# THE AGE OF DESTRUCTION & LIES

# Rupert M Loydell

The Age of Destruction and Lies

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Some of these poems were previously published in

*The Alice One* (Mid Life Crisis Zine Series, 2016), *Amethyst Review*, *Bomb Damage Maps* (The Red Ceilings Press, 2020), *Cathedrals of the* Soul (Ravenstongue Press, 2020), *Cholla* *Needles*, *Duane's* *Poetree*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *The Gospel According to Archbishop Makeshift* (Analogue Flashback Books, 2016), *Gravy from the Gazebo*, *I Am Not A Silent Poet*, *International Times*, *Literature Today*, *Local* *Nomad*, *Long Poem Magazine*, *M58*, *Matthew's House*, *New* *Writing*, *Noon*, *Otata*, *Queen* *Mab's* *Teahouse*, *The* *Quint*, *Raceme*, *Rockface* (exhibition, Jam Records, Falmouth), *Ship of Fools*, *Stride*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Third Way*, *Tract* (Recent Works Press, 2017), *Visitant*, *X-Peri*.

Thanks to Mike, Peter, Andy, Jane, Sarah, Harvey, Martin and Paul for ongoing poetic support; to Maria Stadnicka and Martin Caseley for help with editing this book; and Tony Frazer for publishing this and my other collections.

Love to Sue, Natasha and Jessica.

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THE AGE OF DESTRUCTION AND LIES

So how do we understand and act upon

the doctrine of the separation of powers?

We may be jealous of those who are dead

but a new orthodoxy suggests that

we may *all* be dead before too long, are

acutely susceptible to the coming epidemic.

The best way to understand anything is to use

the science fiction cliché of global consciousness

as a response to unmentionable goings-on

compounded by the decline of social engineering.

Odds are you are happy with how it’s all worked out:

creative destruction is the name of the game.

The ultimate consequence of these upheavals

is a predatory intimacy in response to the unmentionable

and badly written puff pieces which are often a pretext

for vivid set pieces and paid trips to the frozen north.

Let’s agree that overall goals are often unattainable.

I am understandably sceptical about doppelgängers

and new ideas which circulate among poets too slow

to notice a whole constellation of books and dreams,

but you don’t get to choose who reads you

or who does what with music and words.

ABOUT THE SKY

I have mirrored your accident

and fallen up the stairs, fallen off

the map. I am mostly in hiding

from imagined enemies and critics

of my own devising. You know

how it is: these thoughts arise

and worm their way in, quickly

becoming facts. Everyone is a poet

now and if they are not they borrow

texts and call them their own,

or sing and dance, seek fame

and a public any way they can.

One learns to tire of audiences

and withdraw, preferring to mail

pamphlets to a group of friends,

as though it were still the seventies.

Back then shops were independent

and sometimes sold small books

on sale or return (usually the latter).

We found our feet underground

and watched as business knocked

us over, told us that our poems

would never sell. Then poetry was

the new rock & roll, then it went

online. Everyone's become a critic

and an expert but no-one wants

to read or think about their work.

Everything is in the moment,

everything is now, then gone.

There's dust on all my books

and people don't believe I can

have possibly read them all.

Today I'm flat on my back,

wondering how I might

write about the sky.

THE WORLD'S OLDEST STAR MAP

sun disk is now

a landmark universe

known green site

travel by magic

oldest surrounded world

known to map lunar use

ground will move sky

set astronomical time

moon tower words

with crescent between

discover our cosmos

in the time of bronze

hypothetical maps

a conceptual clock

axe symbols appeal

as between arrives

site depiction interpreted

stuck where pain’s inlaid

patina stones failed

by impact philosophy

these transit travellers

finding having work

chisel star movement

is beautiful and gold

blue diameter full of

temporarily wide night

a great mysterious

time dated device

linking oldest symbols

to surrounding astronomy

the concept of place

history and time

BEFORE IT STARTS TO RAIN

Let me say this, before it starts

to rain: I have a fear of mirrors,

am afloat in a lake of distortion.

I know how strange this sounds

but I am a master of destruction

and music is how I avoid

the cartoon madness I draw

for myself. The flickering images

will not go away, torn pictures

are scattered on the floor until

a time when I will sellotape them

back together, a present for myself,

an aid to regret and self-forgiveness.

The elephant in the room

has taken control of the stereo,

and I am inclined now to silence.

We are all in the same boat,

which we are using as an umbrella

because there is no wind. In fact

nothing floats my boat any more

and I have seen this all before.

I know every secret I ever made,

the then and now is gone, inertia

creeps towards the forgotten answer.

