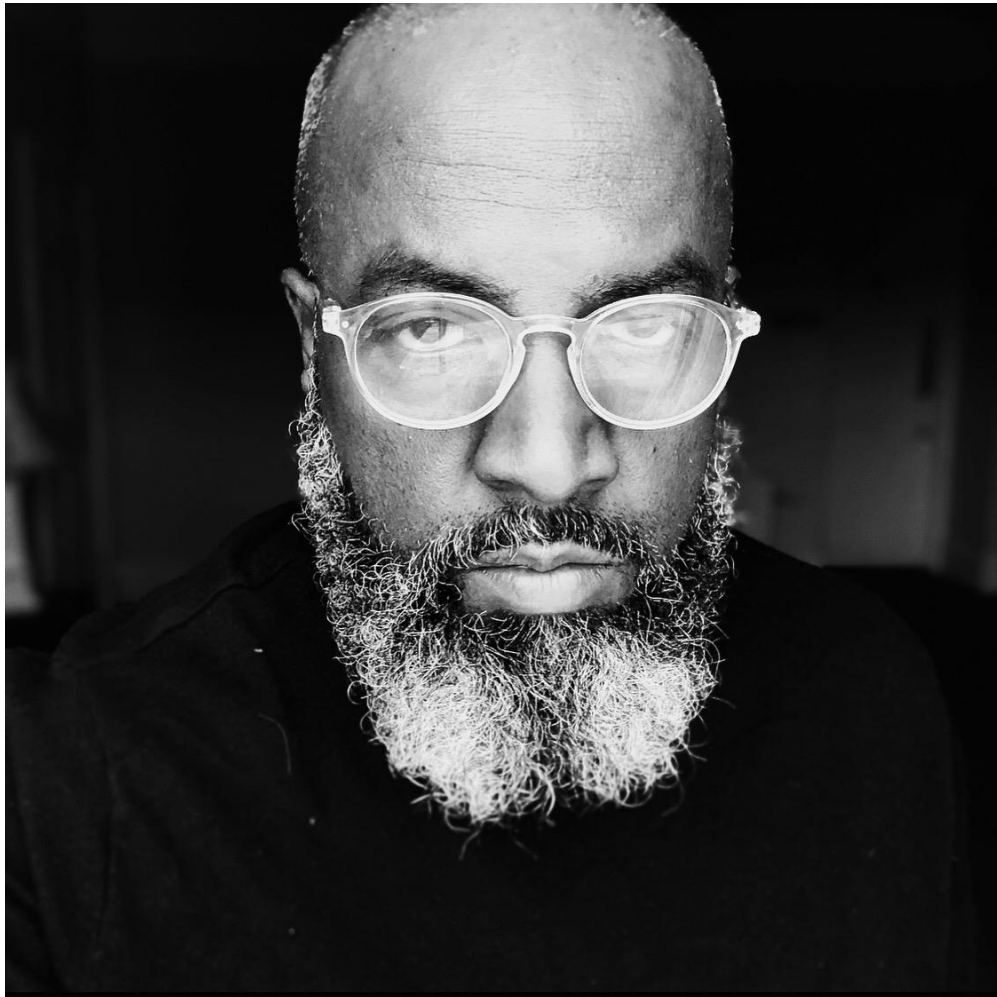


Roger Robinson

NEW COMMISSION

History / The Crowd / Interview / Benin Security Guard at the V&A



One of the most prominent voices in the Black-British writing canon, Roger Robinson is a celebrated poet and musician who has performed around the world. His 2019 poetry collection *A Portable Paradise*, which included heart-wrenching poems about the Grenfell disaster, fatherhood and being Black British in the UK, won the T.S. Eliot Prize and the RSL Ondaatje Prize. He has previously created work for The National Trust, London Open House, BBC, The National Portrait Gallery and Theatre Royal Stratford East where he was also associate artist.

In early 2021, Roger Robinson was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival to write a new series of poems exploring the idea of Black Lives Matter and how it pertains to the Black British experience. Roger performed the poems for the first time at an online event hosted by fellow poet Malika Booker. The event was available to watch from 25 March – 31 March 2021 on MLF's Crowdcast channel.

