

FOREWORD

Before Eddie Murphy became a movie star, he was a crucial part of one of the several golden ages of *Saturday Night Live*; I am thinking in particular of the beaming malice of Mr. Robinson (aka Mr. Rogers) of *Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood*. Here were all the accustomed props to which we parents were unavoidably exposed: the cardigan waiting in the closet (along with the comfy footwear constituting the at-home uniform that separated the outside from the inside); the new word chalked on the handy blackboard (a word that America's children were encouraged to both learn and visualize), the blackboard itself Mr. Rogers' solemn promise to parents that the children committed to his care were not transformed by the trance-inducing hypnotic screen into robots, but rather into readers. Unlike Mr. Rogers, Mr. Robinson was not at home; he was either staging a passive-aggressive refusal to vacate or he was practicing a vocation for hiding out; in either case, his visitors were enraged landlords. For a certain number of years, Fred Rogers' soothing chatter mutated on late-night TV into Mr. Robinson's solitary paranoid ramblings: Mr. Robinson was unwelcome, but Mr. Robinson, for the benefit of all of us former children too hooked or wired to go to sleep, Mr. Robinson was digging his heels in and, crouched under the window, ready to talk, even if talking meant talking to a void.

What these segments have in common with Arda Collins' savage, desolate, brutally ironic first book is the electric excitement of a master performance conducted in a deliberately isolated space, as though isolation were a form of control that promoted fluency. Like Eddie Murphy, Collins has invented a persona: *Welcome to my world*, the first poem seems to say, and for the next ninety-two pages, we are her mesmerized audience—nobody escapes:

At last, terror has arrived.
 Next door, the house has gone up in flames.
 A woman runs from the burning wreck, her face smeared
 with blood and ashes. She screams that her children are kidnapped.
 It's truly exciting, and what more would anyone ask?
 For a rare and beautiful egg to present itself in the grass?
 For sex with the liquor store owner to progress into something meaningful?
 You don't know what I've done in front of the mirror.
 I've pulled my shorts up high like a thong. I've walked back and forth
 doing little kicks and making faces. I've stopped, I've stared.

I try to get my mind around the sight of myself. I make a face.
 Of great seriousness. I imagine that I've just received
 a large and upsetting piece of news. Then I look into my eyes.
 Can I guess what I am thinking? Can I tell you what it is?
 —“The News”

It Is Daylight has, to some extent, roots in those long Victorian monologues in which character is developed through manipulation of tone, and a narrative emerges through that character's evasions and juxtapositions. A closer analogy might be the analytic monologue (though Collins' brilliant, sly free associations are far more original than the patient is ever likely to be). Structurally, the poems resemble not adult analysis as much as the work done with children, in which dramatic play augments or provides occasions for speech. The analytic perspective contributes detachment, distance; the self that acts is, here, always at a certain remove, its actions observed with a committed neutrality. Collins talks without interruption (no one is ever present to interrupt); she also performs, exhibits herself. But make no mistake: this is not a book of individual travail and self-exposure. Like the analyst, these poems never stop thinking. Collins' mugging and kicking are the opposite of narcissistic preening; they arise, I think, out of deep confusion. The parading in front of mirrors, like the invisible quotes around “meaningful,” like the elliptical memories and tableaux, the fantasies—all dramatize a fundamental vacancy: the hope is that one of these gestures, one of these stories, will seem authentic, representative.

At the heart of the poems' struggles is shame, which results not from something the speaker has done, from action, but rather from *being*, from what she is or what she lacks. Collins' speaker cannot bear to be seen; hence her furtiveness, her preference for enclosed environments (sometimes her fear of light). The private closed spaces that protect this speaker from being seen (while paradoxically freeing her to speak) function in other ways, both contextualizing and mirroring a metaphysical claustrophobia: the bleak fate of being always one person. Sometimes Collins' closed space is not merely contained but barely plausible, the space of a human foot on top of a slice of onion:

As you're standing with the heel of your shoe
 on top of some neatly sliced red onion
 you might think to yourself, “I'm at onion,”
 or, “I'm in onion today.” Coming home
 in the evening you might see a letter

waiting there, tucked just underneath
the sliced onion. . . .

and later:

. . . That evening, beside the onion,
you write in your journal . . .

As the poem goes on, as less of the world comes in, disorientation intensifies:

. . . You sleep
on the floor and wake
disoriented and frightened, uncertain if
the heaviness surrounding your sleep is onion
that still permeates your fingers. Day comes
to your estranged bed,
the mood of the bathtub inexplicably
altered . . .

