

# The Geometric Kingdom

Rupert Loydell & Maria Stadnicka

'I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. I such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be.'

– Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

'What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else is the image of a place: a place where your bones and mine are buried, thrown, uncovered, together. They are strewn there pell-mell. One of your ribs leans against my skull. A metacarpal of my left hand lies inside your pelvis. (Against my broken ribs your breast like a flower.) The hundred bones of our feet are scattered like gravel. It is strange that this image of our proximity, concerning as it does mere phosphate of calcium, should bestow a sense of peace. Yet it does. With you I can imagine a place where to be phosphate of calcium is enough.'

– John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*

## THE RUIN OF HERE

'the future is a monotonous instrument'  
– Frances Picabia, 'Blind Man's Bluff'

But we still want to get there,  
try to climb the stairs too early,  
reach the lighted birds, escape  
the ruined castles of our lives.

It looks as though they are flying  
but it is only projected shadows  
on the bare stone walls. It seems  
there is a way out but there isn't:

these earth steps will crumble,  
turn the power off and the light  
will fade. We are not suited  
to the dereliction of today.

## Visiting Hours

I

they no longer  
drink tea, listen, squeeze swearwords

at the top floor, a paper-girl tries on black dresses  
her teeth bite the blue,  
scream; window left open...

life rolls over naked avenues  
with a visiting ticket

the nurse comes closer  
I collar her, state I am  
not through yet

II

they covered orange:  
broken, candle holder,  
climbed ladders,  
loose living-room socks  
hanging  
warm neck...  
tic-tac! tic-tac!

III

they whisper and nibble and cough  
trapped without oxygen masks

silence crumbles,  
cars move in the same direction,  
well dressed;  
my funeral goes ahead

## BECAUSE

Because they live longer lives  
we let them sleep all day  
then die alone.

Because they do not understand  
we cannot teach them,  
prefer not to talk.

Because they do not earn enough  
we let them eat badly  
and live somewhere else.

Because they are not us  
we are not interested  
and leave well alone.

Because they will die sooner  
we make excuses  
and put ourselves first.

Because we do not understand,  
they are always there;  
thankfully somewhere else.

Because we do not care  
they are not cared for,  
and live on their own.

Because they live such lives  
we push them away  
and let them die alone.

## Spring Cleaning

Tuesday with dust shining on jars,  
sitting on cracked lino to watch Clara  
piling old memories in black bags. Cleaning day.

Up and down the stairs, one-winged sister  
trips over my legs but keeps singing.  
The tune slides across walls, butterflies jump  
from her mouth on her head then out.

I wonder what butterfly meat tastes like,  
if sliced with a silver blade; what mother tasted like  
the moment I was released - honey coated pearl.  
I smell the skin on my wrists to see if mother is hiding in there.

'Remember the day she left to buy bread?' I tell Clara,  
'She had stilettos, a hat, mid-eighties permed hair.'  
*Grown long to her ankles by now.*

Clara sets fire to old carpets,  
fibres curl, briefly spark, die off in smoke.  
Baby dolls rest on rubbish bin's lid.  
House fills with mid-eighties permed ashes.

## **Headline**

Late at night, the sidewinds pushed the car  
off the road. They made an emergency stop.

No city in sight, nor visible lights. They could not  
see a landmark in the rear-view mirror.  
Just absence and floods.

Between treetops, one of them noticed  
a planet hanging down, tilted off balance.  
Went out to get a closer look of its shadow.

The further he went, the deeper the quicksand.  
The earth sobbed, shooting star came to life,  
he stepped out of view.

Rain washed away the return of her captive.

## DISTANT THUNDER

Hard, cold and dead:  
icy flash and flicker,

semi-darkness between.  
Over the liquid surface,

the image of the present,  
contours of forgotten things.

Doors are open to  
the darker side of dawn,

hidden stories and presences,  
stone and mud, fresh blood.

DISSENTERS' BURIAL GROUND,  
PONSHARDEN

The cracked language of stones  
all askew and fractured,

moss-edged, ivy-clung,  
on the edge of land & town.

