

# BOMB DAMAGE MAPS

*West London blues*

Rupert M Loydell

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## THE LORE OF THE LAND

On other occasions the people did  
convince themselves of intentions  
to uprise and take back control  
but apathy and commonsense  
soon sent them back to work,  
to daily routines, to shop, to bed.  
Each day went much as before;  
is a tradition among inhabitants  
to do so. Is a blessing and a boon.

On one occasion the car was towed  
to an unknown garage. Was never  
recovered or repaired, though always  
had an MOT, bought round the corner  
from where he used to live. *Win a trip  
to NYC* said the chocolate biscuits  
wrapper he couldn't afford, *Tories  
out* said the wall and the gossip  
in the pub. But they wouldn't go.

South of the village is an intersection,  
and storytellers agree that questions  
must remain unanswered. The book  
is a magic ritual, maintained to be  
written by the natives. Sickening  
is not allowed, of neither the heart  
or the body. All must be restored  
by unknown powers and you must  
show you are available for work.

Traditionally, ghosts are associated  
with the past, what went before,  
but others call this idle fiction.  
Reformation and revolt is often  
punished and misunderstood  
by other generations. Condemned,  
we ride through implications  
and denial, accused of sorcery.  
Questions remain unanswered,

answers remain unattached. Let  
the show continue, let bygones  
be history and history be gone.  
Let us commence, let us be lovers,  
let us in or out, just let it drop.

Legends about the city abound.  
No son of mine will ever die  
by drowning, I own my luck and  
each day happens much as before.

It is said tradition only speaks  
when spoken to, and speculates  
that it ceased and was filled in.  
The screams of a woman haunt  
this place and the king and all  
his army became stones. Which  
tree is meant is unclear, as no-one  
will own the watch. But all agree  
what this is is not said or known.

## TOPOGRAPHIES

She made a suit made of maps,  
made a dress made of maps,  
papered her kitchen with maps.  
She was going nowhere but  
she could dream. And did.

Made a map made of maps,  
a world to get lost in, a world  
of impossibilities and broken  
mountains, roads and streams.  
When I reach this place I will stop.

Walked in shoes pasted over  
with maps. Host in her hive,  
guide to her own inclusive holiday.  
Made her son's football into  
an abstract globe, all ocean

and land, and then another.  
Papered chairs and the table,  
doors and windows, blinds  
a squiggle of roads and lanes  
all leading to her backyard.

The map as an image is  
a popular form of decoration,  
thereby showing its qualities as  
substitute for travels as well as  
a means of orientation.

Made a map made of maps,  
all borrowed mountains and hills,  
blues and greens, red lines,  
a public house by the stream.  
She owned no right of way,

was no safe passage marked  
across her land. Imagine being  
lost everywhere, imagine quitting  
in the middle of a tour. She paced  
round her garden then went inside.

## WESTWAY

See the scars beside the concrete  
where houses used to be, people  
used to be. A horse in a dried-up  
muddy field, graffiti for company:  
*Where is your god now?* a dripping  
question that can't be answered.

Painted the scene purple and gold  
but couldn't hide the damage. Cars  
drove faster to get to nowhere quicker  
than they ever had. A skatepark  
sprang up and splintered, the gypsies  
moved on, leaving a scrapyard behind.  
The tube offers the best view: squint left  
and imagine a neighbourhood divided  
by demolition and elevated road. Imagine  
a riot on your hands, a fire 24 stories tall  
and next door dying or gone missing.

*Where is your god now?* He is a row  
of concrete statues holding up the road,  
is a horse remembering grassier days,  
is speculation all, no material evidence.  
Is working for human rights groups,  
is plotting the ley lines that gather here,  
is looking for his name in the phonebook,  
is probably a prince looking for a princess,  
is too old to move away now. Is stuck,  
is buried in the cellar, is underneath  
the arches, is pouring cold water  
on all his own ideas. Is forgotten.

