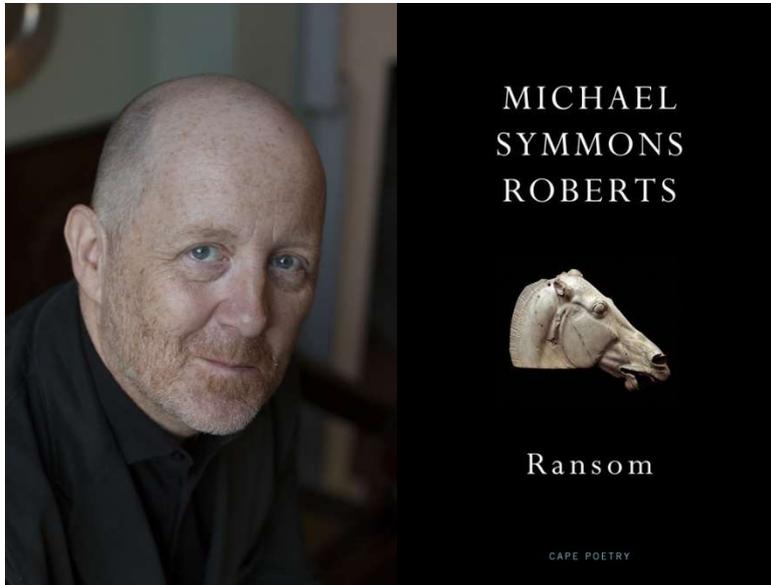


# ***Ransom***

**by Michael Symmons Roberts**



Michael Symmons Roberts was born in 1963 in Preston, Lancashire. His poetry has won the Forward Prize, the Whitbread Poetry Award, and been shortlisted for the Griffin International Poetry Prize and the T. S. Eliot Prize. He has received major awards from the Arts Council and the Society of Authors. His continuing collaboration with composer James MacMillan has led to two BBC Proms choral commissions, song cycles, music theatre works and operas for the Royal Opera House, Scottish Opera, Boston Lyric Opera and Welsh National Opera. Their WNO commission – ‘The Sacrifice’ – won the RPS Award for opera, and their Royal Opera House / Scottish Opera commission - 'Clemency' - was nominated for an Olivier Award. He has published two novels, and is Professor of Poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University.

## **Reviews**

*Ransom*, the new collection from Michael Symmons Roberts, is an intense and vivid exploration of liberty and limit, of what it means to be alive, and searches for the possibility of hope in a fallen, wounded world. The poems in *Ransom* display all the lyrical beauty and metaphysical ambition for which his work is acclaimed, but with a new urgency, a ragged edge to what the *Independent* described as his 'dazzling elegance'. At the heart of this new book are three powerful sequences - one set in occupied Paris, one an elegy for his father, and one a meditation on gratitude - that work at the edges of belief and doubt, both mystical and philosophical. The idea of 'ransom' is turned and turned again, poem by poem, seen through the lenses of personal grief and loss, cinematic scenes of kidnap and release, narratives of incarnation and atonement. This is a profound and timely book from one of our finest poets. (Cape)

'For me, the high spot of the Michael Symmons Roberts collection *Ransom* is the central sequence "Vingt Regards" which, the end notes explain, is based on a set of twenty piano pieces by Olivier Messiaen entitled *Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant-Jésus*. The idea of Jesus as Redeemer of the World clearly links with the book's title and overall theme of rescue and release from various kinds of bondage; but the sequence underlines this connection by drawing on the fact that Messiaen composed the music in Paris in 1944, both during the occupation and after the liberation. On top of this, the poems also make use of the knowledge that the classic film *Les Enfants du Paradis* was being made in Paris at the same time. This background gives the whole sequence a very satisfying coherence and texture — even if the reader is unfamiliar with the music which has inspired it.' - Thomas Ovens, *London Grip*

### SONG FOR A SIGN-WALKER

*Life and love are all about water*  
or so says the top line of a placard  
hand-painted by a rough sleeper whose path  
I cross twice in the same afternoon.  
There's a screed of text below,  
but no one reads beyond his opening salvo.

He's trying to catch my eye so I keep  
my head down, stare at my shoes,  
guided by flagstones, road markings, hunch.  
His line's not wrong, save by omission,  
I tell myself the last words of his sign  
will be *unconditional love not endless fire*.

