

“At every turn, Antrobus pushes back against flattening, against the tidy narrative—an invidious Ted Hughes poem gets radically revised, an aunt’s misheard utterance becomes ‘a faint fog horn, a lost river.’ It’s magic, the way this poet is able to bring together so much—deafness, race, masculinity, a mother’s dementia, a father’s demise—with such dexterity.”

—KAVEH AKBAR, author of *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*

“In the work of Raymond Antrobus, grief and loss are traversed generously, and using many modes as a backdrop, illuminating their many nuances, and many corners. In *The Perseverance*, this happens through sound, through language, through sweeping and beautiful shifts of land and landscape. This book is a gift, for how it repurposes my understanding of treacherous feelings, and shapes them into something worth sticking around for.”

—HANIF ABDURRAQIB, author of *A Fortune for Your Disaster*

“*The Perseverance* is an insightful, frank and intimate rumination on language, identity, heritage, loss and the art of communication. Ranging from tender elegies about his father to frank interrogations of deafness, Antrobus highlights the persistence of memory and our need to connect. These colloquial, historical and conversational poems plunder the space of missing, and absence in speech/our conversations—between what we hear and what we do not say. *Perseverance* is a lyrical translation of a power dynamic always present in conversational exchanges but even more so in the d/Deaf experiences. Thought-provoking and eloquent monologues explore the poet’s Jamaican/British heritage with such compassion, where the spirit and rhythm of each speaker dominates. These are courageous autobiographical poems of praise, difficulties, testimony and love.”

—MALIKA BOOKER, author of *Pepper Seed*

THE
PERSEVERANCE

THE
PERSEVERANCE
RAYMOND ANTROBUS

 TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

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There is no telling what language is inside the body

ECHO



My ear amps whistle as if singing
to Echo, Goddess of Noise,
the ravelled knot of tongues,
of blaring birds, consonant crumbs
of dull doorbells, sounds swamped
in my misty hearing aid tubes.
Gaudí believed in holy sound
and built a cathedral to contain it,
pulling hearing men from their knees
as though Deafness is a kind of Atheism.
Who would turn down God?
Even though I have not heard
the golden decibel of angels,
I have been living in a noiseless
palace where the doorbell is pulsating
light and I am able to answer.



What?

A word that keeps looking
in mirrors, in love
with its own volume.

What?

I am a one-word question,
a one-man
patience test.

What?

What language
would we speak
without ears?

What?

Is paradise
a world where
I hear everything?

What?

How will my brain
know what to hold
if it has too many arms?



The day I clear out my dead father's flat,
I throw away boxes of moulding LPs:
Garvey, Malcolm X, Mandela speeches on vinyl.

I find a TDK cassette tape on the shelf.
The smudged green label reads *Raymond Speaking*.
I play the tape in his vintage cassette player

and hear my two-year-old voice chanting my name, Antrob,
and Dad's laughter crackling in the background,
not knowing I couldn't hear the word "bus"

and wouldn't until I got my hearing aids.
Now I sit here listening to the space of deafness—

Antrob, Antrob, Antrob.



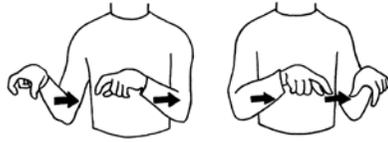
*'And if you don't catch nothing
then something wrong with your ears—
they been tuned to de wrong frequency.'*

KEI MILLER

So maybe I belong to the universe
underwater, where all songs
are smeared wailings for Salacia,
Goddess of Salt Water, healer
of infected ears, which is what the doctor
thought I had, since deafness
did not run in the family
but came from nowhere;
so they syringed olive oil
and salt water, and we all waited
to see what would come out.



And no one knew what I was missing
until a doctor gave me a handful of Lego
and said to put a brick on the table
every time I heard a sound.
After the test I still held enough bricks
in my hand to build a house
and call it my sanctuary,
call it the reason I sat in saintly silence
during my grandfather's sermons when he preached
The Good News I only heard
as Babylon's babbling echoes.



