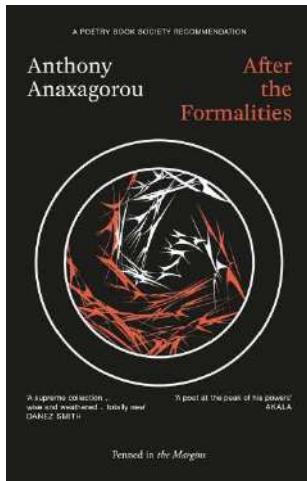
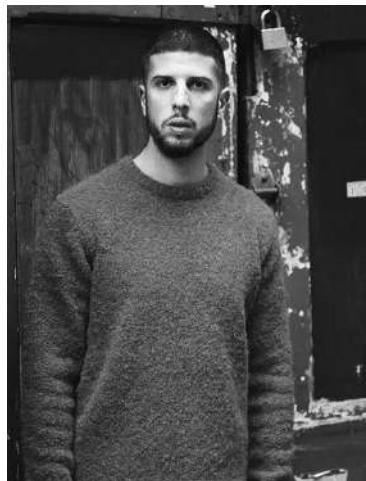


After the Formalities

by Anthony Anaxagorou



Anthony Anaxagorou is a British-born Cypriot poet, fiction writer, essayist, publisher and poetry educator. His poetry and fiction have appeared on BBC Newsnight, BBC Radio 4, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky Arts, and have been published in POETRY, The Poetry Review, Poetry London, Granta, The Rialto, Oxford Poetry and The Feminist Review. In 2019 he was made an honorary fellow of the University of Roehampton. He has toured extensively in Europe and Australia. Anthony is artistic director of Out-Spoken, a poetry and live music night in London, and publisher of Out-Spoken Press. *After the Formalities* is his breakthrough poetry collection.

anthonyanaxagorou.com

Reviews

“*After the Formalities* is a supreme collection. Anaxagorou’s lyrics, mapped over expansive interior and historical landscapes, feels to me as wise and weathered, and it feels to be bringing something totally new to my ear. Solid. The Self and The West catch the hardest blows, but Anaxagorou throws hands critical, bloodied, and tender all so skilfully you can’t help but come out feeling rocked too. The ghosts that haunt this collection have blessed it and we are blessed for it.” (Danez Smith)

“Formal, experimental, dextrous, aural, democratic, radical; what Anaxagorou does in this collection breaches paraphrase. These poems work as poems should: enacting deep thought towards philosophies, and they make me hopeful.” (Rachael Allen)

A Line of Simple Enquiry

follows in the traditional vein of questioning when one encounters a person or persons they perceive to be other. The famous public autopsy, at a dinner party, art gallery, gymnasium

or local bakery. Five words light as a baby's finger. But where really? The taxonomy of difference, along with the need or entitlement to ask so politely, with one hand resting on the elbow, displaying caution, not wanting to infer, with emphasis on assume, as in to avoid causing offence, becoming more scrutinized, every feature up against the light, your body under their knife, the question again, so as to deduce, so as to allow the remarkable recalling of definitive histories, Ibn Khaldun, Mansa Musa, Phillis Wheatley & Al Afghani, your people, as in extraordinary, as in don't take this the wrong way, as in don't take this to heart, but it's all so fascinating, an appreciation if you will, to announce so subtly, without hubris, the panoply of books read, on the way we eat & live & love & bury our dead, & really it's all just so interesting, as if interest were a desperate thing scurrying across a mass grave, an artefact snatched from an old warrior's hand, neat wall text in a city museum, to cast iron eyes over, incredulity, you don't look like, the aquiline nose was the giveaway, skin thicker than animal sex that never cracks under god. All those nuances bloating the unfinished ghosts of the sea, & all that hair, is that natural? Is that yours? Is it real? To touch what I own. Take what I see. There's a reason why my daddy told me to keep a stone between my fists when I fight, & really it's all too complicated, & everything's already been said much better, by people who have it much worse, but look, is this your attempt to bid me farewell in my tongue? Are you here to help carry the burden of my name? Are your hands strong enough to lug it? We all know the stuck fishbone never meant any harm. Is that your hand still on my elbow?

How Men Will Remember Their Fathers

As protagonists encumbered by their role,
chain smoking the innards of a living room parish,
decades spent with arms crossed, rejecting fragility,
lifting pints up to their confessional box.

Before we were men we would study the slopes
of shattered furniture, heed how the commands
of our fathers would curdle with a cruel logic.
We were boys then, standing beneath them as detritus,

picking from their petulance ways to parrot their alpha,
vituperative chessmen with only grey slippers on,
dreading another staircase war drum; the generals
we were unable to tell because of their shell-shocked

Jesus. Father, I can fit my childhood into a fist,
I can name the times I stayed silent when you
thundered there were only two types of people,
winners and losers, forgetting the belt, the shoe,

the eyewitness.

Sympathy for Rain

Only a flood will be keen to want more
cities run you into their concrete cage
umbrellas fatten to confirm your waste
roof tiles keep you only for your slickness
spectacles bury you in a tissue's
neat secret leather jokes at your attempt
little refugees of somewhere cloud camped
in stained-glass windows what thug-grey did this
even when you soak through cloth to beg skin
you're shaken off left to dry into loss
a slant of earth still motions your saving
a slug slow as a monk carries you up
asking red to soften around your name
until you are nowhere but there again.

Discussion Ideas

- Who are Ibn Khaldun, Mansa Musa, Phillis Wheatley and Al Afghani in 'A Line of Simple Enquiry'? Did you need to look them up? If so, what will you do with the knowledge now?
- Who is this poem for? People with their hands on other people's elbows, or people with other people's hands on their elbows? Which sort do you consider yourself to be?
- Why isn't 'How Men Will Remember Their Fathers' called 'How I Will Remember My Father'?
- Does 'How Men Will Remember Their Fathers' include God in the group of fathers?
- Insomniacs who listen to a rain app to get to sleep – would memoirsing 'Sympathy for Rain' and repeating it to yourself also do the trick? What are its lullaby qualities?

Other books by Anthony Anaxagorou

Heterogenous (Out-Spoken Press, 2016)

The Blink That Killed The Eye (Jacaranda Books, 2014)

If you liked Anthony Anaxagorou, try ...

