

*Adventures Among the Living*, Tim Cumming (blueprint, 2022)

The Acknowledgements page at the end of *Adventures Among the Living* suggests that this new pamphlet (or chapbook) from poet and artist Tim Cumming is the product of – or 'made possible by' – 'a lucid dream' back in 2021. This may or may not be the subject of Cumming's painting 'The Poet Appears in Space Time outside Kensal Rise overground station in the dead of night', which is reproduced in full colour across the centrefold of this publication; a strange, slightly blurry work which foregrounds a fox against a street corner, with – presumably – the apparition of the poet to the left of the image.

It's a powerful image, as is the beginning of the first poem: 'I was not all there. Friends had / a habit of pointing this out.' The jokey tone, with its initial pun, gives way to something darker, where the narrator ends up 'whispering secrets / into a hole in the ground', convinced that no-one can hear him, but coming to the realisation that 'they all knew the words'. All? Friends or the implied everyone from the use of no-one? The narrator is set apart, kept back, with the others

glancing back at me as if I was  
the last figure of a convoy  
from the last war of antiquity,  
and my gods were contagious.

I love that last line, the idea that you can 'catch' gods, like an illness or disease, a virus perhaps, but Cumming does not linger in this scene; the untitled poems swiftly move the story along. Returning to his room our protagonist finds incident tape and arson, forcing him to flee, comparing himself to Frankenstein but 'hoping / something good would come of it' rather than 'monsters / that would eventually kill me'.

The fourth poem's 'bedsheets beneath me / twisted into a body shape' suggests that we are in dream territory, an idea reinforced by the way the narrator finds himself 'falling through air' then moving among people he recognises, 'unheard and unseen'. The dream sometimes turns into a nightmare:

I looked for my face but only  
saw a gap. How could I retrieve  
it, unfold it, spread it out  
like a map and read it,  
follow it, and find myself

But he cannot find himself, for he is 'as solid as smoke' and 'way off the map', reduced to asking 'what / would Keith Richards do?', which hardly seems like a rational response!

This, however, is not a rational journey, it is a city where 'shadow lives sometimes showed through', built upon 'the shadow of false memories', a place where 'the ground itself swooned at your feet'. The bed is a re-occurring image, as are maps and absences: of memory, self, any sense of purpose or direction. Films and parallel universes are mentioned

in passing, and '[a] box that had been opened / decades ago suddenly arrived / in the hands of a courier', as time loops around itself and slips away.

This poetic journey is made by a narrator who 'wasn't going anywhere', who is eventually led to tell himself that

Your place is here, and even  
though you are going to be very  
far away, you are expected and  
there's nothing you need to bring

although in the next poem he interrogates this: 'What did you bring / and how much of it did / you need to carry?' At this point, in the final two poems (the quote is from the last-but-one), we realise the whole sequence is a meditation about growing up and the baggage we all carry with us as we navigate the world around us and find our place until we

reach this point where  
the road ends, folding  
its dimensions into what  
you packed in haste as a child  
before embarking on your journey.

Cumming's dreamlike sequence, perhaps written according to 'fairy tale logic', is a strange and marvellous affair, its abstractions and surrealism grounded by very real depictions of the city, and a perceptive engagement with the language of emotion and confusion. It's a brave engagement with, and attempt to illuminate 'the shadows that / fall when memory passes you by.'

Rupert Loydell