We try not to disturb kaddish,  
tread carefully around the dead.

## Cartagena

When I collected my father's ashes  
at the crematorium  
I thought to keep them hidden  
in a pencil case.

The undertaker handed back  
his old beer-stained passport  
and postcards from cities  
he had planned to visit one day.

That night, in my hotel,  
I fell asleep in his clothes, dreamt  
a room filled with journeys and ink.

Father's hand moved across maps  
and pointed the Danube, the Volga,  
the sea with its blackness.  
Smoky seeds ready for new soil.

I jumped awoken by rain on a wet deck.

## INVOCATION

What is the function of invocation, what do we hope to achieve? Grotesque rituals as a form of ghost dance, dodgy seances with incoherent messages from the dead, do not constitute a resurrection machine.

When people listen to themselves what do they hear? Years of silence, whispers of brutality and inner selves. Help us to reconfigure and confuse, to stay alive and respond to the command interface

you specify. Death is a Möbius strip of lies and decay, so what keeps you going now you have abandoned life? Emails from the living, kind eulogies, and traces of self-evident decay.

In the beginning we invoke the one, but now we are struggling to breathe. What is the function of elucidation, transformation, the idea of the divine? Something to cling on to as we die.

## **Karenin**

not long after doctors decide to stop treatment,  
I feel hair locks growing inside my lungs

*/a footnote, not headline/*

asphyxia, earthquake, someone younger  
lost at sea pushes his way out through my vocal cords

poison, drowning, mute wedding photo watches  
from the bedside table in my hospital room

at this point, John Coltrane appears on stage  
to play 'Giant Steps' as a nurse breaks free

from the audience she asks me to sign  
a disclosure agreement before turning off  
life support.

*/falling, the hydrogen bomb does not have  
time to ask the victims of their age/*

the day closes, enters the geometric kingdom:  
ctrl alt delete

## Traffic

It was the longest sun  
and it swerved left-right left-right,  
hit pedestrians watching a bullfight.

On the opposite lane,  
a runner in standby, reading *Nausea*;  
his baby wailed in a pram chewing a rifle.

It looked like the gun fired at me:

The bullet hit the edge of my book  
then sank into earth like a poem  
dropped from a bridge.

Urban rumours carried on  
indicating an obstacle in the road.  
Childless vehicles, late for work.

Nobody looked ahead,  
nobody looked behind.  
My shadow jumped on a live grenade.

The city emptied.

## WARRIOR

I watch the funeral pyre on TV burn  
and imagine the stink of human flesh.  
Bill always used to laugh with us about  
wanting a Viking funeral on the creek –  
a warrior on fire drifting out to sea,  
or to leave his corpse out for the birds;  
of course we took him to the crematorium,  
same as everybody else. Does planning  
our own departure help those left behind  
or give us some vestige of control  
from beyond the grave? We joke, too,  
about haunting those we love, a threat  
made in vain as we choose the poems  
and songs we want used to say goodbye.  
I've now lived longer than my father,  
step into the unknown years he never did.

## M5

After a power cut, waterlogged hours  
unravel dimming dark threads.

The motorway's in stand still.

A wonder-bird drives past  
the Suspension Bridge,  
leaving the nest to defend itself.

Sleet gets through her dress,  
gropes her heart's corner.

Roadworks keep the candlelight going  
for sleepy men digging out earth;  
mother-wings fly off  
towards something uncertain.

Here, distance is all that matters,  
before the absolute stop.

A stranger at the steering wheel, in free fall.

## CONTINUUM

The bird has a key  
plucked from  
a headless stone angel.

Spirit ascends  
to unlock the future.

## **Rigor Mortis**

I am nobody. A blind pigeon jumps  
click-clack click-clack on the roof  
concerto for one instrument

it drops a letter for me, up  
on the landing, a long-lost  
Rembrandt cheers me up

its heartbeat stares into space

I have no followers and I follow no one.  
I eat the supper in silence,  
polish my armour click-clack.

My beak touches the ground.

## CLOSING NIGHT

The last gasping breath  
from a failed experiment,

a desert animal caught  
swimming across the sky.