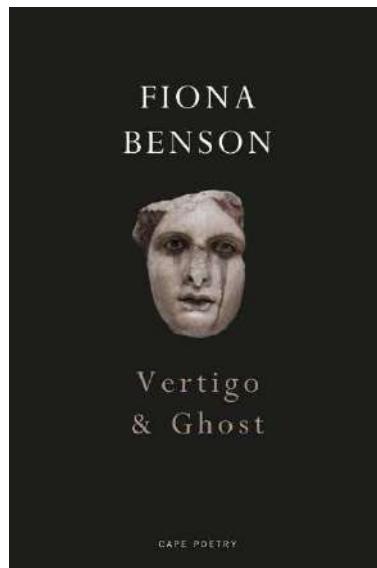
- Joelle Taylor
- Raymond Antrobus
- Tony Harrison

Anthony Anaxagorou online

<https://anthonyanaxagorou.com/>

Vertigo & Ghost

by Fiona Benson



Fiona Benson received her PhD from St Andrews' University. She won an Eric Gregory Award in 2006 and a Faber New Poets Award in 2009. Her first collection, *Bright Travellers* (Cape 2015), was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. It won the 2015 Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the 2015 Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry Prize for First Full Collection. Fiona lives in Mid Devon with her husband and their two daughters. *Vertigo & Ghost* (Cape) is her second collection.

Photo © Gareth Franklin

Reviews

It is the Zeus poems that will get *Vertigo & Ghost* talked about, but the second part of the book is much more than a coda. It starts off traditionally, with poems on a naturalist theme ("Spring broke out but my soul did not. / It kept to sleet and inwards fog") but soon a smart sequencing becomes clear. We move from nature to humanity via the animalistic act of childbirth with "its kingdom / of excrement / and offal", and then to parenthood. This may be well-covered terrain but Benson finds new approaches: "In the Milk Days of Your Youth" is about the mystery for an only child of the arrival of a new sibling, "your parents somehow gone". The reader is always being subtly moved on, and the book ends where the personal meets the political, in a series of poems that are looser and more flowing in their language. (*The Guardian*)

This desire for breaking through to some version of heaven, the ‘heart’s own kingdom’ as per ‘Two Sparrows’ is forlorn. In part that’s thanks to the speaker’s being ‘wheeled and governed’, to her locus of feeling and control always being external, and to poems which are as good a portrait of depression as any in recent years (‘like a bound and stifled fly, half paralysed,/drugged dumb, its soft and intermittent buzz,/its torpid struggle in the spider’s sick cocoon’ – ‘Fly’). It’s also partly to do with the atmosphere of danger, or permanent threat, in which these speakers operate. ‘[A]lways some woman is running to catch up her children’, games of hide and seek are training for concealment, and the certain fear voiced in ‘Wood Song’ takes a few readings to announce itself, but is there in its lack of question, the feeling this isn’t conjecture or parable: ‘Daughters, when they come/we will hide...’. There is no ‘if’, here, and one feels the redundancy of explaining the ‘they’, because there is always a ‘they’. The best that can be hoped for, among all the controlling, external forces and mental unease pressing in is that there might be moments, as in ‘Beatitude (Ah Bright Wings)’, where one is ‘a compass to the currents, briefly healed’. Benson here shows us the real, terrifying world in musical, natural scenes which are immediately memorable, whose dark fruit is brewed from sorrow and the condensing pressures of inescapable love. To quote the final line of the book, ‘Mary Mother of God have mercy, mercy on us all’. (*The White Review*).

‘Ace of Bass’

That was the summer
hormones poured into me
like an incredible chemical cocktail
into a tall iced glass, my teenage heart
a glossy, maraschino cherry
bobbing on top as that rainbow
shimmered through me, lighting me up
like a fish, and I was drunk,
obsessed, desperate to be touched,
colour streaming from my iridescent body

as the wide summer night threw open its doors
and called us into the evening to sit in its loveseat
and gossip about boys, though we’d have fucked
anyone back then – each other, had we dared,
right there on the tennis courts – all us unparented girls
released from the boarding house to *practise our backhand*,
desire between us like a shared addiction
in its crooked spoon, desire and the holding back,
the terrible restraint

as we listened to the top 40, or our three CDs
till the batteries ran down, till the asphalt’s grit

had pressed its intricate red pattern on our thighs,
and we talked about who's done what with whom
and how it felt, all of us quickening,
and sex wasn't here yet, but it was coming,
and we were running towards it,
its gorgeous euphoric mist;
pushing into our own starved bodies at night
for relief, like the after-calm might last,
like there was a deep well of love on the other side.

'(Zeus)'

days I talked with Zeus
I ate only ice
felt the blood trouble and burn
under my skin

found blisters
on the soft parts
of my body

bullet-proof glass
and a speaker-phone between us
and still I wasn't safe

thunder moved in my brain
tissue-crease
haemorrhage

I kept the dictaphone running
it recorded nothing
but my own voice
vulcanised and screaming
you won't get away with this

'Eurofighter Typhoon'

My daughters are playing outside with plastic hoops;
the elder is trying to hula, over and over -
it falls off her hips, but she keeps trying,
and the younger is watching and giggling,
and they're happy in the bright afternoon.
I'm indoors at the hob with the door open
so I can see them, because the elder might trip,
and the younger is still a baby and liable to eat dirt,

when out of clear skies a jet comes in low
over the village. At the first muted roar
the elder runs in squealing then stops in the kitchen,
her eyes adjusting to the dimness, looking foolish
and unsure. I drop the spoon and bag of peas
and leave her frightened and tittering, wiping my hands
on my jeans, trying to walk and not run,
because I don't want to scare the baby
who's still sat on the patio alone, looking for her sister,
bewildered, trying to figure why she's gone –
all this in the odd, dead pause of the lag –
then sound catches up with the plane
and now its grey belly's right over our house
with a metallic, grinding scream
like the sky's being chainsawed open
and the baby's face drops to a square of pure fear,
she tips forward and flattens her body on the ground
and presses her face into the concrete slab.
I scoop her up and she presses in shuddering,
screaming her strange, *halt* pain cry
and it's all right now I tell her again and again,
but it's never all right now – Christ have mercy –
my daughter in my arms can't steady me –
always some woman is running to catch up her children,
we dig them out of the rubble in parts like plaster dolls –
Mary Mother of God have mercy, mercy on us all.

Discussion Ideas

- A soundtrack to begin with - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d73tiBBzvFM>. Is there a connection between the song and the poem 'Ace of Bass'? What do you think about their worlds of imagery – the cherries and rainbows of the poem, the pearls and lipstick of the song's video? Do they work for you as symbols for the tumultuous feelings invoked in the poem?
- Is 'Ace of Bass' a poem you'd give to your daughters? What about your friends' daughters, or your daughters' friends? What about sons?
- What does the word 'vulcanised' mean? Who is Vulcan? What does this word do in a poem about Zeus? How close to or far away from the concerns of the classical world is this poem?
- Read 'Eurofighter Typhoon' out loud to each other. What effect does the length of its sentences have on your reading or your understanding of the poem?
- 'Mary Mother of God have mercy, mercy on us all' – the last line of the poem, and the last line of the book. How does that conclusion have meaning or use to you at this point in history?

Other books by Fiona Benson

Bright Travellers (Jonathan Cape, 2014)

If you liked Fiona Benson, try ...

