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THE PERSEVERANCE - RAYMOND ANTROBUS



Our son, Caspar, gave me *The Perseverance* by Raymond Antrobus (2018) for my birthday in July and I've been enjoying it ever since. The writer describes himself in his poems as "Jamaican British" – he was born in Britain to an English mother and a father of Jamaican origin who migrated to Britain to work in the 1960s. In the poems Antrobus unpicks the tensions of his mixed ethnic and cultural identity, exploring also what it means to be 'D/deaf' (deaf with a small 'd' is what I've got). In his poetry he considers the nature of signed language, communication generally, sound and silence.

This is his debut collection of poems and it has already won two prizes, including, ironically, the Ted Hughes Award in 2018, the year it came out. It's ironic, because one of his hardest-hitting poems directly and angrily challenges a poem of Ted Hughes, "Deaf School". Raymond Antrobus's response to this is a poem called "After Reading 'Deaf School' by the Mississippi River". Although he prints out Hughes' poem, in doing so he *redacts* every single word, so that all the reader sees is a series of black boxes that correspond to the text of Hughes' poem. It creates the impression, which may be true, that Ted Hughes' estate has objected to the poem's inclusion, either on the grounds of copyright infringement, or else because it is so defamatory towards the Hughes poem. I don't know if this is the case or not, but the inclusion of a totally blacked out poem is certainly startling and thought-provoking.

Here, then, *unredacted*, is the original poem (which in fact Antrobus has posted on his web site), followed by his own poem – you can see immediately what made him so furious, though he admits, in the useful notes he includes at the back of the collection, that it was almost certainly a hurried piece by Hughes, whose poetry, he says, he generally admires - but then why *did* Hughes publish it In the first place? It really isn't worthy of him!

Deaf School

by Ted Hughes

The deaf children were monkey nimble, fish tremulous
 hidden;
 Their faces were alert and simple
 Like faces of little animals, small night lemurs caught
 in the flashlight.
 They lacked a dimension,
 They lacked a subtle wavering aura of sound and responses
 to sound.
 The whole body was removed
 From the vibration of air, they lived through the eyes,
 The clear simple look, the instrument of full attention.
 Their selves were not woven into a voice
 Which was woven into a face
 Hearing itself, its own public and audience,
 An apparition in camouflage, an assertion in doubt,
 Their selves were hidden, and their faces looked out of
 hiding.
 What they spoke with was a machine,
 A manipulation of fingers, a control-panel of gestures
 Out there in the alien space
 Separated from them.

Their unused faces were simple lenses of watchfulness
 Simple pools of earnest watchfulness

Their bodies were like their hands
 Nimbler than bodies, like the hammers of a piano,
 A puppet agility, a simple mechanical action
 A blankness of hieroglyph
 A stylised lettering
 Spelling out approximate signals

While the self looked through, out of the face of simple concealment
 A face not merely deaf, a face in the darkness, a face unaware,
 A face that was simply the front skin of the self concealed and
 Separate

It's a *bad* poem on almost every count! Elsewhere, I've voiced my own reservations about Hughes' arrogance as a poet, but here he is unbelievably condescending and sloppy. It rambles on, going nowhere. What is his point?!

Elsewhere, online, Raymond Antrobus has said the following in an interview:
"Redacting the text in the Ted Hughes 'Deaf school' poem was a cathartic choice, because when I read that poem my response was intense anger. I realise that to be able to find a way into my poem it had to begin with crossing out the old one. It's significant that he is renowned as one of England's greatest poets, and he went into a space, had an interaction with people he did not understand and felt the need to write this. My poem is not a character

assassination of Ted Hughes, I love his poems, often he leans into extended metaphor, and I knew if I wanted to respond to Ted Hughes I had to meet him on his level poetically, so personified the Mississippi river."

Here is Antrobus's poem:

After Reading 'Deaf School' by the Mississippi River

No one wise calls the river unaware or simple pools;
No one wise says it lacks a dimension; no one wise
Says its body is removed from the vibration of air.

The river is a quiet breath-taker gargling mud.

Ted is *alert* and *simple*.
Ted *lacked* a *subtle wavering aura of sound*
And responses to Sound.

Ted lived through his eyes. But eye the colossal
Currents from the bridge. Eye riverboats
Ghosting a geography of fog.

Mississippi means Big River, named by French colonisers.
The natives laughed at their arrogant maps,
Conquering wind and marking mist.

The mouth of the river laughs. A man in a wetsuit emerges,
Pulls misty goggles over his head. *Couldn't see a thing*.
He breathes heavily. *My face was in darkness*.

No one heard him; the river drowned him out.

The poem is written with considerable authority and wit (using form and punctuation far more stylishly than Hughes does), and the striking image of the Mississippi River courses through the poem, ambiguously silent (though it can gargle and it "laughs"), with its riverboats "Ghosting a geography of fog". We are not sure if the diver in the "misty goggles" is real or not, but he sounds real and he stands as a rebuke to Hughes' assertion, seemingly, that deafness inhibits other senses as well, that deaf children are merely faces "in the darkness" and "unaware" (in other words they are 'thick'!)

