the ending more dramatic and powerful.

Caesurae also affect the poem's tone. The poem doesn't claim any special authority regarding Eric Garner's life or death. Instead, it makes *conjectures* based on the "Small Needful Fact:" that Garner, was for a time, involved in gardening. Ross Gay read this fact in an obituary, but what follows from it is only hypothesized, not stated as absolute truth. The poem's mid-line commas create a hesitant tone, as its single sentence unfolds carefully, bit by bit. This hesitation is a conscious artistic effect: it suggests that the speaker is treating the poem's subject with respect and humility. Look at lines 3-9, for example:

> Horticultural Department, which means,
> perhaps, that with his very large hands,
> perhaps, in all likelihood,
> he put gently into the earth
> some plants which, most likely,
> some of them, in all likelihood,
> continue to grow, [...]

There's a restraint at work in these commas, as though the speaker wants to avoid turning Garner into a high-flown poetic symbol. The poem shows that Garner was a real person, not just a talking point, and its informal-sounding pauses show that the poet/speaker is *also* a real person, reacting sensitively to a tragic event.

Finally, commas break the text into smaller sections that gradually grow into a full poem, mimicking the tentative, yet purposeful growth of a plant.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Department, which"
- **Line 4:** "perhaps, that"
- **Line 5:** "perhaps, in"
- **Line 7:** "which, most"
- **Line 8:** "them, in"
- **Line 9:** "grow, continue"
- **Line 10:** "do, like"
- **Line 14:** "food, like"

CONSONANCE

The poem uses sparse, simple language, deliberately avoiding anything that sounds too "poetic." In this sensitive context, elaborate literary devices might seem crass and inappropriate, drawing attention to the *writing* rather than the "Fact" the poem is sharing—and the life it's celebrating.

However, the poem does use delicate, yet persistent /t/ consonance. Combined with softer sounds and restrained language, as it is here, this effect suggests tenderness and consideration:

> he put gently into the earth
> some plants which, most likely,
> [...]
> continue to grow, continue
> to do what such plants do, like house
> [...]
> like being pleasant to touch and smell,
> like converting sunlight

Notice how the /t/ sound doesn't stick out too much, but subtly grows in strength as the poem unfolds. In this way, the poem's main consonant sound is like a plant taking to the soil, developing strength little by little. It's gentle and pleasurable, helping to evoke the pleasantness of plants and the life-affirming act of growing them in gardens.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "put gently into"
- **Line 7:** "plants," "most"
- **Line 9:** "continue to," "continue"
- **Line 10:** "to," "what," "plants"
- **Line 12:** "pleasant to touch"
- **Line 13:** "converting sunlight"
- **Line 14:** "into," "it"
- **Line 15:** "to"

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem has many end-stopped lines, but only one *full stop*, or period—at the very end. Otherwise, it's a single, multi-clause sentence that begins with the title. A full stop at the end of a poem is common, of course, but here, it has a dramatic effect because there are no others before it.

The full stop serves two main purposes besides simply ending the poem. First, it adds emphasis to the poem's final word: "breathe." This is a key word in Eric Garner's story; his last words, "I can't breathe," became a worldwide rallying cry against racial injustice and police brutality.

Second, the full stop can be read as a dramatic cut-off, marking a kind of last breath for the poem itself. People need to breathe, of course, in order to live; stopping the poem's single, long, flowing sentence after the word "breathe" reminds the reader what happened to Eric Garner. (That is, he lost his life because he was denied the right to breathe freely.) The suddenness of this moment suggests the finality of death without undermining the poem's otherwise gentle tone.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "means,"
- **Line 4:** "hands,"
- **Line 5:** "likelihood,"
- **Line 7:** "likely,"
- **Line 8:** "likelihood,"
- **Line 11:** "creatures,"
- **Line 12:** "smell,"
- **Line 15:** "breathe."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem consists of one long sentence that begins with the title. Enjambment helps make this structure sound natural and effective. Especially in a poem with shorter lines, end-stopping every line would make the sentence's rhythm sound choppy (and a bit predictable). Instead, it unfolds more organically, like the plants it describes. In other words, by helping build a long, complex sentence, enjambment suggests continuity and growth—important themes in the poem.

Enjambment also helps emphasize a couple of thematically important words. For example, line 9 actually breaks on the word "continue:"

> [...] some plants which, most likely,
> some of them, in all likelihood,
> continue to grow, continue
> to do what such plants do [...]

Notice how the enjambment itself creates continuity, as if the momentum of one line brings the next into existence. Put another way, line 9 needs line 10 to complete it, like one part of an ecosystem depending on another. By both emphasizing and enacting continuity, this enjambment draws further attention to the life that *continues* after Garner's death (because he cultivated it while alive). Similarly, the enjambment after line 14 stresses the word "easier," as if to imply a contrast: Garner made breathing *easier*, whereas the officer who choked him made it *harder* (and finally impossible).