AUNT BERYL MEETS CASTRO

Listen listen, you know I
met Castro in Jamaica in
'77 mi work with
government under
Manley yessir you
should'da seen me up in
mi younger day mi give
Castro flowers
a blue warm warm
welcome to we
and mi know people who
nuh like it who say him
should stay smokin' in
him bush, our water and
wood nuh want problem
with dat blaze, but Castro,
him understand' the history
of dem who harm us, who
make the Caribbean a
kind of mix up mix up
pain. Me believe him
come to look us Black
people in the eye and say
we come from the same
madness but most people

nah wan brave no war and
mi understand dem, but
mi also know how we all
swallow different stones
on the same stony path.
Most dem on the Island
hear life in some Queen's
English voice but I was
tuned to dem real power
lines, I was picking up all
the signals. Some of dem
say, you know too much
yuh go mad, there a fear
of knowledge for the
power it bring and mi
understand dem just
trying to live and cruise
through life like raft
cruise Black River,
hunderstan?

MY MOTHER REMEMBERS

serving Robert Plant, cheeky bugger,
tried to haggle my prices down.
I didn't care about Led nothing,
I'm just out in snow on a Saturday market morning
trying to make rent and this is it:
when you're raised poor the world is touched
different, like you have to feel something, know it
with your hand. You need to know what is
worth what to who. I've served plonkers
in my time. That singer, Seal, tried to croon
my prices down. I was like, *no no, I'm one
missed meal away from misery, mate!*
I used to squat in abandoned factories,
go to jumble sales and come home to piece
together this cupboard, filling it with fabrics.
Then I met this wood sculptor, had these tree-trunk
forearms, said, *why not go to
Camden Passage on Wednesday?*
I had this van, made twenty-eight quid.
Look, everything I sold is listed in this notebook.
Fabrics, cleaned from your Great Gran's house.
Vintage. People always reach back to times
gone and that's what I'm saying,
people want to carry the past. Make it
fit them, make it say, *this is still us.*

I'd take sewn dresses made in the '20s.
Your Great Gran was a dressmaker,
you know, dresses carried her. I wore
this white and green thing to
her funeral. Sorry, guess everything
has its time. Are you ready to eat
or am I holding you up?

JAMAICAN BRITISH

after Aaron Samuels

Some people would deny that I'm Jamaican British.
Anglo nose. Hair straight. No way I can be Jamaican British.

They think I say I'm black when I say Jamaican British
but the English boys at school made me choose: Jamaican, British?

Half-caste, half mule, house slave—Jamaican British.
Light skin, straight male, privileged—Jamaican British.

Eat callaloo, plantain, jerk chicken—I'm Jamaican.
British don't know how to serve our dishes; they enslaved us.

In school I fought a boy in the lunch hall—Jamaican.
At home, told Dad, *I hate dem, all dem Jamaicans*—I'm British.

He laughed, said, *you cannot love sugar and hate your sweetness*,
took me straight to Jamaica—passport: British.

Cousins in Kingston called me Jah-English,
proud to have someone in their family—British.

Plantation lineage, World War service, how do I serve Jamaican British?
When knowing how to war is Jamaican British.

ODE TO MY HAIR

When a black woman
with straightened hair
looks at you, says

nothing black about you,
do you rise like wild wheat
or a dark field of frightened strings?

For years I hide you under hats
and, still, cleanly you cling to my scalp,
conceding nothing

when they call you too soft,
too thin for the texture
of your own roots.

Look, the day is yellow shea butter,
the night is my Jamaican cousin
saying *your skin and hair mean*

you're treated better than us,
the clippings of a hot razor
trailing the back of my neck.

Scissor away the voice of the barber
who charges more to cut
this thick tangle of Coolie

now you've grown a wildness,
trying to be my father's 'fro
to grow him out, to see him again.