

Coming in from the cold

**Raymond Antrobus**

My Dad would often ask my sister and me if we were going to attend his funeral when he died. He spoke about his death so often that, as a child, my most frequent nightmare was of this day, burying my father. With the approaching sound of his heavy footsteps and the stench of tobacco fuming from his clothes, my Dad was often the one who woke me from those dreams. Opening my eyes and seeing him in the world was always a relief, euphoric. He cooked ackee and saltfish for me; the ackee was soft, not dry; the saltfish slipped easily off the bone. The boiled potatoes and rice and peas steamed from the plate with a dash of West Indian hot sauce. He'd watch me eat, wait for me to finish, smile and say, 'I love you Ray'.

These tender moments merge now in my memory of him with the times he'd been out drinking and returned home with a heaviness that made the stairs shiver as he slowly staggered down them.

Both my sister and I had witnessed him beat our mother. He would black out and the next day he'd have no memory of the smashed windows, the bruises, and the burning milk bottles on our doorstep. When he needed care it was hard to measure how much of myself I could give to him, considering that terror. I was there when I could be. I changed his bed sheets and brought him ice cream. I sat by his hospital bed, held his hand,

hugged him after he broke down crying when I asked him how he was, and fell asleep in his arms while Brook Benton sang 'Rainy Night In Georgia'.

How do you dress for your father's funeral? I'm wearing his bright orange blazer, thick padded shoulders, motheaten on the inside. I'm sitting in the back seat of the black Volvo next to my mother and sister. 'In this life / in this life / in this life / in this oh' sweet life' wails Marley through the iPad on my lap. The sky is white and sealed over by cloud. I ask the driver to stop outside the William Hill bookmakers where Dad gambled on the horses. I spent years walking to William Hill, the only other place I would find my father if he wasn't in his council flat on Laburnum Street.

I walk into the betting shop and my father's friends are there. Ninja, so-called for reasons unknown to me, is a short, bald black man with a slightly squashed face and thick patches of grey beard that move around his mouth when he talks. Most of what he says is incoherent because half of his teeth are missing. Then there's Desmond, a slightly taller, lighter skinned man in a cream-coloured jacket and light brown bowler hat; and Barry, a tall slender black man in a white Puma T-shirt, a smart black blazer, a red baseball cap and a grey goatee.

All are standing in front of the TVs. These were the West Indian men Dad would sit around the table with, drinking, laughing, and shouting at the horses. If they'd forgotten about the funeral, my bright orange blazer with my Dad's folded handkerchief in my breast pocket reminded them.

'Yuh old man funeral today!?' says Ninja, then calls the other men over: 'Dis Seymour's son'. The men gather around and shake my hand, him gone, him gone, but him still here. I look up at the TVs as the gates open and the greyhounds shoot from their cages. I walk to the counter and put down a fiver on a dog. I doubt whether Dad would be surprised that his friends at

the bookmakers would miss his funeral. I take the betting slip and leave my Dad's friends shouting at the row of screens.

At Manor Park Cemetery some friends and cousins I haven't seen in years show up. Everything about them belongs in the past. There is a Jamaican flag over my father's casket. My sister and I give speeches.

It must be awkward for her. She'd stopped talking to Dad the night he showed up at the house drunk, and my sister had to defend our mother. She picked up two bricks from the garden and swung them in his face and fractured his jaw. My Dad couldn't speak for a month without the pain connecting him to that night. My sister was fifteen and was forced to grow up quickly so she could help raise me and support our mother. I think she will always be resentful of that, but her speech is gentle and diligent, she trembles through it. My pain is watching her, the strongest woman I know, become a hurt child once again, keeping her head up for her brother, her mother as well as herself.

I look out over the crowd at my scattered Jamaican relatives, different families sitting in their own sections of the church. My Dad lost contact with many of the families years ago and that distance expresses itself in their distance, how far back they're sitting.

I tell the congregation: I have yet to find a Jamaican restaurant that can make ackee and saltfish, sweet potato, green banana with rice and peas like my father. He would always give me a spoon to eat with and call me 'white bwoy' if I asked for a fork.

Everyone in the church laughs except the priest who is the whitest man in the world.

My father lived to 75. He was a smoker, a drinker and a gambler; my theory of his longevity is the result of his sense of humour. Every joke he made gave him back the three minutes of life he lost to a cigarette. Not all his jokes were even funny, I remember sitting on the train with him at Dalston Kingsland, he said, 'Son, did I ever tell you the funny story about the suicidal train driver who drove his train into a station and killed a hundred people? Hee-hee-haha.' I said 'Dad, that's not funny, why are you laughing?' and he'd say, 'What you want me to do, cry?' and he'd laugh again.

The congregation laughed too.

After the service everyone walks to the gravesite with the pallbearers, my cousins still keeping their distance. My Dad's casket is lowered. I take out the betting slip and drop it into the earth.

### **Raymond Antrobus**

Raymond Antrobus MBE FRSL, born in London to an English mother and Jamaican father, is the author of *To Sweeten Bitter* and *The Perseverance*. In 2019 he became the first ever poet to be awarded the Rathbones Folio Prize for best work of literature in any genre. He is the recipient of fellowships from Cave Canem, Complete Works 3, Jerwood Compton and the Royal Society of Literature.

Other accolades include the Ted Hughes award, PBS Winter Choice, the Guardian Poetry Book Of The Year 2018, as well as a shortlist for the Griffin

Prize and Forward Prize. Antrobus was the winner of the *Sunday Times /* University of Warwick Young Writer of the Year Award, 2019, and was a judge of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award in 2019. In 2021 he wrote and presented BBC Radio 4's *Inventions In Sound*, which won Best Documentary: Bronze award at the 2021 Third Coast International Audio Festival.

Antrobus's poem 'Jamaican British' is on the GCSE English Literature syllabus in the UK, and his latest collection, *All The Names Given*, has been shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Costa Award.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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