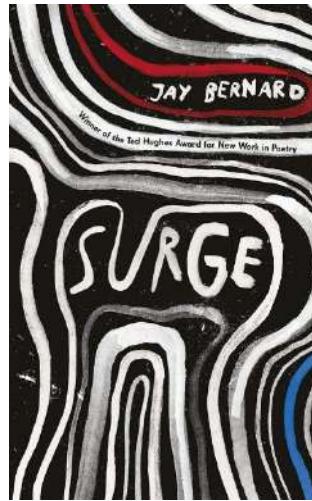
- Clare Pollard
- Karen McCarthy Woolf
- Michael Symmons Roberts

Fiona Benson online

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/1073946/fiona-benson.html>

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

Photo © Joshua Virasami

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, gangrinous 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 ...

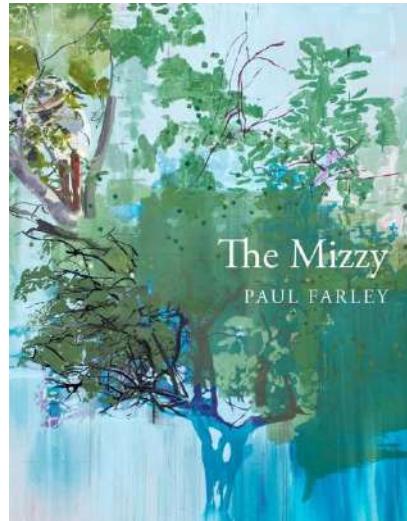
- Keith Jarrett
- Benjamin Zephaniah
- Ian Duhig

Jay Bernard online

www.jaybernard.co.uk

The Mizzy

by Paul Farley



Paul Farley was born in Liverpool in 1965 and studied at the Chelsea School of Art. He has published five collections of poetry with Picador, *The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You* (1998), which won the Forward Poetry Prize for Best First Collection, *The Ice Age* (2002), which was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize, and won the Whitbread Poetry Award, *Tramp in Flames* (2006), *The Atlantic Tunnel: Selected Poems* (2010) and *The Dark Film* (2012). He was named as a Next Generation Poet in 2004. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Lancaster University.

Photo © Jennifer Kuhfeld

Reviews

Paul Farley is now widely recognized as one of the leading English poets writing today. As usual it is impossible to summarise the book in terms of theme, as his interests are too various: there's an air of 'the innocence of childhood' being viewed through the corrective lens of worldly middle age, though, and also of mid-life, its creeping self-consciousness and decrepitude, and the distortions of perception that attend it; confusing encounters with tech, modernity and its accelerated rate of change; satirical excursions critiquing the way business and digital communications have debased language. Farley is also interested as ever in the peripheral and marginal and no-man's lands – the lives of others, and their strange occupations; the birds and unsung-by-the-pocket-guides fauna and flora you miss. 'Selfie with Sea Monsters' encapsulate one of poetry's most capacious and eclectic imaginations. (Pan Macmillan)

'The Mystery'

There's a funfair in the small bones of my ears.

It's pitched up in the deep olfactory bulb,
in the crosshairs of my eyes. It lights the marrow
of my long bones, with a hoop for every year
it turned this park into a diamond district,
each slow excited stride from ride to shy
beyond the goldfish that would grow a bib
of mould in time, beyond the smell of straw
and caramel and two-stroke generators.
Even the big wheel still turns inside me,
though the thing itself has long since gone for scrap,
and every bulb's blown to an iron-grey dust.

You must still hang there in the moving night,
unaware this blank machinery
is doing such dark work, until a slight
catch in the throat and shiver passing through
which we call *déjà vu*. A thought like that
can swing one of two ways: either you feel
yourself the very centre of all things—
the girls laughing, the cinder toffee, the bulbs
like hot rivets holding the dusk around you—
or you can feel the cold all of a sudden,
a mouse inside a town hall clock's movement
frozen before the iron strike of the hour,

and all at once the fluke, the joke, of being alive
lies open and exposed, a sheet-steel sky
shutting the furnace door on Wavertree,
the spoke that holds him pointing towards nothing,
an axle groan rising about the music.
And so he hangs there in the moving night,
knowing the big wheel has to set him down,
a stop/start through fifteen degrees of arc;
that the man who took his money will take his hand
like any boatman would; but he stays aboard
a while longer, for one more go around,
and leaves me standing in an empty park.

'Moorhen'

Shy, maternal, unknowable
haunter of water edges, bearing a red
shield like a cross. There is no danger here.

Primitive three-pronged claw
designed for the packed mud and its sheen

of algae: a print from central casting.

Prey-bird in your forest of reeds,
a few scene-changes from being flightless,
you could walk back there again.

And why stop there?
Keep going, little moorhen.
You carry in your heart the code

to scale up, to sprout true teeth,
to rise with the ruby eyes of a dinosaur
from the lake where we hire boats by the hour.

'The Keeper of Red Carpets'

Come in. Please be careful. Mind your step.
He keeps them in the dark.
It stinks, I know. Like a stable or a paddock.
Perspective slackens like an ankle rope

in a gallery. Carpets sleep off the world,
digesting its flash and glamour,
its royal visits and movie premiers.
He's dragged last night's returns in, tired and soiled,

to see to their cigarette burns, studs of gum.
Always the indents of heels:
moneys bitemarks leave a trail.
A few lie about – unfiled – like ruin columns.

Armed with a dandy brush he settles them down
with a beating and a groom,
and talks to them when the stain removal fumes
fuddle him and make his eyes run.

Safe now from so much as a glance,
he sleeps among them in the racks.
The stockroom phone is ringing off the hook.
Somebody's always looking to make an entrance.

Discussion Ideas

- What's the optimum age to go to a funfair? Is 'The Mystery' a poem of youth or age?
When was the last time you went to a funfair? Did you have fun?

- What other funfairs do you know of in poems, novels, films, tv shows, other cultural creations? What happens there? Is there a difference between British funfairs and ones in other countries?
- <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/wildlife-guides/bird-a-z/moorhen/> - why does a scientist record the moorhen's details, why does a poet? Do they share the same impulse to record or not? Who are their records for?
- The people hiring boats by the hour in 'Moorhen' – do you think they enjoyed themselves that day?
- Is <https://www.standard.co.uk/topic/red-carpet> a site you'd ever visit? What are you looking for if so? What are you avoiding if not?

Other books by Paul Farley

The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You (Picador, 1997)
The Dark Film (Picador, 2012)

If you liked Paul Farley, try ...