When I look up, we're decades on  
– crazy fashions, car-less roads, skyscrapers  
slim as lift-shafts – but our faces are as was,  
mask and giveaway, same cares and passions.  
Rivers have risen to meet us.  
Forgive me if I have misunderstood.

### HELD TO

No matter how early I woke up  
there was a bowl of figs, dates, damsons  
from the lavish gardens, a bag  
of butcher's cuts alongside:  
a cherry of blood in its toe.  
All lawns cut, watered,  
roses dead-headed.

The three-legged mastiff, silent, ancient –  
*don't touch him, he is here for your protection* –  
sleeps long days in the shade-grid of his cage.

I don't know how the gates work.  
There's a buzz I mistake for a wasp  
whenever the cameras tilt  
their gargoyle-faces to follow a tic.  
Otherwise too quiet, just  
a lizard held by its own voltage  
halfway up a wall of flaking heaven-blue,  
kitchen with its slow tornado of houseflies.

The old set just plays DVDs,  
a trilogy, *Godfather 1, 2, 3*, is all.  
I know the scripts off-pat.  
One night, in storms,  
as the bodies were hanging  
out of shot-up cars,  
the picture scrambled into shash  
and a figure danced through it –  
a love song in a blizzard,  
fugitive signal briefly caught –  
then it cut back to the scene  
with a horse-head in the bed.

Doors, French windows, all unlocked.  
What is the transaction here?  
One evening I walked up to the master gate,  
pushed and it opened.  
So I pulled it shut again.  
Later that night I heard distant music,  
celebrations of a kind.  
I am trying to piece it all together  
from the decor, picture, books they keep.  
The flies are driving me insane.

### **SIDE OF THE ANGELS**

The weak ones have gone now, thank God.  
They crossed a line: too much time  
in pavement cafes sighing at the city,  
too much cognac on the job,  
too much concern to blend in,  
to get the fall of jacket right, a fedora's tilt.

Our new guardians, you dare not meet their eyes.  
Their gaze is way beyond compassion,  
beyond good and evil, raw instinct.  
No more urbanity. These are pure beast,  
down on all fours again, because to make like men  
was their undoing.

*At last*, says an old soldier, flicking ash  
into an empty purse, *we have the angels we need,*  
*not the ones we deserve.* He likens them to horses,  
never fully broken, so when a bullet  
kills the rider, who falls onto its neck,  
a horse will never stop, but rather run

through squares and palaces,  
oblivious until it folds, shattered, in a street  
on the opposite side of the city,  
and everyone can see its wild heart pounding,  
like a man trying to get out, a new rider.  
trying to beat his way into the world.

## Discussion Ideas

- Is the first poem 'Song for a Sign-Walker' or 'Song *about* a Sign-Walker'? What's the difference?
- Are 'life and love all about water'? What might the sign mean? Would the people and spirits which populate Kayo Chingonyi's Nyaminyami poem think the same?
- If 'Held To' appeared as a TripAdvisor review of an AirBnB property, would you make a booking? What sort of visit would you be expecting?
- 'Side of the Angels' is from the sequence 'Vingt Regards'. Michael Symmons Roberts writes that the sequence 'was written in response to Olivier Messiaen's set of twenty short piano pieces about the incarnation: *Vingt Regards sur L'enfant Jésus* (Twenty Contemplations of the Infant Jesus). Each piece has a subtitle, and each represents a particular *regard* upon the newborn Christ. For regard, read gaze or contemplation, but also a different angle on the scene. Some of the poems' titles nod to, or paraphrase, the music's subtitles. Messiaen began to write the piece in Paris under German occupation in 1944 and finished it in September after liberation. The fact that Marcel Carné was making possibly the greatest French film – *Les Enfants du Paradis* – in occupied Paris at the same time as Messiaen was writing *Vingt Regards* made the connection even more compelling.' Does the idea of having the angel you need – rather than the one you deserve – appeal? What do think the poem suggests about the type of angels we might need?
- A long-form discussion idea: listen to *Vingt Regards sur L'enfant Jésus* and watch *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Do your ideas about the poem change subsequently?

## **Other books by Michael Symmons Roberts**

*Drysalter* (Cape, 2013)

*Corpus* (Cape, 2004)

*Burning Babylon* (Cape, 2001)

## **If you liked Michael Symmons Roberts, try ...**

- Paul Farley
- Gillian Allnutt
- John Burnside

## **Michael Symmons Roberts online**

[www.symmonsroberts.com](http://www.symmonsroberts.com)