—“With A Voice In Front Of You”

Many poems follow the same arc: what begins as reprieve ends as indictment. The poems are ruled by habit, by ritual, their speaker less hostage to a specific secret than constrained by the habit of secrecy, the need to be protected from the unknown. She understands from the inside the prison of magical thinking; in one poem, she cannot decide “which way to walk around / and approach the table / for the best outcome.”

Ritual and hiding promise safety; so too does art, which excludes the world, constructing a parallel and at least partially sustaining universe. But art is dangerous, taunting; it exposes insufficiencies; it takes one to the terrible depths one fears:

Don't put off your shower any more
listening to Chopin.
Take the Preludes personally;
he's telling you that he can describe a progression
that you yourself have been unable to see,
shapely, broad light at one-thirty,

evening traveling up a road,
an overcast day as gentle bones.
Don't remember the music;
remember it as something obvious
that you are compelled, doomed, to obscure
and complicate. You erase it twice.
The first time
as you listened, unable
to have it,
the second time
as you were unable
to remember it.
Angry with Chopin,
what does he know? . . .

and finally:

Listen to him describe what you would be like
if you were blind, sitting in a chair, at a wake, the days short, that there might
 be nothing
else, night,
content, unable, unwishing, to recall desire, or sight.
 —"Not For Chopin"

This locked-in quality, the inescapability of self, manifests temporally as well as spatially. "It Is Daylight" constructs a universe in which time doesn't pass; in one poem, the accident of stepping on an onion elaborates itself into a version of Dickinson's letter to the world. And in the book as a whole, time has ceased, though day flips into night and back again, like two aspects of paralysis. Because the self doesn't change, because it is exposed to nothing that would change it, time seems not to pass. The last poem recapitulates the first, with its burning house and kidnapped or murdered child—all these poems later, we're still frozen in front of the television, watching these same images. Or this is a version of the onion-world: a book-length account of a moment. The passion not to be seen is played back in the poems as intense seeing, voyeurism; the "estranged bed," i.e., the world, intrudes, via television, into Collins' Skinner boxes.

But no description of prevailing atmosphere does justice to Collins' achievement. How has she managed to make, out of stasis, a book so intensely dramatic? The obstacles are obvious: if the voice deviates too much from narrowness, then narrowness seems willed, artificial; the reader's belief falters. But the obsessive precisions that immobility is likely to produce seem, by definition, repetitive, boring. Collins' solutions are subtle: like a great actor, she stays in character; what moves is the camera:

It's not happiness, but something else; waiting
for the light to change; a bakery.

It's a lake. It emerges from darkness into the next day surrounded by pines.
There's a couple.

It's a living room. The upholstery is yellow and the furniture is walnut.
They used to lie down on the carpet

between the sofa and the coffee table, after the guests had left.

The cups and saucers were still.

Their memories of everything that occurred took place
with the other's face as a backdrop and sometimes

the air was grainy like a movie about evening, and sometimes there was an ending
in the air that looked like a scene from a different beginning,

in which they are walking.

It took place alongside a scene in which one of them looks up at a brown rooftop
early in March. The ground hadn't softened.

One walked in front of the other breathing.

The other saw a small house as they passed and breathed. The
reflections in the windows

made them hear the sounds on the hill: a crow, a dog, and branches—

and they bent into the hour that started just then, like bending to walk under branches.

—“Low”

As single moments expand to fill a page, memories (the *before* and *after* absolute but the transition nearly invisible) turn dreamy, partial. They seem less comprehensive anatomies

than gestures or sketches, searches for analogues and tonal equivalents. By virtue of being past change, the world of memory, like the four walls to which Collins clings, makes an alternative to the outside world—here also time is banished, its repeated passage, phrase by phrase, controlled by the mind. But the world of memory remains strangely incomplete, elusive, mysterious, as though the poet cannot quite say what occurred, only what feelings were generated. The search is for exact emotion, not narrative fact—fact, to Collins, is suspect, a disguise; only nuance, the suggestiveness of a phrase, seems to her reliable, trustworthy. In a lesser poet this privileging of the evanescent over the concrete might be a dangerous predilection, but Collins' animal accuracies, her instinct and intelligence, never fail her. The respite of memory rewrites the schism in the self. The self in the present, always both performing and taking notes, becomes the self that acted and the self that remembers, the shift in tense making each self potentially whole. This, together with the atmosphere of searching or incompleteness, makes, despite the poem's sadness, a model for hope. If something can end (the *before* of *before* and *after*), something can begin; time can begin, feeling can begin.