Finally, enjambment may cause readers to notice their own breathing, especially when reading the poem aloud. As the poem unfolds its single long sentence, enjambments offer extra opportunities to pause for breath (or not, as the reader chooses). Thus, they become subtle but significant features of a poem where breathing is a central subject.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "worked / for"
- **Lines 2-3:** "Rec. / Horticultural"
- **Lines 6-7:** "earth / some"
- **Lines 9-10:** "continue / to"
- **Lines 10-11:** "house / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "sunlight / into"
- **Lines 14-15:** "easier / for"

IRONY

There is a cruel and tragic irony at the heart of the poem. The positive things that Garner "likely" added to the world through gardening mirror the very things his killing stole from him. The gentle touch his gardening would have required ironically highlights the senseless violence of his death (and the deaths of many other Black people at the hands of the police).

The plants that Garner probably "put gently into the earth" might still be growing and thriving, whereas Garner can no longer grow or thrive. "In all likelihood" (the poem is careful not to be too presumptuous), the plants go on doing "what such plants do," whereas Garner can no longer "do what [humans] do." The plants might "feed small and necessary creatures" in their ecosystem, but Garner, renowned for peace-making in his community, can no longer nurture other life. His children have lost their father for good. Nor can Garner enjoy the simple pleasures of life, like smelling a flower.

The greatest irony of all is that Garner's work as a horticulturist added more oxygen to the atmosphere, "making it easier / for us [humans] to breathe" (lines 14-15). His work, then, contributed the same vital element that his killer prevented him from breathing. In a small but significant way, Garner facilitated life, whereas his own life was cut short by hatred and violence.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-15

REPETITION

"A Small Needful Fact" features a lot of repetition, including anaphora. This device gives the poem a cautious, respectful tone—as though the speaker hesitates to "poeticize" Garner's death or claim some sort of false authority. Most, but not all, of the repetition involves words that express a degree of uncertainty:

> **perhaps,** that with his very large hands,
> **perhaps, in all likelihood,**
> he put gently into the earth
> **some** plants which, **most likely,**
> **some** of them, **in all likelihood,**
> continue to grow [...]

These lines make a tentative rather than an authoritative statement. The speaker doesn't know *for sure* that Garner put plants in the ground, but it's a reasonable assumption; same with the idea that those plants continue to grow and provide shelter and oxygen. "Perhaps" (repeated as anaphora), "in all likelihood/most likely" (polyptoton and anaphora), "some" (anaphora): all of these terms express probability and imprecision. They make the poem read as if the poet is speaking—or revising—in real-time, treating a sensitive subject carefully, respectfully, and honestly.

The repetition of "continue" in line 9 and "do" in line 10 (examples of anaphora and diacope, respectively) evokes the continuous, active growth of the plants. Again, this continuity is both part of Garner's legacy and a detail that contrasts ironically with his cruel, premature death.

The repetition of "like" in lines 12-14 (more anaphora) creates a list of the benefits of plants, culminating in the final, crucial detail about helping people breathe. In this case, repetition functions as buildup, preparing the way for a powerful, ironic ending.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "perhaps"
- **Line 5:** "perhaps," "in all likelihood"
- **Line 7:** "some," "most likely"
- **Line 8:** "some," "in all likelihood"
- **Line 9:** "continue to"
- **Lines 9-10:** "continue / to"
- **Line 10:** "do," "do," "like"
- **Line 12:** "like"
- **Line 13:** "like"
- **Line 14:** "like"

VOCABULARY

Needful () - Necessary, vital.

Eric Garner (Lines 1-3) - Eric Garner was a Black American man killed by the NYPD in 2014.

Parks and Rec. Horticultural Department (Lines 1-3) - A municipal department responsible for the upkeep of public parks and green spaces. ("Rec." is short for "Recreation," and "Horticultural" means "related to the cultivation of plants.")

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Small Needful Fact" uses free verse and consists of a single 15-line stanza. Its lack of traditional form suits its down-to-earth tone. The author seems to have carefully avoided making his poem too, well, poem-ish. In this plainspoken tribute to a man who died tragically, conventional "literary" elements might feel like a distraction.

The poem is also one long sentence, made possible by caesura and enjambment. It develops loosely and organically, "growing" clause by clause while remaining a unitary whole. In other words, its form is a bit plant-like! This effect starts with the title, which runs into the first line proper.

METER

"A Small Needful Fact" uses free verse, meaning it doesn't have a regular metrical rhythm. This relaxed style fits the poem's images of quiet, peaceful activity (e.g., Garner "gently" putting plants "into the earth"). The language is very spare and simple, so a tight metrical sound would probably be at odds with this aspect of the poem.

RHYME SCHEME

"A Small Needful Fact" doesn't use any rhyme. Its verse has a loose, plainspoken, almost conversational quality. Rhyme, in this context, might seem overly "poetic," distracting from the humble, respectful tribute to Garner's life.

