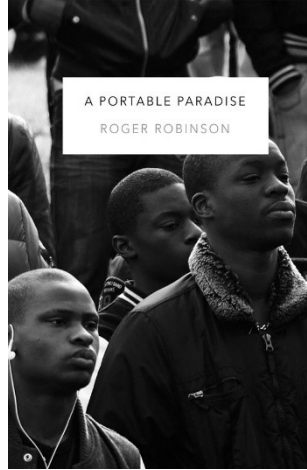


A Portable Paradise by Roger Robinson



Roger Robinson is a writer and performer who lives between London and Trinidad. He has published two poetry pamphlets with flipped eye, *Suitcase* (2004) and *Suckle* (2009), which won the People’s Book Prize and the Oxford Brookes Poetry Prize. His first full poetry collection, *The Butterfly Hotel* (2013), was shortlisted for The OCM Bocas Poetry Prize and his second is *A Portable Paradise* (2019), both Peepal Tree Press. He is an alumnus of The Complete Works and was a co-founder of both Spoke Lab and the international writing collective Malika’s Kitchen. He is the lead vocalist and lyricist for King Midas Sound.

rogerrobinsononline.com

Reviews

“Roger Robinson’s work is shrouded in darkness, a tenebrous blanket that provokes our every sense. Still, its aesthetic appeal is undeniable. With masterful timing and tone, *Portable Paradise* delivers a definitive statement on the wretchedness of the human experience. His offerings are provocative and decisively artful. His abundance impresses. From quotidian calamities and injustice, to the recount of history’s darkest hours, Robinson relentlessly reminds us of the evil that stalks the land. Suffering is ubiquitous, shadowing our every move.” (*Kaieteur News*)

“Robinson was new to me before reading this collection. But from the first poem, ‘The Missing’, written for those lost in the Grenfell fire, I was smitten by his enormous and generous talent. Drawn in gently, I am reminded of the shock and sadness of what happened in 2017, and how two years later, little has changed. In a few beautiful phrases the anger at this horror flooded back to me. The moment that resonates centres on how Robinson conjures up the vision and spirit of the visual artist Khadijia Saye who died, in so few words: “An artist in a wax-cloth headwrap: all airborne pageantry of faith, the flock of the believers.” *A Portable Paradise*, Robinson’s fourth poetry collection, mixes pop culture, history, nature, mythology, art and socio-political commentary to illustrate the suffering of contemporary living. A co-founder of both the Spike Lab and the international writing collective Malika’s Kitchen, he is one of the key mentors and influencer of many of the most

productive and admired poets and writers working in the UK today, such as Inua Ellams and Johny Pitts. Many of the poems are hugely affecting, whether evoked in a traditional format, short paragraphs of prose or a few lines. Some would imagine that such poems are easy to do, but the skill and graft shine through Robinson's words." (*Words of Colour*)

'Dolls'

If I could, like the gods of fate, somehow rearrange the events, I would start with Muhammed's fridge that exploded and started the fire. I would give Muhammed some clue that all was not right with it – perhaps his hummus goes off prematurely or the water collects under the vegetable crisper. Something to make Muhammed replace the fridge. Then I would give those who died on the top floors a reason not to be home. I would have had the fire on the day of Carnival and encouraged those on the top floors be a part of the festivities. I'd let the husbands who left their wives and families home to earn some money on night shifts or driving cabs find a little extra money in their accounts, so that night they'd have taken their children out for shawarma and orange juice down Marble Arch, while they smoked shisha and talked about how good their lives felt. All the children who died would have visited their grandparents that day, here or abroad. I'd make the cladding that burned like dry straw be fireproofed to international standards; let life and love continue in Grenfell.

'Stubb's Whistlejacket'

Looking at Stubb's horse in the dark
it becomes clear he was no glamoriser of muscle,
no fetishist of fur and skin.
Convinced that the body was host
to the horse's spirit, he began making martyrs
of horses, subjecting them to jugular death,
beads of sweat rolling down
their barrelled torsos,
their eyelashes fluttering with a flourish,
as he pumped them with warm tallow
till their pulsing veins and arteries
slowly came to a halt.
Suspending them in a standing or trotting pose
by a series of hooks and tackles,
amid buckets of clotting blood,
first stripping off the skin,
he worked his way through, muscle
by muscle, bone by bone, dissecting
and defining limbs.
Turning the pages in this book of horse,

even in the dark of the museum
I can feel this horse breathing.

'A Portable Paradise'

And if I speak of Paradise,
then I'm speaking of my grandmother
who told me to carry it always
on my person, concealed, so
no one else would know but me.
That way they can't steal it, she'd say.
And if life puts you under pressure,
trace its ridges in your pocket,
smell its piney scent on your handkerchief,
hum its anthem under your breath.
And if your stresses are sustained and daily,
get yourself to an empty room – be it hotel,
hostel or hovel – find a lamp
and empty your paradise onto a desk:
your white sands, green hills and fresh fish.
Shine the lamp on it like the fresh hope
of morning, and keep staring at it till you sleep.

Discussion Ideas

- What do you think about the title of 'Dolls'? How does it relate to the poem?
- Here's Stubbs' 'Whistlejacket' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whistlejacket>. Who is the subject of the poem – the painter or the horse?
- How much would it cost to buy the painting, Stubbs' 'Whistlejacket'? How much to buy the poem 'Stubbs Whistlejacket'? Why the difference? How does one possess a poem or a work of art – do they involve different sorts of ownership?
- What three items are in your own portable paradise?
- What might be the stresses that the items in the poem are protecting the speaker against?

Other books by Roger Robinson

The Butterfly Hotel (Peepal Tree, 2014)

If you liked Roger Robinson, try ...

- Anthony Joseph
- Malika Booker
- Kwame Dawes

Roger Robinson online

<https://rogerrobinsononline.com/>