Readers of these poems may think of Berryman's *Dream Songs*, though Berryman is more haunted by guilt than by shame. It is interesting to remember that those *Dream Songs* were followed by prayer: *Love and Fame* ends with a series of addresses to the Lord, which continue to seem to me among that poet's most moving work. Collins has woven theological argument (if not prayer) into her book; its thematic prominence intensifies as the book evolves. God is, in many instances, the only other presence, too mysterious and pervasive for any pronoun, divine authority confirmed by silence:

I put my hands on the table
and spread them, like
"here's all ten." There's nothing on it,
on the table,
so I found that out.
What did you do today?
I ask god.
God doesn't say anything.
I don't say anything else. . . .

and later:

We stay like that
for a long time,
and I mean a really long time.
That's one thing,
god is the only one
who would do that.
—“Heaven”

This conversation continues elsewhere with fervor: “The universe is on earth,” Collins writes, “unexpurgated / soil and frost.” And the lament that has been fended off finally surfaces, the persona splintering into the third person. “Dawn” is longer than many of these poems, but its individual sections suggest, in their terse completeness, utter despair:

He slit a zoo
full of animals.
It was only one calf.
It turned out to be a person,
not a calf. The calf
made sounds.
Blood filled the grass,
the end of winter. . . .
—“Dawn”/1

And then, from this persona-once-removed, an intelligence two voices away from the poet, comes authentic grief, what is left when rage is played out:

Gentle, painful sound,
it's coming from his face.
He doesn't want to talk,
hates the air; it moves towards the same things,
beautiful night,
beautiful night again, best missed
from afar. . . .
—“Dawn”/11

Collins is hopeless on principle: fear of disappointment combined with a vivid sense of helplessness have produced terror of action. For action, she substitutes memory and fantasy. Scrupulous inertia cannot, however, suppress an imagination so violently alive. The self that hides out is in fact a guerilla fighter; the atmosphere of the book is fierce engagement and despair, not placid resignation. The long, sometimes fragmentary poems of the book's second half do not represent disintegration. As paralysis and stasis substitute for wholeness or coherence, fragmentation manifests mobility. "Dawn"'s separation of rage from grief, as well as its somnambulistic quality, prepare for "Neptune." Here every line is succinct, but sequence, which earlier seemed fated, decided a priori, seems suddenly in flux. The beautiful phrases have a kind of stunned quality, a sense of being led forward, which oddly seems, in this context, freedom, since its alternative is adamant will wholly bent on repudiation:

We pass the day in March of being in the cemetery and
eating a burger.

The air is made out of statues and dead people.

This is why we have sex together.

Did I show you this?

It passed through the particles.

The shadows of a continent passed over
us like the shadow of a cloud over a body of water.

And later:

The upstairs room in the summer is soft and quiet.

Rain dims coming in the night outside.

It is real that it is quiet, and the noise
is away from here, inside the train.

When I lie next to you I miss the world.

This is a book of dazzling modernity as, say, Jim Jarmusch seems modern: caustic, pithy, ruthlessly sharp witted and keen eyed, restless, devoid of that taste for rhetorical splendor

that turns so easily stodgy. If the persona here is well defended, the larger point is that these defenses are among Collins' subjects. I know no poet whose sense of fraud, the inflated emptiness that substitutes for feeling, is more acute. Collins sounds always like a particular person, but she is, here, tracking a culture.

Within its devised constrictions, this voice has the freedom to say anything. The result is a book of astonishing originality and intensity, unprecedented, unrepeatably:

There was snow on the apples
somewhere.
You're at home.
It's getting dark out, rain
makes the cars louder. Nobody
seems to be driving
the cars. Someone has arranged
for them to be there going by,
six o'clock. Someone has made
the sound of air in the room louder.
God? you say, but not aloud. Since
there is no god, you have to be
both you and god. . . .

The TV's on, "something about a fire / and a kidnapped boy." The hypnotic story unfolds again, the mother's anguish this time more detailed, more relentless. And then:

. . . Her voice makes you hungry.
You ask god if god
is hungry, and god is. You ask god
what you should do
for dinner, and god reminds you
that you have turkey burgers
in the freezer, and some broccoli.
You'll get up
with creases on your face.
The windows will be dark. You'll
go take the burgers out

and separate them with a knife.
They'll be slippery and frozen, and
you'll think of driving on an
icy road; and then
you'll put them in foil under
the broiler and start the water
for the broccoli, and take out
a plate for yourself, and get
the salt and pepper, and by
that time god will have left.
God's going to a dinner
where they're having lamb chops
and veal stuffing with
roasted almonds and fig sauce and
Brussels sprouts buttered with pistachios.
And after, they're going to have
pear clafoutis behind a velvet curtain
and drive their skulls into the center of a diamond.
—“Snow On The Apples”

Louise Glück