SPEAKER

The poem has an unidentified speaker, and, in fact, the speaker's identity isn't all that important. The poem foregrounds Eric Garner—and the "small needful fact" that he once worked for the "Parks and Rec. Horticultural Department"—so any details about the speaker would probably be a distraction. There's no evidence of any gap between the speaker's attitudes and the poet's, so it's reasonable to treat the speaker as the poet himself.

The poem's tone makes clear that the speaker deeply respects Garner and his life. The speaker wants to provide a kind of service, reminding readers that Garner was a person—with feelings, family, hopes, and dreams—not just the center of a news story.

This respect manifests in the speaker's cautious approach, with words like "perhaps" and "most likely" acknowledging that the poem is based on assumptions drawn from the "small needful fact." The speaker doesn't claim any special authority or knowledge about Garner, but simply infers that, if the fact is true, then some of the plants Garner worked with are probably still growing—and still having a positive effect on the world around them.

SETTING

The poem's setting is largely defined by the "small needful fact" itself. That is, the poem focuses closely on what it wants to tell the reader about Eric Garner's life and work. The historical context—Garner's tragic death—is part of the setting, too, but is kept in the background (on the assumption that the reader knows what happened). Only that final phrase, "making it easier / for us to breathe," evokes Garner's dying words on a New York sidewalk ("I can't breathe") and the worldwide protests that followed.

The fact the speaker shares—that Garner once worked for a "Parks and Rec. / Horticultural Department"—places the poem in the "gentl[e]," "pleasant" world of gardening. This provides a quiet, peaceful atmosphere that's a world away from the media storm surrounding Garner's violent death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ross Gay is an American poet, professor, and editor born in 1974. He has published four books of poetry. *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*, the 2015 collection in which this poem appears, won numerous prizes and is widely taught in American schools and colleges. "A Small Needful Fact," though, was first published on the website of poetry organization Split This Rock. It was shared extensively across social media, in part to suggest that Garner should be remembered for his life and not simply his unjust death. As Gay put it himself, "What that poem, I think, is trying to do is to say, there's this beautiful life, which is both the sorrow and the thing that needs to be loved."

Expressed with carefully crafted respect and understatement, the poem is part of a wider 21st-century movement of American poets and publishers that confronts racial injustice, police brutality, and systemic inequality. These poets ask questions about America itself: who sets the terms of its societal structures, and why are they the way they are? Who benefits and who suffers? Other essential books in this movement include Terrance Hayes's *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Danez Smith's *Homie*, and Morgan Parker's *Magical Negro*.

The poem's title, and especially the word "Needful," also seems to echo Robert Hayden's sonnet "Frederick Douglass" (1966). A Black American poet whose career overlapped with the Civil Rights era, Hayden often tackled themes of racial injustice in his own work. His poem in praise of Douglass, the iconic 19th-century abolitionist, calls liberty "needful to man as air" and "the beautiful, needful thing"—phrases with clear relevance to Garner's legacy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Eric Garner was a Black American man killed by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo on July 17, 2014, during an attempted arrest for selling single cigarettes without tax stamps. Pantaleo was filmed using a prohibited chokehold, and an autopsy found that Garner died as a direct result of the compression of his neck and chest. The death was ruled a homicide. Pantaleo's employment with the NYPD was terminated in 2019, but to date, he has never been charged with Garner's killing.

Garner's death catalyzed worldwide protests against racism and police brutality. Protesters staged die-ins, and Garner's last words—"I can't breathe"—became one of their rallying cries. Erica Garner, Garner's daughter, held a vigil and die-in at the site of her father's death. The killing and its aftermath remained headline news across the globe for months. Protests against Garner's treatment became part of the wider anti-racism and social justice movement Black Lives Matter.

Racism and police brutality have a tragically long lineage in America, from centuries of slavery to the Jim Crow era to the present day. One recent study shows that Black men are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police in America than their white counterparts—and Black people who are fatally shot are twice as likely to be unarmed. Garner's death was followed by the high-profile, widely protested police killings of a number of Black Americans: Michael Brown, a teenager killed less than a month after Garner; Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy playing with a toy gun; Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, both in 2020; and many more.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — "A Small Needful Fact" read by Kevin Young, the poetry editor of The New Yorker magazine. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoJDwj5rtX4)
- A Musical Collaboration — Ross Gay's "Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude" set to music by Bon Iver. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBWcnGjfadY)
- Ross Gay's Worldview — An interview with the poet in which he discusses the importance of joy. (https://onbeing.org/programs/ross-gay-tending-joy-and-practicing-delight/)
- Ross Gay on Robert Hayden — Gay and other poets discuss Robert Hayden's "Frederick Douglass," a poem that may have helped inspire "A Small Needful Fact." (https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Poets+Respond%3a+A+Discussion+of+%22Frederick+Douglass%22+by+Robert+Hayden.-a0199187587)
- Poetry and Anti-Racism — Recent collections that examine America, racism, and systemic injustice. (https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/83522-an-anti-racist-poetry-reading-list.html)
- More Poems by Ross Gay — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ross-gay)

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