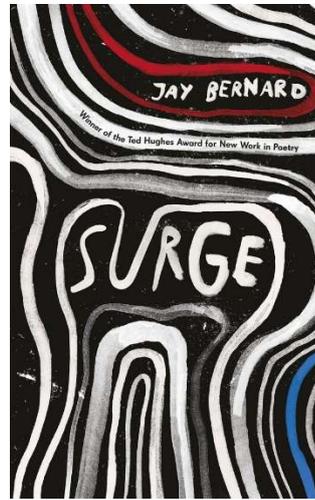


Surge

by Jay Bernard



Jay Bernard is the author of the pamphlets *Your Sign is Cuckoo, Girl* (both Tall Lighthouse, 2008), *English Breakfast* (Math Paper Press, 2013) and *The Red and Yellow Nothing* (Ink Sweat & Tears Press, 2016). A film programmer at BFI Flare and an archivist at Statewatch, they also participated in 'The Complete Works II' project in 2014, in which they were mentored by Kei Miller. Jay was a Foyle Young Poet of the Year in 2005 and a winner of SLAMBassadors UK spoken word championship. *Surge* is their debut collection and they won the 2017 Ted Hughes Award with *Surge: Side A*.

jaybernard.co.uk

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Reviews

For those readers of Jay Bernard's debut *Surge* who are not familiar with the historical event to which it responds, there is a carefully detailed author's foreword. On 18 January 1981, 13 black teenagers were killed in a house fire that engulfed a birthday party at 439 New Cross Road in south-east London. A subsequent apparent suicide, driven by grief, would bring the final death toll to 14. The cause of the New Cross Fire – it may have been a hate crime – has never been determined and the governmental silence that followed (prompting the refrain at the time "13 dead, nothing said"), in addition to hostile, haphazard official investigations, speaks to a long history of racism in Britain. Later that year, uprisings against police discrimination in Brixton, Toxteth and elsewhere would lead to a new era in black British history and identity.

Although the fire, the subsequent protests and the founding of the Black People's Day of Action were documented by poets Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah among others, Bernard's work uniquely addresses a new generation encountering this past almost

afresh, as it is echoed painfully in the present. A key element of the project is Bernard's exploration of black radical British history in the George Padmore Institute's archives, against the backdrop of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the xenophobia of the Windrush scandal and Brexit. This interrogation of the tensions between "public narration and private truths" is found throughout *Surge*. Bernard, who uses the gender-neutral pronoun "they", reminds us that the self is an overlaying of multiple identities, comprised not just of what is remembered and forgotten, but of how one is located in the wider questions of belonging, memory and solidarity. (*The Guardian*)

It is noteworthy that the first word of the opening poem in *Surge* (Chatto & Windus), Jay Bernard's searing debut, is *remember*. Here is a collection against forgetfulness; a refutation of any presumption that the past is the past at all. Set between the pillars of two disasters, the New Cross Fire of 1981, which claimed the lives of fourteen young black Londoners, and the Grenfell fire of 2017, *Surge* is a ledger of injustice and resistance, a book of haunting and disquiet. (The Poetry School)

'Proof'

I came here when I was six –

I was dark-skinned in a thin dress and I loved my grandmother –
she was my mother – and she raised me with my three sisters who
still stand waving me goodbye –

I was the first to come to England, and when I arrived, I knew –
I knew – something had happened to me – I knew that what I saw
in the mirror had been darkened, differently arranged –
when I looked at myself in my new coat and boots I saw – I saw –
something like a net that catches death –

I was the child of two strangers with my last name – who bathed me –
scrubbed me with the seawater at the bottom of their lives –
two ghosts rubbing soap on my shoulders –
two dead people in their house clothes telling me to wash my neck –

I feel – I feel like I have to hold on – and say – and say –
I don't want to die in this country – let me die with my grandmother –
I want to be rotted by the sun –
and I want her shadow to fall along my body –
and I want to be shaded by her grief –
and I want the dogs to hanker for my bones –
I want to be eaten by worms and become an ackee tree –
lord, I said – I said it in such a whisper
I could have put the ground to sleep –

don't let me die in England I said to the pavement –

to the sea-black rain –
and never tell my grandmother why I never called –
never called to say that I thought of her daily –
that I suffered with the weight of what she had freely given –

many nights before this one I wondered what she thought of that –
what she thought of her youngest grandchild who couldn't say that
many nights before this one I tried to forget that I loved her –
turned the pain of her remembrance to the bitter lie that she could not
have loved one such as me and the proof was in the distance –

'Hiss'

Going in when the firefighters left
was like standing on a black beach
with the sea suspended in the walls,
soot suds like a *conglomerate of flies*.

You kick the weeds and try to piece it back.
Fractured shell? A bone? Bloated antennae?
Flesh thigh spindle, gangrenous pet fish?
An eye or a tiny glaring stone? A seal's tongue?
Or the sour sinew yoking front and hind fin?
Vertebrae or fetters? Bedsheet or slave skin?

The black is coming in from the cold,
rolling up the beach walls, looking for light.

It will enter you if you stand there,
and spend the rest of its time inside you
asking whatitwas whatitwas whatitwas
in a vivid hiss heard only by your bones.

'Chemical'

And all of their ghosts are burning
above the house. Some fires burn green
or blue or pink as damaged blossom.
Your broken vessels, bruised, lit up
and upward streaking, rose-hot capillaries
ignite the deads' ragged cloth and unshrooms
them to gas. Screaming crackle. Frayed spirit,
unbecoming black we think makes up the unseen,
but that black is the last twisted shape
their bodies will take. The floor, the rooms,

liquid windows part absence, part gas.
And then the wind breathes sideways:
their soot is scattered, ghosts of the now-gone
dragged out of hereafter back to tonight,
back to the cold air making its way towards
a darker past, the true past, there at spirit level

Discussion Ideas

- What do you know or remember or have learned about the New Cross Fire? Some perspectives here https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Cross_house_fire and here <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/may/15/race.london> and <https://www.thealbany.org.uk/shows/surge/>
- *Surge* began from the poet's research into the archives of the New Cross Fire. What does a poet tell us that a historian doesn't – and vice versa?
- Are these poems which can be read separately, or does their power come from their contribution to a larger complete work?
- What does the phrase 'spirit level' suggest to you – in 'Chemical' and across the other two selected poems here?
- *Surge* 'traces a line' from the New Cross fire to the Grenfell fire. Are these two fires the same fire?

Other books by Jay Bernard

The Red and Yellow Nothing (Ink, Sweat & Tears Press, 2016)

If you liked Jay Bernard, try ...

- Keith Jarrett
- Benjamin Zephaniah
- Ian Duhig

Jay Bernard online

www.jaybernard.co.uk