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Roy McFarlane, *Beginning With Your Last Breath*

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REFERENCES

McFarlane, Roy, *Beginning With Your Last Breath* (Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2016). 83 pages. ISBN: 9781911027089

- 1 Roy McFarlane was born in Birmingham of Jamaican parentage and has lived in the Black Country, an industrial area to the north of Birmingham, most of his life. He is a former community worker and after working in many anti-racism projects in the 1990s, began to write and perform poetry around 2000 under the tutelage of the late Roi Kwabena, a Trinidadian poet and cultural activist who was then based in Birmingham. Roy's reputation as a poet and performer quickly grew and in 2009, he was appointed Starbucks Poet in Residence. In 2010-2011 he was Birmingham Poet Laureate.
- 2 In 2011 Roy McFarlane co-edited an anthology of poems by locally based artists, *Celebrate Wha'? - Ten Black British Poets from the Midlands* (Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 2011) and in 2012, he was featured in a major anthology of black and Asian poetry edited by Jackie Kay, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson: *Out of Bounds: British Black and Asian Poets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2012). His debut collection, *Beginning With Your Last Breath*, was published by Nine Arches Press in September 2016.
- 3 This first collection is divided into four sections which follow the poet's journey and his life as a black man who grew up in Britain. The catalyst for the writing of these poems was the passing of the poet's mother in November 2014. The first section begins with the poet's adoption by his new mother and charts the painful process of getting to know his biological mother and coming to terms with his status as an adopted child. The second section is about growing up black in England in the 1970s and 1980s and tackles the issues of racism, integration and identity. The third section charts the poet's development as a

man and deals with love, relationships and jazz. The final section completes the circle with the passing of the poet's mother being a major theme and taking us back to the beginning.

4 Roy McFarlane's collection could be seen as an example of what Black British poetry is today, but it also transcends these expectations and shades into confessional poetry.

5 The second section of this collection contains the poems which best fit the "Black British" label. For instance, the poems entitled "That place just off the M6" and "The *black corner* of Wolverhampton" subtly address the issue of Black Britishness or growing up black in England. In "That place just off the M6", the poet uses humour and wordplay to refer to the wave of immigration from the Caribbean which started in the late 1940s and saw the arrival of thousands of West Indians in the Black Country, an industrial area to the north of Birmingham:

Queen Victoria called it the Black Country.
Black Country! Black people!
Where else would they go? (21)

6 Then we learn that it is no wonder that so many West Indians settled down in the Black Country, also known as the land of the "yam, yam" on account of their dialect, as "Black people nyam [Jamaican Creole for "to eat"] yam, sweet potatoes and tings" (21).

7 A haunting presence in this collection is Bevan, a childhood friend of the poet, who appears in several poems like "After all is said and done" and "Saturday Soup". Bevan may have been the poet's alter ego, a "rude boy" who sometimes resorted to violence. In "After all is said and done", Bevan gets beaten up by a gang of skinheads and that incident changes his life forever: "he still believed, but stopped calling on Jesus" (35). Poems like "Saturday Soup" and "The Tebbitt Test (Patriotism)" address the issue of racism squarely. The piece entitled "The Tebbitt Test (Patriotism)" refers to Norman Tebbitt's notorious "litmus test of Britishness" (33). In 1989 the Conservative MP Norman Tebbitt said that most people did not want to live in a multicultural society and that the latter had been imposed upon them and in 1990 he said that to be British you had to support the England team at cricket matches. This quickly became known as the "cricket test".

8 One of the most moving poems about the poet's childhood memories is probably "Patterson's House", a piece in which the poet fondly reminisces about "the old man of the neighbourhood" whose house was always open and where the local youths could eat Jamaican food, drink some Guinness and listen to the old man's stories about this time in Cuba or in the RAF during the Second World War.

9 The poems in the first, second and last sections transcend the boundaries of Black British poetry and take the reader into the realm of confessional poetry. The first poem in the collection, "Papers", movingly recalls the day when the poet first heard from his adoptive mother that he had been adopted, and "Fragments of a mother and son story" relates the poet's journey to Canada to meet his biological mother. Both poems work towards crescendos that enact the poet's emotional experience.

10 A number of poems could only be described as sensuous love poems and chart the poet's development as a lover while others explore his love of jazz ("A Love Supreme") or his religious upbringing ("Baptism"). Indeed, the poet's father was a Pentecostal minister and expected his son to follow in his footsteps. This adoptive father appears in several poems like "In Memory of Boxing" and "I Found my Father's Love Letters". The poem entitled "In Memory of Boxing" is a tribute to his father's resilience and endurance, from his days

as a farmer working "under the bruising heat of a Caribbean sun" (25) to his life as factory worker "labouring in the ring of the steel industry/caught up in the cold of the British Isles (25). All these reminiscences are held together by the metaphor of boxing, from the famous "Rumble in the Jungle" of 1974 to the Frank Bruno v. Mike Tyson match of 1989.

- 11 A number of poems are also characterized by a strong sense of place, like "Tipton" for instance in which the poet voices his attachment to this small industrial town in the Black Country where he presently resides:

Tipton, this tongue-tipping
double syllable of a word,
this Bermuda triangle
between Brum and Wolves.
This *lost* city quintessentially
Black Country, God's belly button
of the universe has got me (59)

- 12 In this "lost" city Roy Mc Farlane has found his voice as a poet and has begun a new journey. For this, the reader can only be grateful.

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personnescitees Jackie Kay, Roi Kwabena, Roy McFarlane, James Procter, Gemma Robinson, Norman Tebbitt

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