We always had something to say  
but no one to say it to;

this unmarked grave  
was not dug willingly.

They, them, us. Goodbye.

## **Habitatum**

I live at the top floor,  
in a flat with a view  
to a perfect car park.

I take white little stones  
and place them, like pills,  
in straight lines on my desk.

Through a hole in the sky,  
I watch the beheadings  
going on in the city  
and point a fully-loaded gun  
against the world.

My earth rests, suspended  
between wild heavens  
and landscaped gardens.

The sun hangs loose  
above silent bell ropes  
as if nothing has happened.

## HALF-AWAKE

In morning dreams I made a collage  
of all the people I have known who died  
(think Peter Blake and *Sgt. Pepper's...*),  
lined them up with my previous cats  
squatting at the front. It was easy  
to start with, but I didn't know where  
to stop. How many acquaintances,  
friends of friends, and people  
I hardly knew, should I include?  
The crowd stretched out of view.

In the centre, aunts and uncles,  
my father and grandparents,  
were reunited. My parent's friends  
that I'd known as a child, friends'  
parents, and that aunt who wasn't  
really an aunt, along with famous  
pop stars and writers I'd mourned.  
What to do with the cut-out dead?  
Start forgetting and they'd disappear,  
blow hard they might fall down.

Who'd really changed my life, who  
had I cried for when they died?  
The picture changed immediately,  
group shrunk to a manageable size.  
The usual suspects: a few I'd always  
loved, some I realised late how much  
they'd meant to me, friends killed  
in accidents. Lost dreams became  
fading maps of my relationships  
with those no longer here.

## **State of Execution**

It simply dawns on me.  
The minute I'd touched  
her memory  
a fortress collapsed.

'the blood is gushing for shelter'

Death does not talk.  
It pulls my trousers up,  
it hides me under a stone.

## NOTHING TO GIVE US A SENSE OF VOLUME

He watched her fade in the distance,  
versifying the end of her life:  
a kind of happiness that was inexplicable.

Things you don't understand: runaway music  
constructed from samples and loops, phones  
going off every five minutes to say nothing.

Sinking into the waters of sadness  
complicates the flow of faster currents;  
the time for navigation has run out.

Experts in subliminal communication  
affirm the direction of your death.  
The stars didn't look back.

Every summer she recalled her childhood,  
brief sanctuary, the blessing of an ending.  
He was never any good at tying knots.

## ONION

The world as places and sounds, a visual music to paint. Hidden layers are stories to be told, ur-texts and brief asides, all referencing each other. It is not a linear progression, our futures do not unfold; we make them, revise them, retell them, practice making others laugh. Then move away and die.

Gaps in the curtain, wing and a prayer, everybody knows

## Journal Page

We inhabit the world's pipeline  
picking up fallen apples, friends who  
died of battlefield injuries turned into  
slowly burned paragraphs,

churches modelling new prisons,  
floating prayers from cell to cell  
damp kiss proof that we are enemies.

Beneath the viewpoint air currents force  
tired birds into submission,  
from our enclosure we like watching  
the fall talking about ourselves

pretending to see the whole in  
small incisions below the continuum.  
In truth, knowing too much about  
the ferocious nature of man.

## TRUE COLOURS

Abstract works, fire at night:  
probably not a direct reference.

Dark places no brighter than  
flickering flames on the horizon;

the hours round midnight  
associated with death.

Dress well and be yourself:  
emotionally distant,

disinterested and sterile,  
with a streak of deals and debts.

Soundtracks to other lives  
make a nonsense of this world.

Maybe there's no such thing  
as the way it will turn out to be,

only grace and expectation,  
dirty moon and autumn light.

## **Thought**

When the truth eventually came out  
they said all the vital preparations were made.

Something essential stopped her half-way.  
Late, almost there, almost present.

If she had waited a bit longer,  
someone would have noticed  
the sudden passing of such a short miracle.

