

S A F E

METAMORPHOSIS

OTIS MENSAH

FOREWORD

Beyond our mutual respect for Hip-Hop and hummus, myself and Otis both believe in a better world. A world with greater equality and tolerance where there is a niche for every one of us to help make that a reality. With that belief, and both of us living in a northern post-industrial city called Sheffield, we were bound to come together.

Strangers matter in Sheffield, because sooner or later it becomes clear that there aren't really any. We all know someone who knows someone who knows the person we now think of as a stranger. It is this idea, at its most simple, which helped me discover a burnishing passion to fight injustice. I got involved in politics because I was, firstly, tired of complaining and also frustrated by asking the wrong people to do the right thing. This led me to become a councillor, then Lord Mayor of Sheffield, and recently an MEP representing Yorkshire & the Humber at the European Parliament.

One of the things I am immensely proud to have done during my time as Lord Mayor was creating the post of Sheffield's Poet Laureate. Nobody suggested I should do it or gave me permission to do it. I just thought it was a great idea and wanted someone to champion Sheffield's creative arts in new and exciting ways, but to also really make a statement. For me, Otis represents all that is great about Sheffield and being a voice for a generation; he's vulnerable yet dynamic, skilful and radical. It's worth pointing out that while the response to his appointment was overwhelmingly positive, some comments made it clear that poetry is still massively affected by elitism; and has a long history of white male mediocrity. Yes, Otis is the first Hip-Hop artist to be awarded a poet laureate title in the UK, and I'm proud that he's breaking down barriers, smashing the stuffy stereotype, and reminding people that poetry is meant to be for the people.

At the heart of this collection of poems, Otis shows us that in a precarious, ever-changing world, the most radical thing we can do is be ourselves. He also shows us the power of authenticity and doing things differently.

Doing things differently can be scary, and there are people who will hate you for it, but there are also people who will love you for it

and who will join you. You might even change the world, in small ways, large ways and middle ways in between, or spark others to do so – like Otis has and continues to do in inspiring me and so many others. But if you keep doing things how they've always been done, and if you stick to outdated traditions (and what is tradition if it isn't peer pressure from dead people?!) then you risk never knowing what it's like to succeed and to fail in the pursuit of great endeavours. So go ahead and enjoy this amazing collection of poems and I dare you not to leave feeling inspired. And let us make a promise, not to denigrate but to inspire. Rather than bemoan the present, let's paint a picture of what can be. Instead of inciting hatred and instilling fear, let's rise above the chorus of our age and dare to sing a different song.

– Magid Magid, former Lord Mayor of Sheffield

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LIKE THERAPY

It's like therapy to me
riding waves of systematic heresy at sea
rid you of that uninvited stranger that never leaves
empty houses and holes in stories lit up like
Tel Aviv at night

Life in the 21st century
where they pump my people full of corn syrup and fluoxetine
causing toxic dreams but
these words are like kerosene
that light up lanterns by my feet
so I can see and avoid this pier of brown broken glass
a town bestowed to clowns
in cloaks and masks
where rats and roaches laugh
at people coaxed by stats

A DAY CLOSER TO FOREVER

This world feeds us so much nothing
only to tell us you are what you eat

I envision echoes from impartial spectators saying
'Why so brash
rash
and hasty?'

I hear the voice of my mother calling
'Things aren't always as they seem,'
begging me to look beyond the shell we're all caged in
to me this is more than apparent

I recall all too well asking for black pudding
in hope of chocolate cake
as sniggers from a waiter render my childlike desires meaningless.
Now, if I could reincarnate into the me of past
I'd say,
'You, Sir,
are a dream killer,
a dream killer.'
I'd harden my shell
to protect me from the knocks of what is
to be whilst you
piss your dreams down the water well of life

Gazing at my reflection in a cracked piece of glass
it saddens me deeply that I'll never know what it is
to see myself as I truly am
I can only look upon a snapshot of myself
a billionth of a second into the past
They say 'time implies change and
change necessitates imperfection'
so I imagine a time where my todays,
yesterdays and tomorrows are all combined,

no one could tell me what I can't do
because of what I've done
or what I must do
because of where I've come
I said 'I imagine a time' but there would be no time
just existence
a line
journeying what it means to Be
silence but not deadness

a kind of calm out of reach for now
bound by space and time
where tweeters tweet
bloggers blog
and demons whisper
but every day when I wake
I look around at the walls which enclose me
and I say
today is a good day
a day closer to forever

Boy: I have a confession to make.

Moon: Tell me, child!

Boy: I've been trading in sleep for poems.