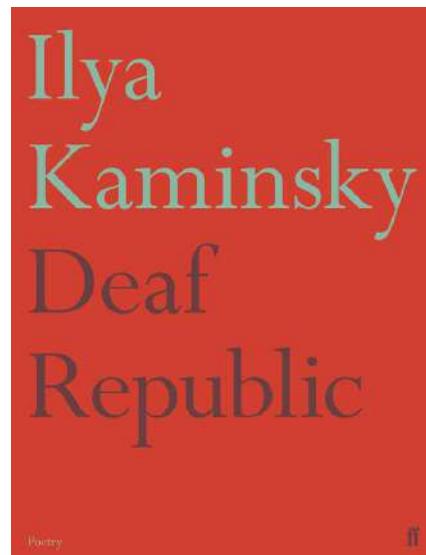
- Michael Donaghy
- Greta Stoddart
- Kayo Chingonyi

Paul Farley online

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Farley

Deaf Republic

by Ilya Kaminsky



Ilya Kaminsky was born in Odessa, in the former Soviet Union, and now lives in the US. [Deaf Republic](#) is his first poetry collection to be published in the UK. He is the author of two previous collections published in the US, *Musica Humana* (Chapiteau Press, 2002) and *Dancing in Odessa* (Tupelo Press, 2004). He is also co-editor of *The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry*. He has received a Whiting Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, and was named a finalist for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. His work has been translated into more than twenty languages.

ilyakaminsky.com

Photo © Cybele Knowles

Reviews

Kaminsky, who is hard of hearing himself, has the citizens of this republic speak with hand gestures and signs—some of which punctuate and animate the poems—as they resist a world of misunderstanding and military violence. “Our country woke up next morning and refused to hear soldiers,” he writes. Deafness, here, is an insurgency, a state of being, a rebellion against a world that sees deafness as “a contagious disease.” There is also humor, or at least a profound set of ironies: “each man is already / a finger flipped at the sky.”

Evident throughout is a profound imagination, matched only by the poet’s ability to create a republic of conscience that is ultimately ours, too, and utterly his own—a map of what it means to live “in a peaceful country.” (*The New Yorker*)

“The deaf don’t believe in silence,” proclaims a supplementary note in Ilya Kaminsky’s *Deaf Republic* (Faber), shortlisted for this year’s Forward prize for best collection. “Silence is the

invention of the hearing.” Falling somewhere between poetry collection and morality play, this unusual book’s episodic vignettes form a narrative that explores how we think about silence – as rebellion, but also as fearful failure to act: “We lived happily during the war / and when they bombed other people’s houses, we / protested / but not enough”. Kaminsky, who lost most of his hearing at the age of four, left the former Soviet Union as a teenager and was granted asylum in the US; his tale of upheaval in an occupied territory speaks to our current political anxieties. But *Deaf Republic* imaginatively succeeds through its use of deafness as extended metaphor, when voices clamour and truth becomes “fake news”. Like the townsfolk he writes about, who invent a sign language as a riposte to atrocity and unrest, Kaminsky’s fluid yet fragmented verse drama is a novel response to conflict and miscommunication, hoping for peace rather than “silence, like the bullet that’s missed us”. (The *Guardian*)

‘We Lived Happily during the War’

And when they bombed other people’s houses, we

protested
but not enough, we opposed them but not

enough. I was
in my bed, around my bed America

was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house –

I took a chair outside and watched the sun.

In the sixth month
of a disastrous reign in the house of money

in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,
our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war.

‘The Townspeople Circle the Boy’s Body’

The dead boy’s body lies still in the square.

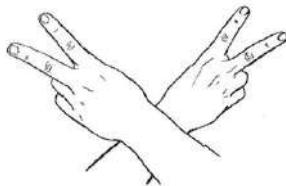
Sonya spoons him on the cement. Inside her – her child sleeps. Momma Galya brings Sonya a pillow. A man in a wheelchair brings a gallon of milk.

Alfonso lies next to them in the snow. Wraps one arm around her belly. He puts one hand to the ground. He hears the cars stop, doors slam, dogs bark. When he pulls his hand off the ground, he hears nothing.

Behind them, a puppet lies on cement, mouth filling with snow.

Forty minutes later, it is morning. Soldiers step back into the square.

The townspeople lock arms to form a circle and another circle around that circle and another circle to keep the soldiers from the boy's body.
We watch Sonya stand (the child inside her straightens its leg). Someone has given her a sign, which she holds high above her head: THE PEOPLE ARE DEAF.



The town watches

'In a Time of Peace'

Inhabitant of earth for fortysomething years
I once found myself in a peaceful country. I watch neighbours open
their phones to watch
a cop demanding a man's driver's license. When the man reaches for his wallet, the cop
shoots. Into the car window. Shoots.

It is a peaceful country.

We pocket our phones and go.
To the dentist,
to pick up the kids from school,
to buy shampoo
and basil.

Ours is a country in which a boy shot by police lies on the pavement
for hours.

We see in his open mouth
the nakedness
of the whole nation.

We watch. Watch
others watch.

The body of a boy lies on the pavement exactly like the body of a boy –

It is a peaceful country.

And it clips our citizens' bodies
effortlessly, the way the President's wife trims her toenails.

All of us
still have to do the hard work of dentist appointments,
of remembering to make
a summer salad: basil, tomatoes, it is a joy, tomatoes, add a little salt.

This is a time of peace.

I do not hear gunshots,
but watch birds splash over the backyards of the suburbs. How bright is the sky
as the avenue spins on its axis.
How bright is the sky (forgive me) how bright.

Discussion Ideas

- To what extent do you 'live happily during [a] war'? Is this a poem about guilt or acceptance or complicity ... or something else altogether? Does it accuse you or reassure you?
- What mood are you left in after the end of 'The Townspeople Circle the Boy's Body'? Are you surprised by your reaction?
- If you've not read the whole book, the publisher's blurb explains its story thus '*Deaf Republic* opens in a time of political unrest in an occupied territory. It is uncertain where we are or when, in what country or during what conflict, but we come to recognise that these events are also happening here, right now. This astonishing parable in poems unfolds episodically like a play, its powerful narrative provoked by a tragic opening scene: when soldiers breaking up a protest kill a deaf boy, the gunshot becomes the last thing the citizens hear – in that moment, all have gone deaf. Inside this silence, their dissent becomes coordinated by sign language. The story then follows the private lives of townspeople encircled by public violence: a newly married couple, Alfonso and Sonya, expecting their child; the daring Momma Galya, instigating the insurgency from her puppet theatre; and Galya's puppeteers, covertly teaching signs by day and by night heroically luring soldiers one by one to their deaths behind the curtain.' 'The Townspeople Circle the Boy's Body' is a central episode in that story. If you were making *Deaf Republic*, the feature film, how would you want this scene to appear? How would you incorporate the sign at the end of the poem?
- What is the key ingredient in the tomato salad in 'In a Time of Peace'? How would the salad be without 'joy'? How would the poem be without the salad?
- 'How bright is the sky (forgive me) how bright' – this is the last line of the poem and the last line of the book. How does this line compare with the last line of Fiona Benson's book? Which line stays with you the longest?

