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HILTON: Oh my gawd. This book is one of the high points of my life.

ROBIN: Shush.

HILTON: I begged, I begged to review it.

ROBIN: Thank you.

HILTON: And I said, "She's gonna win this award."

ROBIN: Yeah. I'm glad everybody knew; I didn't know.

DAVID: That's Hilton Als, a staff writer at The New Yorker, talking with Robin Coste Lewis about her debut poetry collection, which just won a National Book Award. The book is "Voyage of the Sable Venus," and it takes its name from an 18th century engraving.

ROBIN: It's this gorgeous black woman on a clam shell, like Botticelli's Venus, and she's attended by all these classical figures. It isn't till you really look at it that you realize it's a pro-slavery image because Triton or Neptune is carrying--instead of a trident, he's carrying--a flag of the Union Jack.

DAVID: That got her interested in images of black women in Western art, a research project that got much bigger than she ever anticipated.

ROBIN: It just led me on this whole path, and I really thought at the time it was gonna be a few pages long. And then, every time I would do research, it would just get darker and deeper and longer and more horrid. It just didn't stop; it didn't let up.

DAVID: "Voyage of the Sable Venus" is Robin Coste Lewis's first book of poems. She was trained as a Sanskrit scholar at Harvard, and now in her 50s, she's working on a PhD.

ROBIN: The Western art project, as beautiful as it is, it also has such a ugly underside for so many kinds of people.

HILTON: Yes. Well, it had to hack away at other things in order to stand on something, right?

ROBIN: Absolutely, absolutely. Right, right. So you know, for me, if I would go into a museum and see some kind of grand historical painting about some emperor doing something fabulous, conquering some land, there might not have been a black woman in that painting, but the frame might have had black, female bodies carved throughout it in some kind of subservient position.

HILTON: Yes, yes.

ROBIN: Do you know? And we're not supposed to notice that frame, and we're not supposed to think about it.

HILTON: Yes.

ROBIN: But it's there, and that's what was so fascinating to me, is that there's so many black women in exhibitions all over the world in every time period, in every country, every continent. It's everywhere, but you wouldn't think of it. Because who would think to look at the carving of a comb closely?

HILTON: Yes.

ROBIN: Or the face of a button for an emperor? Why would someone need to carve a black, female body onto the button of an emperor? Why, you know?

HILTON: Yes, yes.

ROBIN: And then when you start looking just for that, that's when it begins to kind of emerge. And so I don't think I would've done--I don't know that I would've seen that had my brain not slowed me down and made me look more slowly.

HILTON: Yes. I know that you began writing poetry because of something that happened.

ROBIN: Yeah.

HILTON: Would you mind talking about it?

ROBIN: Not at all, not at all. I was in what they call a catastrophic accident. I fell through an open stairwell, and I--

HILTON: What does that mean? There were no stairs?

ROBIN: There was no rail.

HILTON: There was no rail.

ROBIN: That I didn't know, and it was a dark room. I was going to get my coat in a restaurant, and they failed to tell me there was a hole in the middle of the floor. And I walked into air.

HILTON: Where was this?

ROBIN: In San Francisco. I was at a conference, and I was just having dinner with a friend. And I got cold, and I asked for my coat. And they led me back to this room and said, "It's over there." I could see my coat hanging on a wall, but I couldn't see the hole in the floor.

HILTON: Oh my gawd.

ROBIN: So I fell through, and for the last--I guess it's 16 years now--16 years, I've been doing a lot of rehab and recovery and somewhere--

HILTON: What was the effect of the falling?

ROBIN: Well, oh thank you. So I was diagnosed with permanent mild to moderate brain damage: so a traumatic brain injury.

HILTON: Oh my gawd.

ROBIN: And then I had all kinds of injuries all over my body. I still have so many surgeries to have, that I'll be going into soon. But the most kind of devastating part of it was the brain injury.

HILTON: Yes.

ROBIN: At some point I couldn't read or write, and I was very, they call it "exquisite hypersensitivity." Everything triggered some kind of symptom: talking, walking, seeing, hearing, smelling, you name it. Anything that had to do with the senses would send me into a spiral where I would end up sleeping for days upon days. My memory. I fought really hard for a year to teach myself the alphabet again. It took a year just to do that because the language center of my brain was badly damaged. But you know, I hate to be that person that is always looking for the green side of something. But it turned out to be, in many ways, a blessing in disguise. I call brain damage the gift that keeps on taking, you know [laughs]?

HILTON: [laughs].

ROBIN: And I don't think that I--I know. I just with my friends that this book is actually about brain damage. I know I would not have written this book had I not had that accident. So partly because if I'm gonna die, I can write whatever the hell I want.

HILTON: Exactly. You're free.

ROBIN: I'm so free.

HILTON: Yes.

ROBIN: And there's no one to care about much in terms of pleasing. But also, the doctors told me I can only write one line a day, and I could only read one line a day. And that, of course, spiraled me into an incredible depression for several months. And then, at some point, you know how that grace, that voice of grace just comes into your mind?

HILTON: Mmhmm.

ROBIN: This voice just said to me, "OK, then. It's gonna be the best damn line I can think of." And so every single day I would spend in bed thinking of the best line. I couldn't write cuz my hands were all in different casts and all kinds of splints.

HILTON: Were you a mother when you had this accident?