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HISTORY

Before that moment every two generations we forgot who we were. As if we were freshly molded from wet mud, we couldn't even tell you our great grandmother's name. A constant forgetting. Not helped by the older generations wanting to forget. Enquiries would be met with "why you want to know about those hard, sad times?" or "how you expect me to remember back that far?" Although we always knew that the images of that time were vivid. You can see them seeing it on the inside of their foreheads every time they sit looking out at nothing and you'd say "Pops are you okay?" and it would pull them back into this time and they'd get up saying irritatedly "yes, yes I'm fine" and perhaps they walk slowly upstairs to their bedroom. But then it happened, a Black man was being murdered, shot on mobile phones screaming out for his dead mother and it connected us all. The sufferings inside every Black woman and child downloaded and they began to play. And they played and played and didn't stop. Then we knew, we knew it all: our genealogy, lineage, ancestors, joys. We screamed, we cried, we knew, we ran into streets with our placards shouting, as our grandparents looked on from their bedroom windows wondering if the knowing was any better.

THE CROWD

They streamed from tributary side streets into a river of protests, some in black and white, some in technicolor, others in high definition. Different eras, different places now in one constant slipstream of time, with fists up with signs up saying I am a man, we demand decent housing now, we march for integrated schools now, saying Black Lives Matter. In black and white, in suits and ties with masks on with garlands and sharp hats and shades. Arms locked together on the front line with black fists, held high in black leather jackets and black berets, singing 'the revolution has come time to pick up the gun'. Dodging water cannons, dodging rubber bullets and hard black batons, police shields and dogs trying to bite chunks out of their calves and forearms. One black solitary speaker behind microphones, behind megaphones, straining their vocal cords. Styled in African print head-ties and hoop earrings, in jeans and creased polyester pants, in Nikes and patent leather laced up shoes, with pencil-thin moustaches and byrlcreemed hair, beehived hairdos with extensions with pitch black global afros and baby hair. From above a river of people, protest and strength stretching for miles and miles, years and years, generations and generations, marching, marching on.

INTERVIEW

The Black Man had an interview. He grabbed a pair of glasses to look less threatening. He felt silly, there was nothing wrong with his eyes. He thought perhaps a tweed jacket, something more traditional. No, no jewellery. He wouldn't have bothered, but he needed this job. A tie might have been overdoing it he thought, as he shaved off his beard. He had been growing out his fade for weeks now because he knew this was coming up. A short afro was the best that he could do. He was trying to present himself in a way that was unthreatening (though he knew that there was no threat there). He arrived at the building and gave his name to security, they took his name and they looked through the interviewee list. They said he wasn't on it. He asked them to look again. They refused. He asked what the problem was and to check again in case they missed it. They said that they won't be doing that. Time was passing he was going to be late for his interview slot. There was a certain amount of anxiety in his voice. The security guard told him to lower his voice. He lowered his voice and he could see another guard near the wall talking into his radio. They asked him to leave the premises. He needed this job. He refused to leave and he asked again that they call the contact name because it could be a simple mistake. Three guards grabbed him from behind; they tore his tweed jacket, his fake glasses fell to the floor and cracked. Just then someone called out his name to see if he had arrived for the interview. He shouted that's me they put him down without an apology. He walked upstairs with his cracked glasses with his tweed jacket sleeve in his hand. The top three buttons of his shirt popped off, his pristine afro seemed ruffled, and he sat and tried to answer the questions as best he could, trying to give them the impression that he'd be pleasant to work with.

BENIN SECURITY GUARD AT THE V&A

When the last visitor has left and the chefs from the restaurant have given him some dinner to eat later from a takeaway tray. When the cleaners have donned their thick winter coats and black and purple berets. When all the display screens have been turned off, and the museum is dark and still, the security guard heads for the African artefacts room. The first thing he goes for is the Benin crown. It fits him perfectly like it was made for his head, the rose gold against his dark brown skin. Next, he picks up the wooden armband denoting a South African leader sliding it over his security shirt. Then he takes the indigo adire cloth and wraps it around his waist and stands in front of the autumn colours of the Wissa Wassef Egyptian tapestry, pulls out his phone and takes a selfie. Tomorrow he'll be back for another shift, pulling strands of ancient African culture into a moment. It's the only thing he looks forward to.