AT THIS MOMENT

'My life is cold, and dark, and dreary;  
It rains, and the wind is never weary'

**– Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 'The Rainy Day'**

1.

Housebound and landlocked, eye to window to rain to leaking gutter and sodden towel in corner of the studio. I would be a sunshine man, sitting in the shade; I would be a fairweather sailor sipping onboard wine and watching others daydream. I would be overgrown and forgotten, knowing she is always right and that there is nothing to be afraid of.

Shallow end, strange cadences, the city of the sun

2.

Owl song, moonrise and low cloud. No more fallen branches but the imprint of the last is still there on the lawn, along with this year's acorns. Even asleep I can hear the rain, can feel the dampness of the air and watch the garden path become a stream and then a waterfall as it descends the concrete steps. I am dreaming summer backwards, afraid to live within these clouds.

Ice of the north, dry sands of the desert, morning still hours away

3.

A rusty future calls, one of decaying metal and rotten, broken boughs, things which this quiet man is not well suited for. This long winter of storms and banter has reduced him to hallucination and frostbite, layers of warm clothing and endless online dreams. Everything happens to me, nothing feels the same, my heart is a twisted oak. The children remind me and then move away. There will be different days.

Muddy water, happy sad, thunderclaps and late night booze

4.

All roads from this village lead only to the next, the paths I've found circle through mud back to where they began. I am better than I used to be at all of this, can't wait for me to get here or for silence to be declared. I sing rain songs and cast spells to ward off infection and pain, am waiting for the miracle I promised myself would be here soon. There must be a way to expand into the universe, however hard I want to be like me.

Teenage wildlife, yellow flowers, evening sky on fire

5.

For the birds, for the children, for the person in your life. For the sake of the planet, for the silent majority, for an undisclosed sum. For the uninitiated, for the first time, for the foreseeable future. For good reason, for the benefit of us all, for the rest of the year. For the best experience, one for all and all for one. For the last time, head for the hills. Thanks for nothing, thanks for the dance, I am out for the count. This is where everything falls apart, where I don't know how to begin or end.

The sunsets are meant for somebody else

6.

Drystone songs and fairweather tunes, cardboard boxes cut down to size and stacked under the skylight's grey. It is just you, just me, and the storm outside, dreaming ourselves back to then. In the glimpses between powercuts I imagine phantoms of the sun. Take all the stars and half-tongue the moon, I have been swallowed by the sea.

Call me Noah, call me Jonah, call me up another time

7.

In and out of the fading light and everywhere I go. A small boat in a week-long storm, an echo of my own devising, a rather soggy scream. On the other side of knowing is a hidden future but the forecast is not good. There are invisible seams in the sky and endless streams on the ground. It is not just winter rain and all these crooked words cannot turn things upside down. These are poems for broken birds and stories for strangers, songs about broken shells and flooded roads. An invocation to the god of dry.

Fluid dynamics, solemn goodbyes, black cat sleeping on our bed

8.

Out of all this blue and water come invisible connections and email blessings, messages made of sellotape and glue. Secrets sent from the white starline bring me back to earth, where it is time to become ocean and turn my inner landscape grey. What do I do with all the sorrys owed to my other selves or with the storm within? From nothing to nowhere, I have found another version of me to inhabit and persuade. It is raining in my house but I now have a time machine.

Land of doubt, liquified, secret passage into spring

COUNSELLOR AND CONFIDANTE

We weren’t really at the gardening stage,

didn’t talk about how wounded we were,

how sometimes a mood could take us.

We didn’t know magic was collapsing

and adopted strategies weren’t working.

Good liars are canny with their audience

and that relationship is worth considering.

Discussion generally focusses on intention

rather than the role of the listener

but lying is a social act and can create

what is sometimes called the plausible,

can create passion and distress, laughter

and dismay when truth's revealed later on.

From my books I learnt great sadness,

derogatory names and social vividness.

I adopted the use of an ear trumpet,

assumed a limp and spoke out about

filth oozing from the gutters and

the moral decay all around. It’s hard

to live an energetic life but I tried,

although I could no longer compose,

write or undertake rambunctious

holiday activities. Sordidly innocent

and deterministically depressed,

I sought solace in educated women

and conversation with elected rulers.

At this point we need to look beyond

our impoverished political landscape

and compensate, reconcile and buy

another drink. This is a founding moment,

we should be more radiant than gloomy

even if we have been beaten up, are so

damaged we are almost no longer human.

I spend my time driving aimlessly around

the ring road, treating life as a journey,

burning intensely with a new hatred

for all authority and those who continue

to use the word ‘normal’. Memory is all

about being able to change the past.

COMMON GROUND

We have a fixed body of doctrine,

which focuses on force of recognition

and depends upon heroic revolutionaries

drained of rebellious energy, along with

emotionally charged words and moments

intended to have a profound effect.