The final, ironic line is delivered with dead-pan humour: "the river drowned him out." The silent river is vaster and more potent than the human voices lost in "darkness". Ultimately, we are each of us "a face in the darkness", not simply those who happen to be in a 'deaf school'. The image of the Mississippi is complex and its very *lack of clarity* makes it more interesting and appropriate. Even if linked to deafness – or an inability to fully comprehend - it is still beautifully natural, powerful and full of 'commerce'. The Mississippi connects people!

This collection of poems is filled with lots of people and voices. Many of the poems are about his father, but they all explore a world of rich relationships, often reflecting on the writer's experience of what it is to be D/deaf. The poems also consider the writer's Caribbean roots. Growing up in Hackney, he is as British as anyone could be, yet one of the poems has the title "On Being Called a Fucking Foreigner in London Fields". In another poem, he writes of having been knifed and of his subsequent feelings for the man who attacked him. The poem carries 'stitches' between each little section:

"I forgive you for my twenty-one stitches; this scar is how I talk to you.

We were boys, we were lost, we were worthy of space. It took me an age to learn there are men in the world who aren't here to hurt us. There is no knife I want to open you with. Keep all your blood."

The poems to his father, who, while British, felt his Caribbean roots so strongly, are full of tenderness and ambivalence. Antrobus nursed his father during his last years of illness and now misses him, though he makes us also aware of his father's difficult side, reminding us that he fathered "three children with three different women" and was a drinker. Here is perhaps his best poem about his father – the title poem, "The Perseverance", which is the actual name of an east-end pub in Broadway Market, London, where his father used to go drinking.

The Perseverance

'Love is the man overstanding'
Peter Tosh

I wait outside THE PERSEVERANCE.
Just popping in here a minute.
I'd heard him say it many times before
like all kids with a drinking father,
watch him disappear
into smoke and laughter.

There is no such thing as too much laughter,
my father says, drinking in THE PERSEVERANCE
until everything disappears –
I'm outside counting minutes,
waiting for the man, my father
to finish his shot and take me home before

it gets dark. We've been here before,
no such thing as too much laughter
unless you're my mother without my father,
working weekends while THE PERSEVERANCE
spits him out for a minute.
He gives me 50p to make me disappear.

50p in my hand, I disappear
 like a coin in a parking meter before
 the time runs out. How many minutes
 will I lose listening to the laughter
 spilling from THE PERSEVERANCE
 while strangers ask, where is your father?

I stare at the door and say, my father
 is working. Strangers who don't disappear
 but hug me for my perseverance.
 Dad said *this will be the last time* before,
 while the TV spilled canned laughter,
 us, on the sofa in his council flat, knowing any minute

the yams will boil, any minute,
 I will eat again with my father,
 who cooks and serves laughter
 good as any Jamaican who disappeared
 from the Island I tasted before
overstanding our heat and perseverance.

I still hear popping in for a minute, see him disappear.
 We lose our fathers before we know it.
 I am still outside THE PERSEVERANCE, listening for the laughter.

In the notes, Antrobus is keen for us to appreciate the form of the poem, a sestina, where the rhymes are repeated throughout the six-line stanzas. The discipline creates a form of control which is important, given the strong emotions aroused by this memory and also the ambiguities played on in the poem, notably the irony of the pub's name. As well as giving the poem a certain distance, the repetitions also convey the monotony of waiting and the sense of this experience having been endlessly repeated in the past and endlessly rehearsed now as he remembers. I also like the play on "*overstanding*" – it's sort of 'understanding' but he's got 'over' the difficulties. He's 'above' the situation now, where before he might have been 'beneath' it and subservient, literally and metaphorically.

I'll spare you the poem "Thinking of Dad's Dick", though it is actually tender and compassionate, honouring a father who "never held back details" of his sexual life. It finishes, and there is gentle ironic humour in the word "length",

.....He knew he wouldn't live
 to see me grown. I know that now. He had to give,
 while he could, the length of his life to me.

Instead (I would love to copy out all of the poems, but one must choose), I will give you the moving "Conversation with the Art Teacher (a Translation Attempt)". It's a prose poem and seems to be a transcription, but also tellingly a "translation", from signed language to written

speech. The ‘conversation’ (for it is really a monologue) is with a ‘Deaf’ Somali art teacher. In his notes, Antrobus thanks Naimo Duale and Oaklodge Deaf School, so one assumes it is based on a real life conversation. One of his his poetry’s strengths is its ability to capture other voices and most of his poems use other voices, either quoted, or as here, as someone else talking. What I like about his poetry is that they give a feeling of freedom and apparent spontaneity, but beneath the surface Antrobus’s poems are carefully shaped and controlled.

