They

In our class, Nicole brought up an excellent point about the use of “they” when we reference a general (or unknown) authority. Her example was about a friend saying “Well that’s what they say” and other phrases like that. I thought this was a great point because we hear things like this all of the time. And who hasn’t said something along the lines of “They say it’s going to rain today”?

I immediately thought of the song “They” by a European singer named Jem. The lyrics pertain to the problem of an unknown authority. The singer apologizes, but why? Because we blindly follow “rules” imposed upon us by cultures?

Rules in any society grow out of need, just like we saw in Crystal’s The Fight for English. Spelling and grammar rules emerged over time from the need to communicate and, because some thought they knew better, from the need to impose a standard on the masses. These rules have led to our prescriptive compulsion with grammar. I’m guilty of prescriptivism, and I know it. It’s difficult to challenge what you’ve been taught, though, especially when it’s “worked” all your life and helped to get you where you are.

But why shouldn’t we question what “they” say is proper grammar? English has changed in innumerable ways since some of the times of the most notable writers in history. Why should we be different? How are we trying to make ourselves the exception to the time-tested rule of change?

We develop rules from patterns and enforce rules out of need. So if change in language has been the pattern over time and language changes out of need, why fight the inevitable and the natural in favor of following a general and relatively unknown authority?
"They" Jem, Finally Woken

Who made up all the rules?
We follow them like fools,
Believe them to be true,
Don't care to think them through

And I'm sorry, so sorry
I'm sorry it's like this
I'm sorry, so sorry
I'm sorry we do this

And it's ironic too
'Cause what we tend to do
Is act on what they say
And then it is that way

And I'm sorry, so sorry
I'm sorry it's like this
I'm sorry, so sorry
I'm sorry we do this

Who are they?
Where are they?
How can they possibly
Know all this?

Do you see what I see?
Why do we live like this?
Is it because it's true
That ignorance is bliss?