ROBIN: No. No, no, no. They also told me I couldn't have a kid [chuckles]. They told me I could never write again, teach again, read again, and not become a mother.

HILTON: And you've done all those things.

ROBIN: I've done all those things. I was annoyed. I was enraged.

HILTON: Yes. There's nothing like being annoyed to get the juices going.

ROBIN: Absolutely, oh yeah. Absolutely.

HILTON: Tell me about your son, and how did that miracle occur to you?

ROBIN: Oh my gawd! What do you mean how?

HILTON: [laughs] I mean, well I know how it happens!

[both laugh]

HILTON: But the decision to.

ROBIN: There's a bird, and there's a bee [laughs].

HILTON: Yes, exactly! There's a stork in a diaper.

ROBIN: Exactly!

HILTON: But how did you decide to become a mother?

ROBIN: This is such a great question. I have been haunted with being a mother all my life, and when they told me I couldn't have kids, I really had to think about it. I thought about it for like a decade, you know?

HILTON: [sighs]

ROBIN: What does it mean to be a disabled woman and to have a child, and don't be selfish and mess with this kid's life if you can't really raise him or her well? And then one day, I was walking down the street in Boston. I was doing major rehabilitation at the time. I was in occupational therapy, speech-language therapy. Just going outside would hurt.

HILTON: Mmhmm.

ROBIN: One day, I'd gone to do something, and there was a woman, this gorgeous woman, in a power wheelchair wheeling down the street at what felt like to me 60 miles per hour, with two of her kids on her lap.

HILTON: Wow.

ROBIN: She was high-tailing it. They were having such a good time. And I was like, "You idiot. If this woman can raise her kids, you can have a kid."

HILTON: Wow.

ROBIN: And she was such my inspiration. And so then I was hell-bent. I tried and tried and tried for many, many years, and then it finally happened. Finally happened. And the deep irony for me is that my father was the first person to tell me, way before my accident, "I think you really should have a baby, Robin. You wanna be a mother. You should just do it."

HILTON: Wow.

ROBIN: My father was incredible. He was funny too.

HILTON: I love him already.

ROBIN: Oh, he was so good!

HILTON: Yes.

ROBIN: And the deep irony is I found out--after years of trying to get pregnant--I found out I was pregnant four days after my father's funeral.

HILTON: Oh wow.

ROBIN: Which felt so magical to me cuz I always told him, "You know. You know when you die, you better take me with you. Cuz there's no reason I'm staying without you."

HILTON: Yes, yes.

ROBIN: And so the fact that when I found out I was pregnant, it felt like he stayed with me in some way.

HILTON: How does the accident impact you today?

ROBIN: Well, I mean, I've grown comfortable with being brain damaged.

HILTON: Yes.

ROBIN: It's become familiar. You know that saying that human beings can get used to anything. I got used to it. I don't know. I still very much appreciate that my brain has become a odd little bedfellow with me.

HILTON: Yes, yes.

ROBIN: We love each other. I'm like, "You're a freak brain." And that's kinda sexy to me.

HILTON: Yeah [laughs].

ROBIN: I like that you see these things that other people aren't seeing, but keep it to yourself. And we'll try to turn it into art at some point.

HILTON: Yes, yeah. Does it help you parent in a different way, do you think?

ROBIN: Absolutely. It helps me put it in 5th gear every day from the gate, and I'm--

HILTON: As you wake up with him, and it's like, "Look! We're here!"

ROBIN: Absolutely.

HILTON: Yes, yes.

ROBIN: And also, I mean this is the macabre part. Supposedly, my brain won't last as long as most people's brains will last. I know that, and I think that's also why I push myself so hard to write. There's a certain urgency. I feel like I'm fighting the clock until my brain starts to rot.

HILTON: Yeah.

ROBIN: And so I try to have a lot of fun. I try to parent him for the future. I've already--I have a whole library for him once I'm gone. I have friends sign books to him for the future because I know there's gonna come a time where I won't be able to be present in the same way that I am now.

HILTON: Be mobile, yes, yes. Do you talk to him about that?

ROBIN: I do. I mean, I had to because my disability is invisible.

HILTON: Yes.

ROBIN: So the way I described it to him when he was younger, I said, "It's like mommy's brain is in a wheelchair." And sometimes it's hard because he's a gregarious, precocious, fabulous child.

HILTON: He's about eight now.

ROBIN: He's seven. And I have to tell him sometimes to be quiet. That's a drag.

HILTON: Yeah.

ROBIN: It's just a drag. Or I can't--I'm sad that he doesn't know the person before my accident, because I was a huge audiophile. I mean a music collection that's brilliant, and I can't listen to music and have people talking at the same time in a room unless it's a lot of people talking. So things like that. I'm constantly, I feel like I'm constantly repressing his little spirit in order stay--

HILTON: Oh, sweetie. But sweetie, it's not--

ROBIN: in order to stay asymptomatic and take care of him or make him dinner.

HILTON: Yes, yes.

ROBIN: So in those ways. But it's also OK because I feel like you know, he's getting to learn about the ways in which bodies are different.

HILTON: And also the ways in which life curtails us.

ROBIN: Absolutely.

[music]

DAVID: That's Hilton Als, a staff writer at The New Yorker, talking with the poet Robin Coste Lewis. Her debut collection "Voyage of the Sable Venus" just won a National Book Award. I'm David Remnick. This is The New Yorker Radio Hour.

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