

## Bird Head Son

ANTHONY JOSEPH is one of the leading writers of his generation. A poet, novelist, academic and musician, he was born in Trinidad, moving to the UK in 1989. His publications include *Desafinado* (1994), *Teragaton* (1997) and *The African Origins of UFOs* (Salt, 2006). In 2004 he was chosen by the Arts Council as one of 50 black and Asian writers who have made major contributions to contemporary British literature, appearing in the historic 'Great Day' photograph. In 2005 Joseph served as the British Council's first Poet in residence at California State University, Los Angeles. He has performed internationally and also tours with his band The Spasm Band. Joseph lectures in creative writing at Birkbeck College and at Goldsmiths College, University of London where he is a doctoral candidate.

Also by Anthony Joseph

POETRY

*Desafinado* (Poison Engine Press, 1994)

*Teragaton* (Poison Engine Press, 1997)

*Liquid Textology* CD (Poison Engine Press, 2005)

FICTION

*The African Origins of UFOs* (Salt, 2006)

MUSIC

Anthony Joseph & The Spasm Band

*Leggo de Lion* (Kindred Spirits, 2007)

*Bird Head Son* (Naïve/Heavenly Sweetness, 2009)

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ANTHONY JOSEPH



CAMBRIDGE

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*For Louise & Meena ierè  
and in memory of my friend  
Kemal Mulbocus*



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# Bird Head Son

... and I look in the rearview and see a man  
exactly like me, and the man was weeping  
for the houses, the streets, that whole fucking island.

DEREK WALCOTT — The Schooner *Flight*



## Bosch's Vision

It started as I was leaving  
with a dim groan in the afternoon.

I saw my grandmother  
embrace me  
in her hand stitched dress  
and wrench my soulcage open.

I saw vistas of apocalyptic Europe,  
heard obscure tongues.  
Till sudden now the sky become  
peppered with woe.

Slack eyed soldiers were howling  
in the wind.

Botched leper experiments  
and gene mutations  
with veins hung  
like vervain from the neck.

The sun long gone and weeping.

The oil.

The Devil.

No doubt it was.

The Devil.

Who chased colour from the earth.

Who left sulphur where he spoke  
like a jitney carburettor.

No doubt it was.

The devil.

Twisted muscle of night.

Who crackt  
the sky glass lid.

Maman.

Tell me again why I should leave this island.  
Tell me again that those cities exist.

All I know of the ocean  
is that a river  
starts here.

The day I left Mt Lambert  
the wardrobe doors would gleam.  
It was a day like any other.  
Woodslaves ran and woodslaves waited.  
Lovers lay against the Samaan trees.  
Cattle grazed and bachacs burned  
in matchbox discoteques.

But we were going to the airport  
and my brother in the backseat  
is him I ask: *is me  
this happening to?*

## Kite Season

In the dry heat of February  
when the trade winds blew dust across Aranguéz savannah  
    I pulled  
a copybook an cocoyea kite  
all round that ragged field an river.

But Mitagau boys from up Calvary Hill  
had grind glass paste an razor blade  
    on they kite tail.  
An they one thrill  
is to cut down a young boy kite an bawl—

A'IEU                      O

what heavenly light shone at that gap in time  
    where the thread met the bow met the compass  
    and the sun's pure face?

And when the line rushed through my hands I ran  
behind its brief and flickering tail  
as the kite sailed over the Samaan trees,  
    beyond the blue hills of Lavantille,  
        all down Hell Yard and Lacu Harp  
            in the jungles of Port of Spain.

## Conductors of his Mystery

*for Albert Joseph*

The day my father came back from the sea  
broke and handsome  
I saw him walking across the savannah  
and knew at once it was him.  
His soulful stride, the grace of his hat,  
the serifs of his name  
~ fluttering ~  
in my mouth.

In his bachelor's room in El Socorro that year  
he played his 8-tracks through a sawed-off speaker box.  
The coil would rattle an the cone would hop  
but women from the coconut groves  
still came to hear  
his traveller's tales.

Shop he say he build by Goose Lane junction.  
But it rough from fabricated timber string.  
Picka foot jook wood  
like what Datsun ship in.

And in this snackette he sold red mango,  
mints and tamarind.  
Its wire mesh grill hid his suffer well tough.  
Till the shop bust,  
and he knock out the boards  
and roam east  
to Enterprise village.

Shack he say he build same cross-cut lumber.  
Wood he say he stitch same carap bush.  
Roof he say he throw same galvanize. He got  
ambitious with wood  
in his middle ages.

That night I spent there,  
with the cicadas in that clear village sky,  
even though each room was still unfinished  
and each sadness hid. I was with  
my father  
and I would've stayed  
if he had asked.

Brown suede,  
8 eye high  
desert boots. Beige  
gabardine bells with the 2 inch folds.  
He was myth. The legend of him.  
Once I touched the nape of his boot  
to see if my father was real.  
Beyond the brown edges of photographs  
and the songs we sang  
to sing him back  
from the sweep and sea agonies  
of his distance.

Landslide scars. He sent no letters.

His small hands were for the fine work of his carpentry.  
His fingers to trace the pitch pine's grain.  
And the raised rivers of his veins,  
the thick rings of his charisma,  
the scars—the maps of his palms—  
were the sweet conductors  
of his mystery.