## MOTH KINGDOM

In the Moth Kingdom everything  
is blurred and dusty, undefined.  
Mistakes are honoured and upheld,  
background becomes foreground  
and every idea takes gentle flight.  
It is always twilight, never dark  
or light enough and everything's  
aflutter. Things have grown too tall,  
too large, looking for the light.

## **Ensemble for Two Pianos**

(to Clara and Luca)

At first, I counted heartbeats, my ears watched  
for sudden changes in atmospheric pressure  
and planetary alignments. Night cries squeezed  
the cords of my flesh until milk-tears would burst.  
Primal hunger kept us awake. I got used to  
saving the last mouthful for somebody else.  
In crowds, I walked ahead, made you space,  
with my elbows, for a wider view and a wider earth.  
Time watched us.  
When bedtime arrived, I touched twin backs  
with my fingertips, covered you both, promised  
'I'll keep you safe.' Those words I said  
before candles turned off. Time already knew  
you would leave by morning.

## NOW'S THE TIME

This is yesterday's news today, or possibly tomorrow's news from yesterday. You have brought the Sunday papers round, oblivious to the fact we read online and that this feels like déjà vu. I wonder if Ingmar Bergman was right? Will I be 'a better ghost than I am a human being'? I'll let you know. In the meantime there's the tennis or football to watch, and politics to ignore. Democracy is dying but that is nothing compared to Richard, Dad or my other friends who are not with us any more. This is old news too, but it makes me cry when I think about the people gone. There are rows of cracked stones in the cemetery near home, but I have nowhere to grieve, because we burn the bodies now. Lucy said some people carry on emailing the dead, holding a one-sided conversation; others say they commune and speak with their loved ones. I think it's a bit of a joke, but then I've spent years grieving for people I hardly knew but wished I had, and for those I knew well who have gone. You can try and live for the now but there's a sense of repetition, a relentless concern with getting ahead, of keeping up and using each day before it disappears. It will, I know, however much time is just a constructed idea we use to bully and persuade ourselves there are more things to do. The world won't end without us, it's us who will disappear, whatever we do to try and make our mark. For me it's words and paintings, others run fast or eat the most pies. We're all going to be forgot.

## **Zoom**

In the back of a car,  
a thought held his hand,  
adjusted his glasses

did I die in a crash?  
or maybe they waved  
from a bedroom window;

the words multiplied,  
the ropes played with children  
but none of us had

the courage to move closer  
for fear of making too much noise.

He had recently taken up chess.  
When the bullet hit, he was  
planning the next move

between two windowpanes,  
a shortcut to heaven. The  
mid-giggle blast, rotating

stuck in familiar music box  
stood out flour trace leading us  
to a crime scene.

Out of the cinema,  
the crowd felt slaughter  
and rushed to unsee, unhear.

The blinds were drawn.  
The camera zoomed in.  
The lullaby malfunctioned.

## BEYOND

Hostile polarization and extensive paramilitarism,  
ideological confrontations and bloody terrorist attacks.  
She uses that tension and channels it into her work:

rich textures, dream sequences and subterranean music,  
a catalogue of rejected clichés and jokey asides,  
recreate the world that never was, could never be.

But here we are today, each with a label on our back,  
so that others can know our name. Beyond death's door,  
evening is growing dim and gossip cannot hurt us now.

## Objects

Tomorrow lived in the same house with us;  
bursts of yellow-red heated mute water pipes,

afternoons passed lettering names,  
we'd exchange poems for shoes we bought  
at the market.

There were no written instructions for happy  
until a bailiff came to collect your dresses and scarves.

I gently obliged and made tea.

Tomorrow has now departed in high heels,  
vanished behind the walls of right-here-right-now.

## RELAY

Here in the present, we document the past  
and imagine what will happen next.

Fascinated by spaceships and planes, the possibility  
of drought and destruction, we feel we're missing out.

Death gets in the way of us all;  
we can only run and hand the baton on.

## **Cher Papa**

I did not know how much  
you wrapped yourself around my heart  
until today when sitting in the park  
I accidentally caught you eating bread.

You took each bite with eyes closed,  
gently stroked the crust  
like you would do, on Sunday, at church.

