

## **This Voice**

**Andrew Hodgson**

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You open up your mouth and... this voice.

I wonder if it was always like this, for you.

A voice, or voices.

I wonder.

If

Sat, watching Andi Peters everyday there, on the smoky carpet, legs folded for assembly, crane the neck and stasis, wood effect – tubular? Is that the word? Box, and, on the television, watching Andi Peters, or Anneka Rice, that slightly more dissolute BBC voice of the 1990s, adjacent the earlier Lord Haw-Haw vibe, I wonder.

If the babysitter instilled degrees of Thames Estuary or casj Oxfordshire or whatever, in your voice, at the time.

If it was fleeting, or snuck diphthongs where they're not supposed to be

Your voice given you by a carer, by verbal transmission of a toss given. By the tubular nanny, by

I wonder.

Craig Charles always sounded so alien in comparison. With his grin and unkempt clothes, presented as muck in comparison.

I wonder if that's why you change your voice later. Why they made you change your voice, later.

Did you know then?

When was it, that you learnt your mouth dredges silt? When was that?

The soil.

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When ta mère

Wait

When yer ma

Your mum

Yeh mam

Wait

You suck your thumb in public, though you're too old for all that, and intermittently your hand is snatched away and yer clipt rount lug

Wait

You're slapped, on the back of the head, in close proximity to the ear, quit that, you're too old for that. Pacifiers stymie linguistic development, so they say, autour de toi, and so no more of that

But do be quiet.

Sit nice, Blue Peter's on.

Yeh mam goes Ings Market on Fridays.

You're deposited in the library while she does her jobs for the afternoon.

You're not a bain though, are you? Grow up. So you avoid the sandpit with the green plastic turtle cast and yellow hand rakes – is that the word? Trowels? For meditative tending to the sable – cible? You avoid the red chairs, look a bit like Lego, grow up.

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The outer reaches of the area you can access without being escorted back to the picture books, and pick *The Silmarillion* from the shelves. You know the name on the spine, you've heard talk of a cartoon by the guy. But you next *The Hobbit* for illustrated cover, and pick *The Silmarillion*, a thick white hardback that appears in the environs of 85% appendices and footnotes.

You guess it is about a ship. The Silmarillion is probably a ship, a boat. Maybe it is about Sean Bean in Spain, rolling around in hay in abandoned windmills for whatever reason, and you scan the pages of tiny signs. Phase the eyes out and read aloud, under breath, the blurred black rectangles, tubes and boxes of a similar voice to yeh sen as he graciously, heroically even, accepts the surrender of conniving French forces during the Napoleonic incursions into Spain.

Ah tell thee

The librarian tells you to be quiet, you are escorted back to the sandbox.

Your thumb is snatched away from your mouth, you are told to be quiet, you are escorted back to cross your legs on the smoky carpet, crane the neck – is the Art Attack guy in the red jumper also the daft bust with the bobble-nose? Is the silly head Geordie, or Scouse? Is the joke that he is Geordie, or Scouse?

You do the voice. Harry Enfield does the voice with a comical wig on. Is that what you sound like too?

What's the joke again?

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At camp other people laugh you can't talk proper

- He can't pronounce his own name, let alone the city he's from! Say hedgehog. Say gatepost. Say nothing. Say snow.

Monkey.

You reason that you don't speak English at all. You speak something else. Something older. It's Anglo-Norse, not English, it's something else. Something older.

Who put those letters in your name? In the city's name? Who changed that so? In some other code.

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At uni, they say, say gatepost. Say snow, say nothing.

You brush your teeth in the mirror and practice someone else's voice. Snow. Gatepost. More Lord Haw-Haw at first, before it settles into something else. On planes people think you're Dutch or something else somewhere else.

In writing, your dialect confuses editors. They ask if you're foreign or something – this needs a native speaker's eye.

On Twitter southerners claiming to be educated laugh at northern voices, vulgar, uncouth, uneducated – monkeys, gammon, pigs

In uni, later, in a different context, your students laugh at their few northern peers as they enunciate their ideas. They ask them how the heroin tastes up there

Seminars on classism no one attends, and your camouflage feels more and more a shirking of responsibility, of giving in, of surrender to a slow-moving linguistic colonialism perpetrated over centuries.

This voice. Your voice. A voice, to put away.

Sit nice. Be quiet.

Fuck sake.

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