

Hosannas for Hiroshima

Clever Backbone, by John Agard (Bloodaxe Books, 2009), £7.95

I've not yet had the pleasure of hearing John Agard perform his poetry, but judging from his new book he would be most entertaining yet while making the audience think past the cleverness. Agard presents sixty sonnets, each titled in numbered sequence, that are loosely based on Darwinian evolution and its resulting human predicaments and failings. His eye is not that of a biologist but a social radical and sometime trickster. Now, as one might not care to listen to sixty sonnets performed one after another throughout a reading, so one should not attempt to read this slim volume at one go; the weaknesses of the form on the page become too obvious, even as Agard puts the variations of the sonnet form through their paces, each given a sequential number in place of a title. There are some clunker couplet rhymes one might get away with only in performance, such as *Mohendro* [sic]- *darro/branded cargo* (sonnet 58), *Icarus/bites the dust*, (sonnet 42), *smart-ass superior/harass of a hernia* (sonnet 16). But then I was charmed by the sight-rhyme of *giraffe/Luftwaffe* (sonnet 50), which can give pleasure only on the page.

The premise of the sequence, as suggested by the title, is that humans ought not to be uppity just because we think of ourselves as the be-all, end-all of Darwin's "forms so beautiful and most wonderful". Sonnet 59 warns, "You might have turned your backbone from the trees/ but O no, you won't shake off those chimpanzees/ still swinging among the branches of your genes./ Note the way you behead a banana,/ scratch your parts and groom before a mirror --/ making faces at yourself – your Other." Another predicts, punningly, "Remember, O you kind without fins or wings,/ a backbone isn't all it's cracked up to be./ A backbone has its drawbacks. Upright posture/ its downside. So don't start acting uppity.// Slipped discs and backache are already in your future" (sonnet 14).

Agard uses the sonnet sequence to expose our human moral, sexual, and intellectual foibles. One bluesy poem, sonnet 20, goes, "Hello white Erectus/ Bet you've been taken aback/ to discover your family tree/ begins with an African black – a foxy fossil lady named Lucy/... People get ready evolution's train-a-coming./ People get ready evolution's train-a-coming./ Got a ticket all the way to Savanna./ Gonna find you a black bipedal Momma." (I love that sly pun, African *savanna/Savannah* Georgia.) The final sonnet, number 60, philosophises on our human future, as if we had any say in the matter: "Beloved Hominid paradox/ is there no stopping your vertical clock,/ no backing down to your backbone,/ no end to your vertical quest?// And when the final reckoning has come/ will you consider your fate cursed or blessed?/ If you had to do it all over the next time round/ would you opt for a bipedal progress?// Beloved Hominid paradox/ will your Hosannas replace your Hiroshimas/ or will your self-created disasters/ stand in the way of your Happy-Ever-Afters?// Is it too early to start taking stock/ or is the writing written in the rock?"

In view of the evolutionary basis of the sonnet sequence it was a bit disconcerting to find that Agard got his Darwin exactly wrong when in sonnet 46 he wrote, "Pondering four-footed facial expressions,/ Darwin concludes that orang-utans don't frown./ As for smiling out of the question." In fact Darwin observed in orang-utan Jenny at the London Zoo an entire range of facial emotions expressed in proper context, which so resembled his own daughter's, that he

wrote the seminal book, “The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals,” whose conclusions ‘write in the rock’ the case for evolution.

Nonetheless, “Clever Backbone” is an exuberant romp, showing again poetry’s “forms so beautiful and most wonderful.”

Norbert Hirschhorn

Published in London Magazine August/September 2009