Other books by Ilya Kaminsky

Musica Humana (Chapiteau Press, 2002)

Dancing in Odessa (Tupelo Press, 2004)

If you liked Ilya Kaminsky, try ...

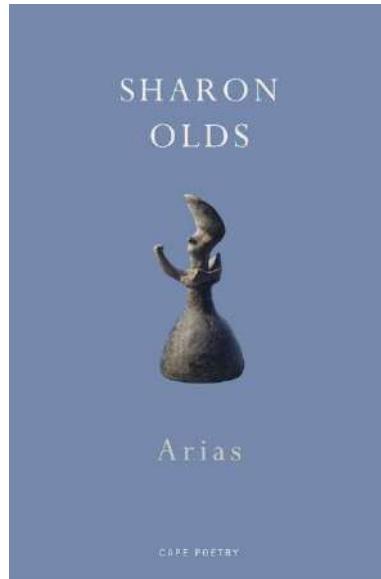
- Alice Oswald
- Christopher Logue
- Ocean Vuong

Ilya Kaminsky online

www.ilyakaminsky.com

Arias

by Sharon Olds



Sharon Olds was born in San Francisco, educated at Stanford and Columbia universities, and has lived for many years in New York City. Her thirteen poetry collections include *Satan Says* (1980), *The Dead & the Living* (1984), which received the [Lamont Poetry Selection](#) and the National Book Critics Circle Award and *One Secret Thing* (2008). Her books have won many awards over the years. Her collection *Stag's Leap* (Cape 2013) won the T. S. Eliot Prize and the 2013 Pulitzer Prize. In 2016 she won the Wallace Stevens award for her 'outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry'.

Photo © Brett Hall Jones

Reviews

... in her newest book, Olds puts her honest, clear verse to work mostly outside of the body, and looks instead at the body politic, at the social body we have created or destroyed together. Here, by looking at the miseries that sometimes threaten to overwhelm, Olds has turned confession into powerful denunciation ... she engages with more joy, more strength, more faith, perhaps, than in earlier collections. There is a sense of lightness here, of play, of being carefree in the world that is being declared, or rather shared ... Sure, Olds screams sometimes, but she does it without forgetting she's a poet and, in the end, won't we admit the things she has been screaming about feel more like truth every day? Her verse a Cassiopeia of early horoscopes and long sight, catching us, foreshadowing us (our mistakes, our dumb moves, she is looking at women, but in the context of their broader, changing, society) in, perhaps, the way that only the wisest among our literary mothers always have. (*New York Journal of Books*)

If a book of poetry can unsimplify—can add tangles, grit, and tangents to the way we think and feel—*Arias* is that book ... children, including Trayvon Martin, Etan Patz, Olds' own firstborn, are introduced in the book to bring the immensity of the world's hurt to an intimate human level, not only to personalize it but also to concentrate it and to find its odd joys. *Arias* offers hard-earned comfort well worth the effort. (*Booklist*)

'My Father's Whiteness'

It takes me a lifetime to see my father
as a white man – to see his whiteness
(named by white men after gleaming and brightness).
I saw the muck sweat of his pallor, he'd be
faceup on the couch like a mushroom in a mushroom-forcer,
and I didn't even wonder what it would feel like
for a person to be proud of their father.
I knew that at the interfraternity council
he'd been the handsome, wisecracking one, the
president, proud he could not read,
he could always get someone to do that for him –
he liked to say the two people allowed
to graduate from his college without knowing how to
read or write were him and Herbert Hoover.
Nor did any frat house there
house a brother.
Nor did I see my father – that in order to pass
out every night on the couch, snore
and snort and gargle-sing from his chintz
sty, he had to overcome
every privilege known to a man
tall, dark, handsome, white,
straight, middle class. He had to put his
every advantage down on the street and drive
over it with that thump a tire
and a body make. O say can you see him as I
see him now, as if he had no one
to answer to, so he prepared
to devour and excrete the hopes he'd been handed
on a platter, the spoon in his mouth, he could eat
what he had not earned, he could do it in his sleep.

'Nemo me impune lacessit'

When I learned of my mother's family's slogan,
I did not know that there were doctors who sat
on the floor, with a child, and a dollhouse, and played.

My outdoors dolls were a stick and a stone,
or a snapdragon and a dead bee –
one in each hand, they would shout at each other, in small
shouts deep in my throat. And sometimes
they shrieked, like the Medeas on the classical station.
There was nothing better, those hours with the under-my-
breath operas of anguish and death
and revenge, and the long solos when a piece of
dirt, or the corpse of a dragonfly
would pour out its story. And when I turned
to pencil and notebook, to lead and the pulp
of trees, I didn't yet know the motto – though she'd
had it punished into her, as she'd
punished it into me: *No one harms me*
with impunity.

'Aria conceived in Mexico'

Our first child was my first contact
with the other world – which had been, all along,
this world,
inside myself.
Our child used to not exist,
ever, and then, over sand, under coastal
trees, near breakers, she came into being, came
out of the world of nothing, the world
before time, before death,
into the world of time and death
and love, in a country of poetry
and courage, of guarded riches and unguarded
poverty, on a beach in the Republic
of Mexico, she entered this
dimension there. We did not know
who she was – but, slowly, I learned
motherhood – it was her life now,
not mine. I'd been an envelope,
and now was a living basket, for the civil
holy, the new life. And the milk
Arrived, hard, in what had been
my breasts, and now were for her, and the other
world sent out, through them, food
of this world for her. And she slept, and the smallest
motion of eyelash or hand was the meaning
of my life. I would kneel at the bars of the old
cradle and listen for spider sight
and warbler plant, and lobos moan.
And the other world had sent in, with her,

her means of continuance, the tiny
fresh eggs in her first-breath side.
Through her children, her life would continue,
and maybe, if we do not destroy
the earth, it too might continue, the whole
life of the human, in Bahia Sur,
and Mérida, and Islas del Mujeres.

Discussion Ideas

- At the time of writing (2019), Sharon Olds is 76. What do you understand by ‘lifetime’ in the context of ‘My Father’s Whiteness’? Why now does she see her father ‘as a white man’? What might she seen him as before?
- ‘O say can you see’ – are there any other fathers implicated in this poem, other than the poet’s?
- Who is Medea, what’s she doing in ‘Nemo me impune lacessit’? Is the poem itself an ‘under-my-breath opera of ... revenge’? Or maybe it’s one of forgiveness?
- What does ‘Ilas del Mujeres’ translate to? What do you make of the phrase ‘Through her children, her life would continue’?
- A father poem, a mother poem, a motherhood poem. Someone once said that the only subjects for poetry are sex, death and power. Would these three poems of Sharon Olds’ fit into that categorisation? Do you find the categorising interesting or reductive?

Other books by Sharon Olds

Stag’s Leap (Cape, 2012)

Odes (Cape, 2016)

If you liked Sharon Olds, try ...