Here, we sense the warmth and directness of this ‘talking head’, the Art Teacher, but also her concern that how she communicates will perhaps not be ‘really’ what she has ‘said’ in sign language, after it has been converted into written words. The success of the poem lies in the fact that Antrobus *does* recreate a real human presence, expressively and wittily.

Conversation with the Art Teacher (a Translation Attempt)

Shit and good my education. Hearing teachers not see potential. This my confusion life, 90’s hearing teachers not think I can become artist because of deafness but funny thing, Deaf girl does GCSE art in six months and go on to get degree. I have proved many wrongs. I am costume designer, teacher, artist. At school I said, “I want to be a costume designer.” Teacher says, “I can’t.” I can’t? So harsh. My father, hearing, signs. Says I can follow dream and lucky me, I did. Proving people wrong is great but tiring. Was I born deaf? You asking lots of questions! OK, yes, in Somaliland, I was about two, meningitis. Seven other children in my hospital ward, all died. My father worked around Europe and took me with him. English hospital saved me. I still know some Somali sign. Wait, you write down what I say, how? You know BSL has no English grammar structure. How you write me when I am visual? Me, into fashion, expression in colour. How will someone reading this see my feeling?*

*British Sign Language

At times he reminds me of Derek Walcott, the poet and playwright from St Lucia. Walcott’s poetry is equally caught between different worlds and his poetry moves assuredly, humanely and artistically, between them: St Lucia – an “idyllic” Caribbean holiday location, yet with problems of drugs, crime and poverty – and with Creole French, the local ‘patois’; Britain, the ex-colonial ruler, with English the official, colonialist language of the island and the language also of his own classical, British education; and nearby, USA with its southern racism (cf. his collection *The Arkansas Testament*) and its urge for political and cultural hegemony. Antrobus’s poetry seems to be aligned with Walcott’s in its sharpened sense of spoken language and with its varied voices and dialects (including sign languages).

Antrobus references Walcott in the last poem I shall leave you with. Again, it is about his father and is simply called “Dementia”. My father and maternal grandfather had dementia or Alzheimer’s in their last years and the poem resonates a lot with me.

Dementia

black with widening amnesia

Derek Walcott

When his sleeping face
was a scrunched tissue,
wet with babbling,

you came, unravelling a joy,
making him euphoric, dribbling
from his mouth –

you simplified a complicated man,
swallowed his past
until your breath was
warm as Caribbean
concrete –

O tender syndrome
steady in his greying eyes,
fading song
in his grand dancehall,

if you must,
do your gentle magic,
but make me unafraid
of what is

disappearing.

Antrobus uses language in surprising ways – the phrases “tender syndrome” and “gentle magic” are unexpected, linked as they are to dementia, which is personified here. The portrait of his father is ambivalent; there is tenderness mixed with cooler speculation.

“Swamp”, the poem by Walcott referenced here, is similarly nuanced. The sexy, life-breathing, organic “swamp” is also sinister, chaotic, tangled and dark as death, or oblivion. There is something almost majestic, often, in Walcott’s strongly rhetorical assertions: Here, they create an ambiguous picture of Caribbean landscape.

SWAMP by Derek Walcott

Gnawing the highway's edges, the black mouth
Hums quietly: "Home, come home..."

Behind the viscous breath the very word "growth"
Grows fungi, rot;
White mottling its root.

More dreaded
Than canebrake, quarry, or sun-shocked gully-bed
Its horrors held Hemingway's hero rooted
To sure, clear shallows.

It begins nothing. Limbo of cracker convicts, Negroes.
Its black mood
Each sunset takes a smear of your life blood.

Fearful, original sinuosities! Each mangrove sapling
Serpentlike, its roots obscene
As a six-fingered hand,

Conceals within its clutch the moss-backed toad,
Toadstools, the potent ginger-lily,
Petals of blood,

The speckled vulva of the tiger-orchid;
Outlandish phallos
Haunting the travellers of its one road.

Deep, deeper than sleep
Like death,
Too rich in its decrecence, too close of breath

In the fast-filling night, note
How the last bird drinks darkness with its throat,
How the wild saplings slip

Backwards to darkness, go black
With widening amnesia, take the edge
Of nothing to them slowly, merge

Limb, tongue and sinews into a knot
Like chaos, like the road
Ahead.

Under the close observation of real swamp life, the imagery plays with "blackness" - the life-asserting richness contrasting with the island's stultification and inability to progress. It's that "amnesia" that is called into question metaphorically in Antrobus' poem here.

So, then, thanks, Caspar!

Raymond Antrobus has an original and compelling poetic voice (and voices) and is definitely to be watched out for. It will be fascinating to see where (and how) he goes from here. He has already done a lot of work in schools in London, helping to address the issues of how D/deaf children are treated, and using poetry to share 'voices' in community ventures.

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