



Roger Robinson

## A PORTABLE PARADISE

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The final stanza of ‘The Missing’, which opens Roger Robinson’s T.S. Eliot Prize-winning collection *A Portable Paradise*, imagines the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire as the inhabitants of a spectral city. ‘They are the city of the missing,’ writes Robinson, ‘We, now, the city of the stayed.’ The poems in the collection remain preoccupied with questions of presence and absence, taking stock of the solid, material world while working through the daily griefs of loss and its reminders. Earlier in ‘The Missing’, ‘a husband tries to hold onto the feet / of his floating wife,’ ‘his grip slipping,’ leaving him ‘with just her high- / heeled shoe in his hand.’ In ‘Doppelganger’, another man—perhaps the same—encounters a woman who looks like his wife. ‘I wanted to hold her,’ he asserts with the same moving simplicity characteristic of the collection, ‘but what I really wanted was my wife, / who is dead.’ Ghosts dissolve throughout the poems, surfacing from time to time, both there and not: we feel the presence of the poet’s grandparents and the lives lost in the Grenfell fire; anonymous victims speaking through the long, ongoing history of racial injustice on both sides of the Atlantic—from slavery to Windrush via Trinidad and London; flickering visions of Mark Rothko, Bob Marley, and the late sociologist Stuart Hall; the ‘guttural’ echoes of a ‘five-year-old girl constantly screaming for help’; a ‘ghostly animalia’ of

spirits in the wake of Noah’s flood, appearing to him nightly in their ‘varying transparencies’. With prophetic gravity, George Floyd makes an appearance, too: ‘When police place knees / at your throat,’ reads ‘Beware’ in its entirety—written following the death of Rashan Charles in 2017—‘you may not live / to tell of choking.’ The poems in *A Portable Paradise* grieve the city of the missing twice, balancing the heaviness of individual loss against the weight of public outrage. At their best, they achieve the same fraught atmosphere of hope and longing found at the close of Sharon Olds’ poem ‘Her Birthday as Ashes in Seawater’. ‘[W]e are all / the dead,’ she writes, and ‘I am not apart from you, / for long, except for breath, except for everything.’

Hope in Robinson’s poems is located in a world of things. Above the ‘charred black tomb’ of Grenfell Tower, ‘the sky looks down on us saying what’s lost is lost, / gather what is left and build new lives.’ And Robinson does gather, threading his poems with graspable life: ‘fattet hummus and maktous’ with ‘cardamom-flavoured coffee’; ‘rocket salad with lemon dressing’ and ‘the smell of el ras hanout’; ‘the 1kg’ of his prematurely newborn son, ‘all big head, bulging eyes and blue veins.’ But the same delicacy with which the poet picks out these details soon belies their vulnerability. The collection is tense with the promise of violence, a violence of negligence and broken vows—‘How is it I’m begging you for housing, / when you burnt my building down?’ begins ‘Citizen II’, one of three dramatic monologues at the heart of the collection, spoken through the voices of the Windrush generation—but much more frequently we meet the blunt, straightforward violence of bodily abuse, the violence of the ‘noose’ and the ‘neck iron’, ‘police hoses’ and dogs, a violence of ‘looking out the window with a clear view of the land that does not belong to me’, to lift lines from the end of ‘Woke’. ‘It Soon Come’, a poem which reveals Robinson’s roots as a dub performer in the vein of Linton Kwesi Johnson, accumulates anxiety: ‘Nobody selling, nobody buying’, the streets running quiet, ‘everyone waiting on a signal’ as ‘the faint smell of smoke’ intrudes into the poem, followed by the distant whipping of a helicopter. ‘Beware of these not nights in Brixton’, warns one poem; ‘Keep alive, / young brothers, keep living’, pleads the next.

Towards the start of the collection, Robinson presents a scene of 'flimsy paper faces', the MISSING posters 'stuck on tree trunks, walls and fence boards' following the fire:

In a minute of pure clairvoyance we understand  
that many of these pictures are the faces of the dead,  
some looking like they were saying the word goodbye  
as the picture was shot at a family gathering.

Reading the poem, imagining its missing figures, I was reminded of several pieces by the German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann. Working largely from an extensive collection of found images and photographs, Feldmann distorts and manipulates his material, using it to emphasize and complicate the familiar aspects of our everyday experience. In one of his more recognizable moves, he cuts away the faces or figures of a given photograph, leaving an empty, silhouetted space, prompting us to think about each absence and its consequences. Like Robinson's poems, Feldmann's pieces invite us to recognize that loss, grief, and forgetfulness have an uncanny 'clairvoyance' of their own. More than this, they speak to the essential anonymity of death, however public or well-documented. 'These were the flimsy paper faces of hope for the living', writes Robinson in 'The Portrait Museum', though 'as days went on, the wind blew most of them away.'

As with the Feldmann, the recurring absences of *A Portable Paradise* remind me of José Manuel Ballester's *Concealed Spaces* (2007–12), a series of paintings that recreate the now-vacant backdrops of traditional art history: the high-walled city of Giotto's *Exorcism of the Demons at Arezzo* (1297–1300); the empty execution place of Goya's *Third of May 1808* (1814); Avercamp's *Winter Landscape with Skaters* (c. 1608) minus the skaters, etcetera. The images are quiet, as if recently deserted, as though something's immanent arrival had caused the figures all to flee. But the paintings also suggest moments of hushed and poignant aftermath—the calm *beyond* the storm—a time to take stock of the world, finding a way to process and reply to it.

Similarly, the question that Robinson's poems seem to circle most concerns the role—even the possibility—of poetry in responding to

private grief and public tragedy. The raw iconography of Grenfell Tower—'the glow of fire-ash floating gently down'—cannot help but evoke the memory of September 11, 2001, which also prompted questions of the place and work of poetry. 'There were, in the immediate aftermath, poems everywhere', write Dennis Loy Johnson and Valerie Merians in the Forward to *Poetry After 9/11*, an anthology of 2002:

Walking around the city you would see them – stuck on light posts and phone stalls, plastered on the shelters at bus stops and the walls of subway stations. [...] Eventually, a fire chief actually issued a statement: Thank you for the food and the blankets and the flowers but please – no more poetry.

At times, Robinson's collection seems to query its own poems. The second piece in the book is a haibun, a traditional genre of Japanese poetry attributed to Bashō, combining elements of autobiographical prose and haiku in a form that seems inherently uncertain about the ability of poetry to make an adequate record of meaningful events. Eleven more of Robinson's texts—one in five, if you include the haibun—are produced as prose (or prose poems), including some of the collection's most bluntly moving meditations on the Grenfell fire and its aftermath. And yet, I think these moments are in service to Robinson's ultimate belief in the power of poetry—in whatever form—to be both testament and testimony. 'Poets can touch hearts and minds', he suggested in an interview in 2020; 'they can translate trauma into something people can face [...] allowing others to bear the idea of trauma safely.'

Indeed, time and again, there is something plainly photographic about Robinson's writing—adoring and documentary, exposing and precisely critical. It is in dialogue with the stark, high-contrast imagery of his contemporary, Johny Pitts, whose work primes the collection's cover. As witness and observer, however, it's possible that poetry can only do so much: 'We need some black plaques / on these buildings, godammit', proclaims 'Citizen I'; 'I'd make the cladding that burned like dry straw be fireproofed to international standards', says the speaker of 'Dolls', staring directly down the camera lens. Nevertheless, poetry—like photography—might yet make up some useful ground. Though 'Such

images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention', writes Susan Sontag of the photography of trauma in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), that attention invites us 'to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers', and to ask—of ourselves and of each other—some belated, pressing questions:

Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?