BOMB DAMAGE MAPS

*West London blues*

Rupert M Loydell

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The Lore of the Land

Topographies

Westway

High Rise

Catalogue

A Windscreen on to the World

Underneath

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 foetuses, 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.