

Grace

Roger Robinson

That year we danced to green bleeps on screen.

My son had come early, just the 1kg of him,
all big head, bulging eyes and blue veins.

On the ward I met Grace. A Jamaican senior nurse
who sang pop songs on her shift, like they were hymns.
“Your son feisty. Y’see him just ah pull off the breathing mask.”

People spoke of her in half tones down these carbolic halls.
Even the doctors gave way to her, when it comes
to putting a line into my son’s nylon thread of a vein.

She’d warn junior doctors with trembling hands: “Me only letting you try twice.”
On her night shift she pulls my son’s incubator into her room,
no matter the tangled confusion of wires and machine.

When the consultant told my wife and I on morning rounds
that he’s not sure my son will live, and if he lives he might never leave the hospital,
she pulled us quickly aside: “Him have no right to say that—just raw so.”

Another consultant tells the nurses to stop feeding a baby, who will soon die,
and she commands her loyal nurses to feed him. “No baby must dead
wid a hungry belly.” And she’d sit in the dark, rocking that well-fed baby,

held to her bosom, slowly humming the melody of “Happy” by Pharrell.
And I think, if by some chance, I’m not here and my son’s life should flicker,
then Grace, she should be the one.

from *A Portable Paradise* (Peepal Tree Press, 2019)

Roger Robinson

Roger Robinson is a writer who has performed worldwide. Winner of the T. S. Eliot Prize 2019, the RSL Ondaatje Prize 2020 and a Royal Society of Literature Fellow, he was chosen by Decibel as one of 50 writers who have influenced the Black-British writing canon. His latest collection *A Portable Paradise* was a *New Statesman* Book of the Year. He is an alumnus of The Complete Works and has been shortlisted for the OCM Bocas Poetry Prize, the Oxford Brookes Poetry Prize, commended by the Forward Poetry Prize and shortlisted for the Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry 2020. He has been commissioned by The National Trust, London Open House, BBC, National Portrait Gallery, V&A, INIVA, MK Gallery and Theatre Royal Stratford East, where he was also Associate Artist.

An experienced workshop leader, he has toured extensively with the British Council. His workshops have been shortlisted in the Gulbenkian Prize for Museums and Galleries and were also a part of the Barbican’s Webby Award-winning ‘Can I Have A Word’. He is co-founder of both Spoke Lab and the international writing collective Malika’s Poetry Kitchen. He is lead vocalist and lyricist for King Midas Sound and has also recorded solo albums with Jahtari Records.

A recording of Roger Robinson reading this poem can be found on the WritersMosaic website at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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