

Katrina Naomi reviews Raymond Antrobus, Terrance Hayes and Tim Turnbull

The Perseverance

Raymond Antrobus
Penned in the Margins, 2018

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin

Terrance Hayes
Penguin, 2018

Avanti

Tim Turnbull
Red Squirrel Press, 2018

The Perseverance by Raymond Antrobus is a Poetry Book Society Choice. This is Antrobus's first collection and it's an immediately likeable one. There's a warmth and a keen intelligence brought to the many issues the collection tackles – from D/deafness, to racism, to class, to his relationship with his troubled and violent father.

I say 'likeable' because there's such a strong sense of Antrobus's identity throughout. The opening poem *Echo* shows the poet listening to a tape of himself as a child:

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.

Some of Antrobus's strongest work is written in response to racism and/or offensive comments regarding D/deafness. In *After Being Called a Fucking Foreigner in London Fields*, Antrobus says: "The truth is I'm not / a fist fighter. I'm all heart". We also learn about creativity, how Antrobus prefers to:

'write until everything goes
quiet. No one can tell me
anything about this radiance'.

And here's *Miami Airport* written in the voice of a US security officer:

you don't look deaf?
can you prove it? [...]
why didn't I see anyone that
looked like you
when I was in England?

Antrobus's "Deaf School" by Ted Hughes takes Hughes's poem and reproduces it with the words blocked out on the page so as to make Hughes's poem unreadable; an effective response to a poem with numerous mentions of the word 'simple' in relation to D/deaf children.

One of Antrobus's stand out poems is *Dear Hearing World*, written after Danez Smith's much celebrated *dear white america*. Writing in response to such a famous poem is a risky enterprise but Antrobus more than pulls it off. He takes Smith's opening line "i've left Earth in search of darker planets, a solar system revolving too near a black hole.", and opens with:

I have left Earth in search of sounder orbits,
a solar system where the space between
a star and a planet isn't empty.

Antrobus's poem riffs on noise, on "audio supremacy", religion, the closure of D/deaf schools and "the annihilation" of BSL.

The Perseverance refers to Antrobus's determination to make his way in the world, despite what's been thrown at him. The title poem also tells us that this is the name of a pub his father used to drink in, where Antrobus could only wait by the door: "I am still outside THE PERSEVERANCE, listening for the laughter."

As a poet and a tutor, Antrobus has worked to raise awareness of discrimination and to encourage others to achieve. I'd really recommend this accessible and highly enjoyable collection.

Terrance Hayes' **American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin** (Penguin, 2018) has been shortlisted for the T S Eliot award. He wrote these 70 sonnets during the first 200 days of Trump's presidency. The idea of writing sonnets in response to such a despot is a great project, and the response to Hayes's collection has been enormous.

The sonnets consider ideas of freedom, of love, of masculinity, of poetry itself, of power (and its abuses) and crucially, of the persecution of black people. The assassin is everywhere:

You assassinate the sound of our bullshit &
blissfulness. [...]
Sometimes we lie on the roadside
In bushels of knotted roots, flowers & thorns until
our body
Is found. (p. 17)²

Trump:

... can't distinguish a horse from a zebra
Without the stripes, he can't describe himself
Without looking in a mirror. Baller. Bawler. (p. 42)

In addition to sonnets aimed at the current US leader, Hayes's sonnet featuring George Wallace is powerful (p. 69). Wallace, in his 1963 inauguration address as Governor of Alabama, stated "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever":

... Can you guess what black
Folk passing empty cotton fields feel, George
Wallace?
I damn you with the opposite of that feeling.

Hayes asks "How much is owed?" in a poem (p. 49) featuring the 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955:

Where the confederate statues have been painted
White so often they will probably look like ghosts.

Strong imagery. And on p. 40, these lines are breathtaking:

... I carry a flag bearing a different
Nation on each side. I carry money bearing
The face of my assassins.

Many of the sonnets reference writers, including James Baldwin (probably the most cited),

Gwendolyn Brooks, Emily Dickinson, Galway Kinnell and Pablo Neruda, or musicians, including Miles Davis, Aretha Franklin, Jimi Hendrix and Theolonius Monk. We learn “Seven of the ten things” Hayes loves about Baldwin’s face, (p. 16) including:

The crease between his eyes [...]
...like a riverbed branching
Into tributaries like lines of rapturous sentences.