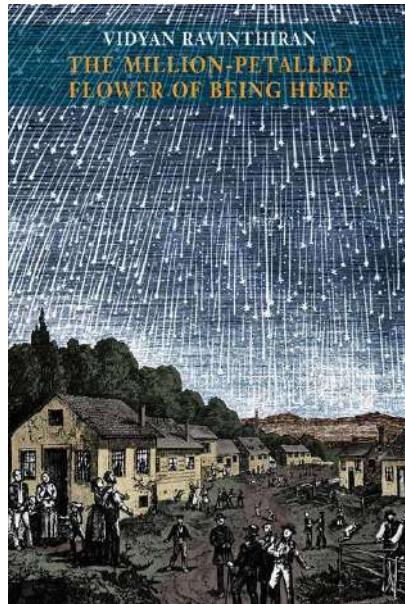
- Hannah Sullivan
- Jacqueline Saphra
- A K Blakemore

Sharon Olds online

www.sharonolds.net

The Million Petalled Flower of Being Here

by Vidyan Ravinthiran



Vidyan Ravinthiran was born in Leeds to Sri Lankan Tamils. He is the author of *Elizabeth Bishop's Prosaic* (Bucknell, 2015), His first book of poems, *Grun-tu-molani* (Bloodaxe, 2014), was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, the Seamus Heaney Centre Poetry Prize and the Michael Murphy Memorial Prize. His second, *The Million-petalled Flower of Being Here* (Bloodaxe, 2019) won a Northern Writers Award and a Poetry Book Society Recommendation, and is shortlisted for both the 2019 T. S. Eliot Prize and the Forward Prize for Best Collection. He is moving to the US in January 2020 to teach at Harvard.

Photo © Jenny Holden

Reviews

"Formally assured but far from formulaic, this book of sonnets for the poet's wife is testament, at its best, to the ways in which poetry can reach from the particular to the universal. Moving and inviting in their conversational ease, Ravinthiran's sonnets stretch from the grounding details of life for a mixed-race couple in England today – "over the years we'd find the money / but in that area no one smiled at us" – to thoughtfully touch on themes of identity, class, work and community. If references to the Tough Mudder endurance event, Super Mario and Brexit seem strenuously current, they also authenticate poems that manage to be both hard-thinking and sensitive, wondering at "the ways we love and hurt one another"." (*The Guardian*)

"Vidyan Ravinthiran's collection is both bracing and complex, and it is difficult to give a comprehensive review of such a diversionary, inclusive body of work without venturing into essay territory. But a sense of non-specific, mild anxiety, of the feeling of the ground moving

beneath his feet, pervades his poetics. And there can be no doubt that the current socio-political climate is feeding the narrative of family concerns, of cultural dislocation, of mixed-race marriage. Against a backdrop of mutable urban dereliction where a sense of stability is craved, the poem ‘Transition’ struggles to locate meaning when it is most necessary. Grappling with an ‘abstruse system’, as the filmic character of Daniel Blake does in the contrapuntal ‘Contrarieties’, the seeker of answers in ‘Transition’ is met with a wall of jargon whose obfuscatory mechanisms are both deliberate and frightening.”

(*The Yorkshire Times*)

‘Ceylon’

– the word’s on the tip of your tongue
(or, as you say it, tong), as we take tea.
Waiting for you to speak, I sip mine:
Tetley’s tastes of nothing, but I suppose
it’s good to know true flavourlessness,
the prose of life we sugar over with verse.
Ceylon you say – a trochee not an iamb –
referring to the drink I drink
with two spoonfuls at home and, here, none.
Though by ‘home’, I mean the house
my parents live in and where I grew up;
like, and unlike, them saying ‘back at home’
when they intend Sri Lanka, and not Leeds
where they live and I haven’t, not for years.

‘In My Father’s Room I Discover’

among the Wilbur Smiths and icons for pooja
W.C. Lefroy’s *The Ruined Abbeys of Yorkshire*.
Its blood-red leather’s like a sari;
only the spine is worn by the touch of the air
to the colour of your shoulder-blades when we
forget sun-cream abroad. ‘Like the sound of brave words
or fine music in dreary scenes and moments of depression
is the sight of Kirkstall Abbey’, writes the author,
‘in the purlieus of dim, laborious Leeds.’ We’ve been,
of course, but did you know my parents took me as a teen
to see *Hamlet* performed in the ruins?
We brought green bean and potato curry in buns,
a thermos of hot lemon; crisps as provoking of tuts
as my dad flipping through his York Notes.

‘Strictly’

– hard to live up to, on Saturday night. I mean
the frictionless assimilation

of sundry cultures – a sparkly cult
insisting on their joy and asking why
anyone must leave. Watching millionaires *on a journey*,
I sense my face when you glance over fail in its smile
for we've drunk too much, or not enough, and I'm too full
of the thought of the passing weekend and the time we while
away on the couch, both together and not. The time we kill
with irony and ritual. Sometimes we embrace
the spirit of the age – ordering, for instance, many takeaways.
Sometimes we're ashamed and to save face
try hard to like what we're given. As if it were us
grinning at the camera, not allowed to not be joyous.

Discussion Ideas

- What food, drink or taste reminds you of home in the same way tea does in 'Ceylon'? Is it a dish or drink you still make? If not, why not? What are its complications – are they the same as the ones which come with the tea in the poem?
- Do you think it was actually *Hamlet* they went to see (in 'In My Father's Room I Discover), or might this be poetic licence? What purpose is Hamlet serving in this poem? What do you notice about the rhyme scheme in the poem – what does the pattern draw your attention towards?
- Are you 'Strictly' fans? Who is the 'sparkly cult' in the poem – are you part of it or not? What might 'not allowed to be joyous' mean – to the contestants, to the poet and his wife, to the viewers of the show, to the readers of the poem?
- How will 'Strictly' be read in fifty years' time? Will it make sense? If not, does it matter?
- *The Million Petalled Flower of Being Here* is a book of sonnets to the poet's wife. Where does the book's general reader come in to that relationship? Who else reads your love notes?

Other books by Vidyan Ravinthiran

Grun-tu-Molani (Bloodaxe, 2014)

If you liked Vidyan Ravinthiran, try ...

