Bodies and Other Strangers

*Kinship / Home*, Dorothy Cross (Lilliput Press)

*Slow Days, Fast Company*, Eva Babitz (NYRB Classics)

*An American Book of the Dead*, Kirsten Norrie (Broken Sleep Books)

At first glance Dorothy Cross' book seems to simply document the process of returning a mummified male body back to Egypt from a university in Cork where it has sat from the 1920s, having been taken from its tomb. But it is far more: it is an art project, an anthology of writing in response to her project, and an engagement with time, mourning and death.

Here are photographs of sculpture and memorials, of deserts, museum cabinets and ransacked tombs; fragments and close-ups of stone ears, feet and damaged limbs. Here are poems and stories, reminiscences and non-fiction that explore – often at a tangent or by association – themes related to home and loss, aging, migrants and the pilfering and plundering of architecture, gathering up in the name of colonialism and history.

Hisham Matar writes about 'Her Mother', her illness and suffering, their trip to London to obtain better medical treatment. The text ends as 'we land at midnight'. Rosemary Mahoney writes of 'A Walk in the Theban Necropolis' and her sudden realisation of what she is picking up – human remains – to take home as reminders of their visit. She and her friend come to their senses and return the body parts to a pit near where they found them. Max Porter offers readers a liturgical poem concerning 'His Child', a text to wish an imaginary son on his way, to praise him, to recommend him to the ferryman, to immortalise and remember him, whilst Edmund De Waal considers, in more general terms, how 'The language of loss and the framing of sympathy in everyday life is so impoverished, so mired in cliché and euphemism, that deep metaphors of "passing" become thinned to nothing, to sentimentality.'

There are other writings, too, including Cross' own text, which describes not only this specific project but places it within the context of her many art works, and within the wider concerns the project raises and which the chosen writers have articulated. She talks of 'connection', to place, to home, to personhood, to dignity and respect; and of how she can only be a temporary guardian of the mummy, who she desires to return home but at the time of publication still remains in a warehouse, in a gilded crate, as more paperwork and administration is undertaken. Although Cross is clearly disappointed at how such a simple idea has become so complex, *Kinship / Home* is a remarkable and moving publication.

The bodies in Babitz's book, which is subtitled 'The World, The Flesh, and L.A.', are usually objects of lust, bitchy criticism or friendship within the social and sexual whirl that Babitz inhabited in the 60s and 70s. Despite a lot of self-deprecation and no mention of money, Babitz seems to charm, seduce and be noticed by anyone she sets her sights on.

It's a fascinating and highly readable insight into a society that I suspect has disappeared post-AIDS, and possibly before as the hippy dream turned sour. There is no sense of distance here, none of the 'cool' observation that Joan Didion undertook on the page, Babitz is in the thick of things most of the time. She loves smog, traffic jams, cocktails, affairs, sex, parties and restaurants; and namedropping too. They may be names the reader has never heard of but Babitz soon lets you know all about them: their status, indiscretions, fashion sense and the current gossip about them.

Los Angeles is one of the weirdest cities I have ever been to, mostly because to British eyes it doesn't function as a city, just a spread-out map of roads with occasional clusters of shops and tourist attractions, but Babitz humanises it. She adores the heat, the availability of drugs, good food and sexual partners; she likes being looked after, especially by her special friend Shawn, who seems to act as a mix of escort, pimp and stand-in partner when required. If she tires of the city she flies to San Francisco, because it is cold and wet and makes her homesick, so she knows she will feel better after returning: 'My claustrophobia from San Francisco begins to vanish—that cheerful shipshape vitality of the north violates my spirit and I long for vast sprawls, smog and luke nights: L.A. It is there I work best, where I can live, oblivious to physical reality.' It's a sultry, insider's look at L.A. from back then.

The bodies in Kirsten Norrie's *An American Book of the Dead* are less physical, although the gritty landscape this 'Acid Western' is set in is hot, dusty and harsh enough. The absent bodies of the dead, however, are present in seances and photographs, and although the story is peopled by numerous characters, it is Death who is the hero of the novel. The book is a kind of fake archaeology, told in pseudo 18th Century language, detailing memories, apparitions, desires and occurrences in the Wild West. It is uncanny, intriguing and addictive, a ghostly reinvention of frontier survival, folk lore and the genre we know as the Western.

Rupert Loydell

[875 words]