Gorgeous stuff.

Hayes is a generous and inventive poet. Many will know that Hayes invented the poetic form known as the Golden Shovel, taking a line from a Gwendolyn Brooks poem. In this collection, Hayes cites his gratitude to Wanda Coleman and an assignment for writing ‘an American Sonnet’, or what she called ‘jazz sonnets’.

As well as the sonnets inspired by politics and other artists, there’s two lonely hearts-style sonnets:

A brother versed in spiritual calisthenics
And cowboy quiet seeks funny, lonesome,
Speculative or eye-glassed lass. (p. 66)

How good is ‘cowboy quiet’? And the second (p. 78) for an ‘overlooked brother’ who is looking for a woman who:

Must be willing to raise orchids
Or kids in a land of assassins.

Wonderful word play. I did feel that the collection was too long; some sonnets didn’t quite make it. But when they did, they really did.

I’ll leave you with the first two lines from a real favourite (p. 11). If anyone asks you what a sonnet can be, tell them this:

I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,
Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame.

Avanti (Red Squirrel Press, 2018) is Tim Turnbull’s third collection. He opens with a poem *That’ll Only Make It Worse* in memory of the comedian Frankie Howerd, who died in 1992. There’s a lot of play, and playing with time, in Turnbull’s poetry, **Avanti** means ‘forward’, then he immediately looks back to Howerd. And there’s a lot of looking back, including several elegies for famous – and infamous – men.

In addition, rhyme is essential to his writing and Turnbull has quite an engagement with contemporary art. This final stanza from *Death and Art* could be said to be ‘typical Turnbull’:

Now Death and Art’s the only book in
town, and no, there’s no use looking
down to see what rut you’re stuck in:
It’s all you’ve got.
Art and Death (and maybe Fucking),
but that’s your lot.

He can be very funny. Some of my favourite lines are from *A Date with Elvis*, which is in memory of Erick Lee Purkhiser of The Cramps:

[you] were as sharp as a scalpel and as cool as
Siberia.
There were many imitators but all of them inferior;
The Goths could have learnt from you and been a
bit cheerier.

But comedy is a difficult thing. You’re not always going to click with it. I also found myself out of step with much of the collection, either the comedy didn’t work for me or culturally I felt adrift from it. Turnbull’s poetry can feel old-fashioned but I sense this is deliberate. He uses archaic language, ‘Siam’ rather than ‘Thailand’, for example, and see *The Two Boidies* (as in birds):

Quoth one, “I say, old featherhead,
I’m starving. Where might we get fed?”

Sometimes Turnbull’s targets feel too easy. See *Bohemians*, with artists in their “quirky hats and

canvas shoes, / ultra-skinny jeans and stubble". Elsewhere in the same poem, lines discussing class and culture offer so much more:

*Who are these angels and where from
and who set them the thankless task -
bringing culture where there was none?*

Occasionally, Turnbull offers a glimpse of himself and writes a very different kind of poem. Less swagger, more tender, as in "I have cut myself chopping kindling in / the wrong glasses", from *Happy Times, Old Man*. I'll end with three wonderful Turnbull lines from *Love*, where the narrator and a companion consider the skies, and the possibility of a meteorite wiping out the earth:

*What must we do? Why, you
must love me; love as if it were
already in sight, reflecting in your eye.*

Katrina Naomi recently received an Authors' Foundation award by the Society of Authors for work on her third collection. Her most recent is *The Way the Crocodile Taught Me*, Seren, 2016.

- 1 Antrobus includes a note on D/deaf. 'Big D Deaf people are those who are born Deaf and tend to learn sign before spoken language is acquired and regard their deafness as part of their identity and culture rather than a disability. Small d deaf people are often those who become deaf in later life, after they have acquired a spoken language. Their relationship with deafness is more medical than cultural.'
- 2 None of Hayes's sonnets have titles. I have chosen to reference page numbers instead of using first lines.