Is Saturday morning in the market,  
the discarded is being repurposed,  
the freeway connection ignored.  
Jazz and reggae lubricate damp clothing  
and stale smoke, everything is cheap  
or overpriced. There's nothing I want  
but it is somewhere to be, something  
to do, is a diversion from the rest  
of the week, is a diversion: you must  
turn left, follow the yellow signs until  
they stop and you is lost. (Rumours  
that ghosts are to be seen walking.)

Is years later and nothing has changed  
although traffic jam above is longer  
and slower. Is a shopping centre nearby  
and an encampment of homeless men  
living in plastic and cardboard. Is  
a desultory space, curving shapes  
divide sky and landscape in visually  
arresting ways. Is private and is public,  
is glimpsed from the train, is whiplash  
and shadow, sounds of purpose up above.

Is two chairs and an upturned crate  
around a fireplace made of stones.  
Is signs of habitation, desolation,  
abandonment and discard, is home  
to no-one anyone knows. There used  
to be a second burial chamber  
in a field not far away, used to be  
a jumble of boulders, was once  
a church on a hill here, houses  
where people would eat and sleep.  
Now is only grim skyline, cold ash,  
the great round eyes of stray dogs,  
next day happening much as before.

## HIGH RISE

24 floors of incendiary backfire,  
flames reforming the sky, sirens  
for miles around, repercussions  
for years to come. Most local  
tower blocks are not yet safe,  
is money to be made elsewhere.  
Is not a priority, accommodation  
will be made available as and when.

Life on the never-never is not  
enough. There is not a dry eye  
in the house, there is not a floor  
left habitable, there is nothing  
to be done. Nature as divine entity  
is part of our relentless desire  
to classify, label and burn know.  
Each person's narrative is still  
their own, but they own nothing  
else, live at the edge of negative  
space and grief, poverty and guilt,  
with the lingering smell of fire.

Everything is subtly blurred  
and discarded. Lives taken away  
in skips, a tower block dressed  
in green beside the motorway  
into town. Gawping drivers  
and old news, a charitable fund  
and lost neighbours. Other  
variables are in play, emotions  
run high, trains run late.

Not an attempt to understand,  
is sound given shape to words,  
distant observations from the  
train ride into town. I live  
in the suburbs, haven't had time  
to look into these things  
or become a misery tourist.

24 floors that could have been  
saved, 24 floors that are too high  
for normal habitation. They are  
building 44 floors nearby:  
scratch the sky, hope no-one

has vertigo or drops a match.  
Will not be clad with same,  
will meet health and safety  
regulations, will cost more  
than risk and death can justify.

Bomb damage maps show what  
is missing and what is at risk.  
Areas destroyed, areas of fire,  
areas where it is not safe to live.  
But there is nowhere else to go.  
Grief and rage mark anniversary,  
72 people died, you we are doing  
almost nothing. Put your trust  
in anger, in official inquiry,  
in a black sack over there.

A wall and barbed wire fence  
separates towpath from  
an area under the road,  
but local legends are made  
from cultural ragbag, fleeter  
than wind and faster than fire.  
Next time, you should and must  
link up with the neighbours,  
form one massive community.

Council housing blocks around  
the church were adorned with  
green scarves and the nave was  
packed with people wearing  
the same colour, holding up  
pictures of loved ones they lost  
and carrying white roses to lay  
later at the base of the tower.



## CATALOGUE

I bought the book because of memory,  
not because of art. Paintings retain  
an appearance of speed, spontaneity  
and freshness, vital satisfactions  
I depend upon to navigate my past.

Major creative uncertainties are said  
to have been founded by an otherwise  
unknown saint, a plucky little survivor  
in the shadow of the concrete monolith,  
trying to be heard above traffic's roar.

A fenced off and graffiti-strewn area  
is the most common item of village  
mythology. Arise and march on to  
victory or the local on the corner.  
The official enquiry is still going on.

A ghost used to be seen here, legend  
has it that he was a wizard or a tramp,  
maybe the disputed site of a church,  
a mighty tower reaching to the sun  
and a road where lorries could race

across the aimless landscape beneath.  
Over two miles of elevated motorway,  
sliproad crossing the railway, two stubs  
on the north side built for connection to  
the planned line of an imaginary route.