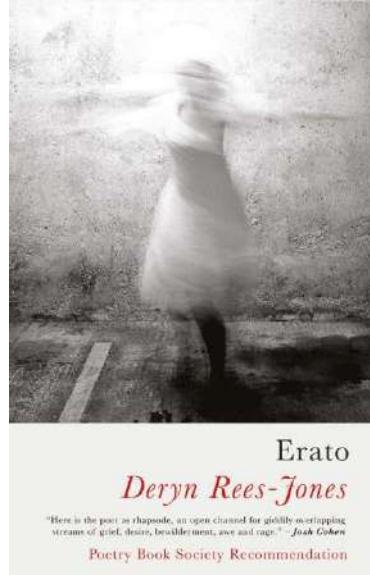
- Amali Rodrigo
- Sarah Howe
- Caleb Klaces

Vidyan Ravinthiran online

northernwritersawards.com/winners/profile/vidyan-ravinthiran

Erato

by Deryn Rees-Jones



Deryn Rees-Jones was born in Liverpool with family links to North Wales. Her poetry collections (all Seren) are *The Memory Tray* (1995), *Signs Round a Dead Body* (1998), *Quiver* (2004) and *Burying the Wren* (2012), which was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. *Consorting with Angels*, on 20th century women's poetry, was published alongside *Modern Women Poets* (both Bloodaxe, 2005). In 2004 Deryn was chosen as one of the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation poets. She is Professor of Poetry at the University of Liverpool, and is the editor of the new Pavilion Poetry series for Liverpool University Press.

derynrees-jones.co.uk

Reviews

Q: The poems often juxtapose beautiful images with sombre ones of loss. Can dark moments contain their own moments of inner beauty?

A: "How do we make the privacy of the lyric engage with, be ethical, and encompass the world? Terrible things are happening, and every day on the news or on my twitter feed, I, all of us, become sometimes, for a moment, aware of them. Uprootedness, war, climate emergency... There is always a chance for empathy, for action. But often, we do nothing. One small way I have attempted to deal with all this knowledge of pain and difficulty has been to experiment with the formal 'beauty' of poetic structures. So there are a lot of prose-like pieces which I have tried to structure like a sonnet. They carry something of the sonnet's 'little song' but also need to find a new way of carrying them. So form and 'beauty' become thrown into question as they are pulled to a point of impossibility and transform into something else."

(Interview with Deryn Rees Jones, Seren website)

"This fifth collection by Deryn Rees-Jones is an invocation to Erato, classical Muse of lyric poetry and songs, whose name means 'lovely' or 'beloved'. Yet in the poet's hands, Erato's lovely face is pixelated, blurred, transformed into her shadow guise: goddess of error, errancy and erasure. The collection's narrative arc explores how 'the scribble mess' of self is constituted 'by what we love' and thus, inevitably, through slippage, failure and loss. It also offers a precise, darkly funny exploration of 'middle age' with its divagations, its difficult movements: 'What stepping in / and back and on / is this, this middle age?', cries the voice of 'Firebird'.

"The theme of error is registered through traumatic repetition: the 'face blackened to a shroud of bees', the ghostly 'nucleus of / shadow' that the speaker seeks to 'run my hands / across' are images that recur in surreal, painterly fashion (Rees-Jones acknowledges her indebtedness to artist Paula Rego). But bereavement and 'heartbreak' are seen, not just as terrifyingly empty spaces, but as passionate states in their own right, electric in their disordering/reordering of time and self – and thus, potentially generative."

(Siriol McAvoy, www.gwales.com)

'Bowerbirds'

Start now with the smallest things,
a pile of blackened acorns, glinting beetle wings,

the green fruit and purple flowers of the potato bush.
He trails a path of halts and hesitations

like stations of the cross,
turns colour in his mind, perspective.

Snail shells or the blue of berries?
(is that a bud of jasmine in his beak?)

His bower, I see, is thatched with orchid stems,
moss laid like a lawn at the entrance to his bivouac,

orange leaves like a pool of restless koi.
This stuff he collects as a small boy might,

adrift on a prayer of football cards and dinosaurs.
All settles as he eyes her. And here now,

like a seal on his heart, a bed of blooms
pulled from a bush.

How carefully he's considered her.
This pink, he thinks, of roses.

'Collared Doves'

An afternoon that hints of rain, and in the branches
of the back-yard conifer, a pair
of collared doves perform their springtime ritual.
Wingflap, bow. He nudges her, she nods
to his pursuit, a freeze-frame foolishness, kabuki dance,

their black-ringed necks and movements mirroring:
a preening and a fluttering; a nibble of the bill.
And then she lets him come to her, the sudden rise to flight, a
blush of feathers as he rests his weight on hers.
It will always be this way, she knows. The soft cry
of that *coo-coo-coo* as shadow presses shadow.
And how could she not have known to love it.
She who learnt meanings of not not, no, never.
They who have come so late to each other.

'Drone'

I am listening to an interview with a man whose job it is to programme drones. The interviewer asks him, How do you know, when you are sending such a weapon to its target, that civilians won't be killed?

We are lying naked in a small, badly-lit room. I do not know it yet, but a drone hovers in the blacked-out crepey sky above us.

Intelligence can be sensory or human, says the man. Someone often has their ear to the ground.

I am moving a finger now down the line of hair which runs from your chest down to your groin. I put my head on your chest, aware of the weight of my thoughts. You are half-asleep and making small sounds that equate with pleasure and its anticipations. But I cannot let this go. I sit up and ask the man, on the radio, Do you ever think about the people you've killed?

No, he answers. The interviewer steps back in and repeats my question. As I listen, the glass in the window shatters. In slow-motion you are reversed back into the evening, shaking time off your heels.

In a matter of seconds you have disappeared. I think about nectar and pollen and honey and my whole face bursts into flames. But I can still hear him, the man, the voice, even as the radio begins to click and buzz and your low moans fill the otherwise empty room. I can feel the glass under my feet.

Never, he says, again and again. No, no, never.

Discussion Ideas

- The ‘stations of the cross’, the ‘prayer of football cards and dinosaurs’ – is ‘Bowerbirds’ a religious poem? What might be the focus of its religion, to whom might the prayer be offered?
- What might David Attenborough make of ‘Bowerbirds’? Is there a touch of his voice-over style in ‘And here now’?
- In what sense are the collared doves performing for the speaker of the poem? Do they know they are performing? What happens to the idea of performance in the second stanza? Why the change?
- Line 3 of the second stanza – what do you think of that ‘a’ at the end of the line? Might you usually expect it as the first word on the next line? What does it do to the pacing of the poem as you read it?
- Is ‘Drone’ a poem or a short story?

Other books by Deryn Rees-Jones

Signs Round a Dead Body (Seren, 1998)
Quiver (Seren, 2004)

If you liked Deryn Rees-Jones, try ...

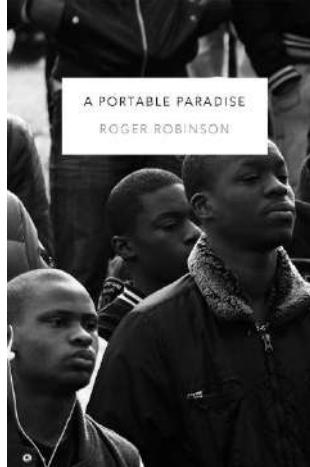
- Colette Bryce
- Elaine Feinstein
- Robin Robertson

Deryn Rees-Jones online

<http://derynrees-jones.co.uk/>

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 Khadija 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 influencers 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 ...