You did not smile; it was the sun  
who smiled back, for a brief moment.

I had been there, in the cold, for quite a while,  
and did not move or blink or even breathe.  
Just waited.

You packed the crumbs away  
and vanished. And then I sobbed.

## SILENCES

When I came to write this, I had lost the first sheet of paper written in the night as the poem nudged at me, escaping from the book I'd finally managed to read after three attempts.

The story is told to the narrator by his friend ('I remember he said that she said'), slowly recounted by the author. It is a book about the recent past, history and how people escaped it, ran away or hid, allowed others a place on the train or a plane. It continues until we get to facts about extermination, concentration camps, memory and loss.

Between the words, the silence, says Dan Beachy-Quick, each silence as nuanced and potent as the rest. Untold stories need telling, but we need room for the unsaid too, space to write and think.

Death happens all too soon.

## **Eyelid**

Everyone said I was looking in the opposite direction  
when the car hit.

The sun was high, beginning of the longest day.  
Crowds covered the scene with blankets,  
coins doped on my eyelid.

The traffic stopped and a sandwich maker  
made the sign of the cross in the air,  
came closer to watch.

For some time, unreturned call echoed in dust.

A week later, news got to you.  
A body was found by the railway station.

## LIVE FOR TODAY

I am trying to read about death  
and our attitudes to it; to listen  
to the radio discussing a musician  
whose name I haven't heard yet.  
It's impossible to juggle and balance  
any more: life is too complicated  
and I enjoy too much. Music, books,  
art and film – I want to see and listen  
to them all. The music on my radio  
repeats and changes, changes  
and repeats, chimes into Sunday.

It's Monday and the pianist plays on.  
I don't want to move, don't want to  
live here, need to go right away;  
any day is as good as any other day  
for dreaming and planning my escape.  
Life's too short and we trap ourselves  
with money, houses, things. I have  
little to my name, am caught in  
revision and reworking of the same.  
Today is shot to pieces and time  
is running backwards, standing still.

## **Punctus Contra Punctum**

From time to time,  
we stand between  
a wolf and a dog. We germinate  
inside tightly zipped handbags  
falling into a moment of muteness.

We are expected to root  
given the choice of death.

A step closer, a level higher  
in a battery operated game:

nobody comes in  
without prior agreement.

The recoiled bows springs out  
unleashed by a howl.

At a steady pace  
we catch a moving train.

## GENIUS

He built a resurrection machine  
to bring back all the dead.

We can hardly move in the village  
for corpses and lost relatives

crowded in the streets. They don't  
understand today or where they are,

can't eat or drink, will die again  
and then again. Time stinks.

## **Final Dispositions**

Perhaps if I suddenly died  
for just a feather

it could be I suppose due to  
an algorithmic error.

Sad, I know, at this age  
not to realise that

such a weight would  
actually cost my life and

probably regret a bit  
the misunderstanding.

But only a bit.

## END OF THE LINE

Is this what dying is like? Creeping around in the quiet early morning, before the sun cuts through the low cloud and burns the dew off the abandoned garden chairs and yesterday's overheated debris? We can hope it's that simple and painless, easy to transfer without any passport queues or scans for unwanted items; or be real and know it will be something or nothing else. But let's hope heaven is as scruffy as our overgrown lawn here, and not our neighbours' suburban fuss; that the ferry trip brings us to wilderness and new lands, though one hopes there'll be a coffee shop and somewhere to sit and sup. It's likely that heaven has now given in to commerce and we will have to pay the dead to simply become dead, get used to smartening up if we want to be considered for the choir. Perhaps death is more like tripping down the steps, hands full, scream lodged in our throat; or simply drowning in the summer air as it becomes too hot and starts to undulate and move. Or life might simply stop.

## **Minor Voice**

to Robin Wheeler

I saw a man leaving a water glass  
at a junction where the elm tree,  
he used to know,  
had been suddenly cut down.

He showed me it did not hurt  
when something you love  
gets replaced by a shadow.

An overnight rain came  
out of nowhere, swallowed  
the wood, the roads  
and everything vanished.