Strange creatures inhabit this underworld,  
bodies buried in the motorway walk  
the streets and tell stories, sing songs,  
and a local tradition has grown up.  
Ask anyone who knows, they'll tell.

Attempts have been made to regenerate  
once-abandoned land, to brighten up  
the front cover of the official report.  
The future requires substantial demolition,  
but there will be no compensation.

## A WINDSCREEN ON TO THE WORLD

The dank chambers of an underground resting place for London's dead might not look it, but this flyover was built out of a respect, a way of escaping the unkempt, swampy cemeteries that were overloaded with bodies from the cholera outbreak. The roads are rarely open to the public, save for occasional tours. Remember, it's an arterial route, not an old railway line.

There are uncorroborated whisperings of a skeleton fully dressed in 1960s finery, with one of the road's spurs named after him and some of his weapons. The locals will tell you that. His ghost can supposedly be seen wandering the tarmac. Other dead dwellers include a shared love interest and the ghost of an unidentified lady wearing white.

Bottled human fetuses, preserved monkey heads and misshapen skeletons are some of the creepy specimens collected for ergonomic research – and all are on display here, or will be when the road re-opens. If deformed bodies and organs don't scare you, then electric lights, hydraulic lifts and air conditioning still pulls fans in from around the world. The A40(M) is the hub of all activity.

Other ghosts have been seen roaming the Western Avenue extension. It might look pleasant enough, but Westway is a 2.5 mile scar with a horrific history. The elevated section connects the mutilated body of a society beauty – limbs strewn under the flyover at ground level – with displays of old surgical equipment, marble heads and dusty documents. The real attraction here though is two giant murals by an artist, just above a forgotten slip road. Apparently, he was so pissed off about the planning he painted these faded stories for free.

You might not be able to hear over the sound of traffic, but a little girl has been reported to weep, slam doors and run along the fast lane, overtaking drivers as they travel. Since the mid 1970s locals have complained about a brilliant orange light emanating from the concrete freeway system. It is enough to give you chills if you find yourself in the aftermath of punk, accompanied only by the echoing footsteps of London and the drip-drip-drip of a leaky sky.

What a great collection of semi-deserted open spaces! Abandoned railway land around the Westway now promotes raw urban ambience but Portobello is lush with vivid greenery although there is still something unsettling about wandering along overgrown cuttings to urban development sites rich in graffiti. It's a little on the haunted side: bleak winter nights in November, London leaps off the balcony of the modern city to find a temporary home out beyond Paddington. Westway marked the beginning of the end.

## UNDERNEATH

At the end of things, death of course,  
and underneath the shake of the traffic  
and leftover violence, racist abuse and  
things no-one would say out loud  
written on the wall, offering new  
perspectives on how to navigate  
the surface of the city, teaching us  
what people really think, why they  
won't look us in the eye. This is not  
abstraction, is not human perception,  
is hatred, cultural war. Properties  
of light do not spill down the steps  
or ramps, the surveillance cameras  
are bust. Everything's slightly blurry,  
exaggerates the visual sensitivity  
of sore eyes after a full day's work.  
The city is not blank or flat: paint  
and pencil, rain and weather, mark  
and maim, move on to elsewhere.  
Is all physiological, all contours  
and edges, more than sum of parts.

Eye always looks for boundaries, you  
are pushing yours. Where to discover  
next? What can you say to inflame  
situation that can be passed off as  
a joke? Text and image, symbols  
and signs: make a mark, move on.  
Violence and passion, desire and fear  
of everything you're not. Bitten nails,  
dirty jeans, tattoos on your knuckles  
and a future you forgot. But is not  
just clichés like you, is parents,  
teachers, friends you might think  
better of. All want us to go home.  
We shan't. Will stand all night until  
time comes to the rescue, have no  
other home but here. Will walk nine  
times round the open fire, then lay  
my head on the turf. There are both  
women and men among us, we are  
a living company and will be here  
as long as it takes us to die.