*Aiyé Olokun.*

He came back smelling of the sea.

# Cutlass

*When de cutlass flash  
de cutlass can cleanse  
can cutlass can clear bush  
can cutlass clenched*

till sparks grew from stars fallin  
scrapin the road  
on jouvay mornin  
Or cut can lash  
a man's bare throat  
cut from runnin sideways fastest  
from brutal blade work  
It make him run out of his shadow  
make him run out of his skin  
make him run out with a tumblin blade  
he pulled sharp across his throat till it brittle  
an he gullet spew  
to irrigate the village vinery

was the same cutlass that slit the pig throat  
like a razor  
an the body shook  
Hang it up and let it drip its oil and ambergris umber  
let oil run all down this holy tributary  
where the corn stalks keep snakes  
and wildflowers  
Let it run all long the bamboo track  
that leads to the Valencia river  
where Sister Phyllis is weepin prayers in glossolalia  
and inscribing a vever for Legba

and an old man is cutting sheaves of sage  
scythe ways or Sundays  
cleaving coconuts with a three-canal blade  
And the nut well bleed  
and it humble  
cutlass when it flash though  
an it cut his achilles

The same cutlass swung from my brother's hip  
when we went hunting up Kandahar hill  
for sacred reeds and flute wood  
naked as we born in this blooming heat  
up Five Rivers jungle

Was cut that lash the horsewhip snake in two  
against the orange tree  
make we strip it twist and pour hot oil  
in its living wound

O ma Sylvia  
your spirit vest still with me it still with me  
your trance of sorrow still  
dry and heavy

and the crying bird of your throat  
is a hummingbird  
for you are loa of birds

Once I was cutting feet for wooden men  
shaping their bones on the steel  
and somehow snapt the blade's hot handle  
and saw the grinning edge rise up

and strike you

central in the temple

*O ma Sylvia*

with the hilt

you was washing white sheets

in the side house sink

## Santa Cruz

In Santa Cruz, the bush, the insect nests and growth  
on the branches and the calabash root.  
The maldjo ash an sap that oozed  
    from the plum tree trunk  
    so slack and clear.

I climbed the Chenet, the Sapodilla  
and the dudus mango tree  
    with white lice on its leaves.  
Paraplegic fruit ruined to rot in that epic of mandrake  
    behind the pig pen  
where the bush was serpent fresh  
and the earth stayed wet  
under riverless bridges and the talcum fog  
    of Pipiol village.

Long grass grew in the gardens of Ignacio and tanty Margaret.  
While they sat sippin cocoa tea in their tapia bungalow  
reaming through rolls of old photographs  
for maps of Orinoco.

Attached to South America  
    by the fingertips.

## His Hands

Ol' Buckmouth swung a black snake.

He whippeth me from arse to widow's peak.

His wicked wrist

hissed so swift

it sparked gashes

like tractor wheels

through the muddy fields

of my back

with his whip

old nigga grip

wrapt two time

around his carpenter's fist.

He maketh me to stand in cold showers

with the first hair of my manhood

exposed.

He forceth me

to eat egg an green banana

in cow heel soup with

plenty pepper. He

maketh me to kneel down on a grater

and count to one hundred

and twenty                    seven

... *o father in heaven* ...

His hands,

which held my breath to ransom

and learnt me how to hide my stutter

were like brutal knots

of burnt Bajan cedar.

But then those hands  
could get gentle on my shoulder  
at country weddings and funerals,  
in Wallerfield, on Christmas eve.

And I remember  
that the corn they harvested there that year  
was twisted and dry  
like a dead man's hand.

## Jungle

I have an antenna in my beard  
and a blood duct that keeps secrets  
I have a bone flute that whistles  
and an arrow headed temper  
that can shave the treetops

. . . in the jungle . . .

There is a baptist hymn I know  
that keeps my amulet shone  
and I know  
every shiver of wind in the cane  
each gust of rain and hurricane  
that trips through this land  
this land that knows my dark heart  
rivers that know my name

. . . in the jungle . . .

I have been seeking  
between the ditay payee  
and the fire plant of my dream  
for the river I used to steal fishes from  
to put in a jar on the window sill  
and feed them wheat and honey  
till each one died

those silver-bellied slitherings  
were the hourglass  
of rhyme

## Mr Buller

Mr Buller seep out sudden  
from deep Cantaro bush  
and it was the talk!  
But how Ma Daisa  
in she seventies  
could come jus so  
an marry a man like he  
in these late seventies?

An dance castilian  
in Hilton ballroom  
with this frog face man  
who smell like black an white lizard shit  
and spootin spit  
an come from cocoa country  
in that baggy brown suit  
an he garrulous mousche  
an he bandy two knee  
with he hernia heng low.  
Who spoke drunkwise,  
who could transcribe?  
No, his whole head shook when he spoke  
and words would roll round his jaw and stay loose  
as if booze  
had them bazodee.

But Buller had a stash of Atlantic 45s  
in a broko down cabinet bottom  
—was the pure jump  
rhythm an blues!  
But he'd cuss if anyone ever touched his Joe Turner  
an he'd lick down for Ruth Brown.  
He'd bark for Fats Domino—  
no no no!