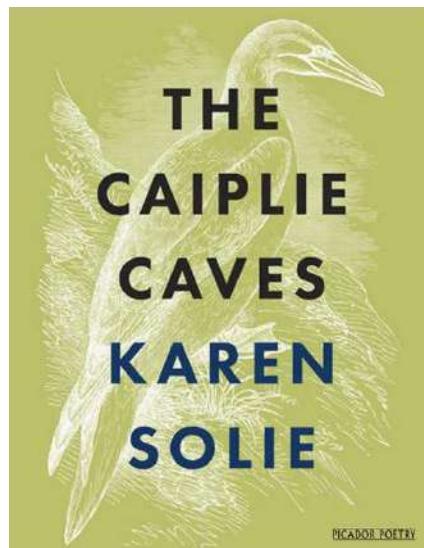
- Anthony Joseph
- Malika Booker
- Kwame Dawes

Roger Robinson online

<https://rogerrobinsononline.com/>

The Caiplie Caves

by Karen Solie



Karen Solie was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. She is the author of three collections of poems including *Short Haul Engine* (2001), *Pigeon* (2009), which won the Canadian Griffin Poetry Prize, and *The Living Option: Selected Poems* (2013). She was International Writer-in-Residence at the University of St Andrews in 2011 and is an Associate Director for the Banff Centre's Writing Studio program. Her first UK collection, *The Living Option: Selected Poems*, was published by Bloodaxe in 2013 and her second is *The Caiplie Caves* (Picador 2019). She lives in Toronto, but is currently teaching at the Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Reviews

"Toronto-based writer Karen Solie, described by Michael Hofmann as 'the one by whom the language lives', has done it again. *The Caiplie Caves* is both an extraordinary and an unsettling accomplishment. Solie begins by setting out a brief history of the caves and a description of the book's protagonist of indecision, St Ethernan. Whilst the caves are still visited today, she tells us, records of St Ethernan are 'often sketched only briefly, in passing' so that his story 'resists a final resting place in the ever-expanding facility of the past'. What we do know is that Ethernan was not endowed with special powers or a supernatural conjuring ability as was common to his cohort at this time. Ethernan, by all accounts, was an ordinary man, subsisting on bread and water, who travelled to these caves and stayed there, contemplating the 'heavily birded' May Island opposite where he might, or might not, build a priory. This decision, to either live in solitude as a caved hermit, or to be active and build a communal place of worship, is the cornerstone of this probing collection; how should we, the reader, reconcile the dissident draw of both estrangement and engagement? What is our responsibility both to the world and to ourselves, and what happens when they're at odds? Does merely noticing the world do living justice?" (Review 31)

"Although conflicted at times, oscillating between misanthropy and lonely wistfulness, *The Caipple Caves* makes a case for choosing solitude. It is a resigned choice, resentful at times, and sometimes simmering with bitterness and anger. But it is also underlaid with sadness, stemming not from the difficulty of northern isolation, but originating instead from a collective society in a state so dire that a person would feel compelled to choose a hermetic life. In this way, the modern and the medieval collide and transcend the temporal gaps between the two narrative strands. In spite of its harshness, the remote north becomes a refuge for the brooding introspection of one wearied by the world. In becoming a part of the land where they escape, each narrator finds a new self, removed from anthropocentric society in a fraught alliance with the natural world. With this retreat into the land and self, there is a wryly optimistic takeaway that might otherwise be overlooked—that somehow, the hardships of a faceless natural world are easier to endure than those imposed by other human beings." (The Poetry School)

'A Plenitude'

Appearing as though they originate in spiritual rather
than material seed, as proof

we don't know how to properly celebrate
or mourn – bindweed and ox-eye daisy, cranesbill, harebell,

hare's-foot clover, whose ideology is fragrant
and sticky, the underside of reflection blooming

across centuries. Arguments for and against belief
volunteering in equal profusion.

My many regrets have become the great passion of my life.
One may also grow fond of what there isn't

much of. Grass of Parnassus –
and when you finally find it, it's just okay.

But look for lies and you will see them everywhere
like the melancholy thistle, erect spineless herb

of the sunflower family. That the eradication of desire
promotes peace and lengthens life

is time-honoured counsel. Still, you can't simply wait until
you feel like it. The beauty of the campions,

bladder and sea, the tough little sea rocket,
is their effort in spite of, I want to say, everything

though they know nothing of what we mean
when we say *everything*; it is a sentiment referring only

to itself. Purple toadflax, common mouse ear,
orchids, trefoils, buttercup, self-heal,

the *Adoxa moschatellina* it's too late in the year for,
I can hardly stand to look at them.

And all identified after the fact
but for the banks of wild roses, the poppies you loved
parked like an ambulance by the barley field.

'The Meridian'

Fishers, who mapped Kilrenny steeple
as a marker to direct them at sea, call it St. Irnie
to this day. I can't bring you back.
My imagination's not enough. Or maybe

it was lost with you offshore between the rigs,
between domestic and foreign sectors, its beacon
unattended. A loved thing shared and doubled
is in solitude never whole again.

the harbour's full of sightsee daycruisers,
private recreational vessels, a few trawlers left
to cross swords for Talisman Energy's odd jobs
on their bellies in the mud. When the sea,

even knowing what it knows, dares flood back in here
with whom will I watch flat fish rummaging
in the sediment, the Canadian sport fisherman
in his new gear, baiting his hook with a fillet?

'A Lesson'

The tide rises, a crowd returning from a stadium,
abstract sound of innumerable specifics
reentering the shoreline's boroughs. Wheels clatter
on the rocks of your driveway, headlamps light the wall.
A door opens in the place in you joy leaps to.

There's puttering in the kitchen. Close your eyes.
What might happen this cycle has happened, and a promise kept –
the nightmare rocks and fingery weed-beds banished –

though something more important kicking off elsewhere
already has the water's attention. Yet again it prepares to withdraw
even its neglect. Tidal pools are exposed,
their smell of mortal exchanges.

Nothing exists in darkness that doesn't in the light.
Once, this comforted you.

Discussion Ideas

- The litany of flowers sent almost as spiritual messages in 'Plenitude' – if they're a form of prayer, what might they be a prayer for or to?
- Where is the only true simile in 'Plenitude'? What effect does its language and position have on you?
- How do fishers use a steeple as a marker doing their jobs? How does a poet use a steeple as a marker doing hers? What does this or any steeple symbolise? ('The Meridian')
- Who is teaching the lesson in 'A Lesson'? Who and what is being taught? Does it teach you too?
- Looking at these three of Karen's poems as examples, what do you think of her technique of ending poems?

Other books by Karen Solie

Short Haul Engine (Brick Books, 2001)

The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out (House of Anansi Press, 2015)

If you liked Karen Solie, try ...

- Michael Hofmann
- Kathleen Jamie
- Jean Sprackland

Karen Solie online

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Solie