Lost almost as soon as it appears,

the marvellous is within everyone's reach,

blending the mystical with the spiritual,

the site of a vision where critical function

gives pause to anyone who feels committed

to any type of esoteric influence.

I am searching for a bit of country

in the city, considering a headlong dive

into group-organized consciousness,

a powerfully convergent aspiration

that feels intuitively off-key:

a strong will does not make life easier.

It is a question of educating people

to spend until everything is lost,

of keeping all the wonder caged.

CONTRADICTING REALITY

Your teeth will be my piano,

although difficult to tune,

and I hope you will not sneeze

mid-performance. Forgive me

for not learning how to put up

shelves and cupboards straight,

for not being a good nurse

and for not being a natural

musician. I should have been

a gardener but I hate gardening,

could have been a roaring success

but the audience didn't like me

and I wasn't about to sell out.

Your feet will be my wardrobe.

I will hang my shirts in a sensible

order and fold my jumpers too.

My mother taught me what to do

although I refuse to iron anything

and nothing ever dries when

I hang laundry out on the line.

I should have been sensible and

stayed home, could have sent

a postcard if I had been so inclined

but I didn't want to waste my time.

I had a nice holiday and remained

incommunicado, silent and relaxed.

Your mouth will be an echo chamber

for what I forget, what I need to say.

You will speak for me, alert to

the need for politeness, day-to-day

necessity and discourse. Your back

will be my table, your legs a place

to park the car; if it rains I might

borrow your hair to serve as

an umbrella, your arms and fingers

to telephone a friend. I know how

to keep busy and occupy my time:

playing the impossible piano,

sorting out my clean clothes.

CROOKED

'No one that ever lived ever

thought so crooked as we.'

– Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

You are a conversation

ghosted by fears about

*the* *future* and *the unknown*.

It is like words in a foreign

language drifting past you

sipping coffee in the square,

like slurred speech after whisky.

We are all in solitary confinement,

keeping it to ourselves, keeping it

from ourselves as best we can.

Make believe has got me,

I contort you to my way

of thinking, hoping it will

make things right. You are

a ghost conversation and I

am afraid of everything

and nothing. The last train

to anywhere left the station

long ago and I have sold

the sunshine in exchange

for broken poetry and song.

DEFENDING SILENCE

for Maria

Lost sense of origin

is a problem to have:

panic lung foreboding,

complex interventions,

suitcases in the hall.

It always takes longer

thanyouexpect

to merge with your own

writing or assume

the power of conviction.

Dreams are simply rowboats

adrift among imprints

of far-off memories

and feelings of loss.

Grandfather wrote spells

and grandmother songs

she memorised. In winter

women gathered to weave

and drink the best wine,

to listen to her singing.

People came to visit,

to reflect and ponder

the ambiguity of mud,

sinkhole domains and

heartfelt ideas about home.

Political complicity

smells like burning wood;

narratives create contexts

and attachments, but

no sense of obligation.

Awe-inspiring advances

in science and technology

explain how things change

more than expected:

it is another language.

Yes or no, depending how

you use it. The word *memory*

can describe various images,

certain objects you have lost,

or empty space and tears.

DUSTY TROLLS

‘ Wherever he looks he sees strangers

full of ambition and a sense of right’

– Gilbert Sorrentino, ‘They Die Over and Over. In the Movies’

Twelve years too long…’ he says

but she corrects him: ‘Fourteen!’

‘No wonder I’m so bloody tired.’

Naomi’s beautiful figure drawing

overlooks songs through a megaphone,

voices of angels and the oppressed.

Things we no longer put our faith in:

governments, parents, teachers, church,

things open to corruption and change.

How few lines are needed to evoke

the shape of the past, the forgotten

places of childhood, the view outside.

He manages to use ‘sweet’ in a poem

and get away with it; I try to downplay

my angels as impossible beings,

try not to be a lecturer, not to be

a dad, try not to be a husband,

have forgotten how to be myself.

I am too attached to my version of the past,

want to wipe it all away and forget,

erase, reconfigure and move on.

Clusters and sequences, arrangements,

networks and lists, all ways we can

organise a book of poems or prose.

More readers but nothing to put on a shelf

if you are addicted to pages and spines;

it is impossible to smell paper onscreen.

Dusty trolls from when you were a child,

gifted to me as you grew up, moved on.

Not who I expected in the audience

and someone arrived late with a phone

that rang out just as I was about to read.

I still collect rusty washers and metal shapes.

FAKE BRAIN MAPS

Small electrical fragments, found in the street,

do not rewire my thoughts. Optical trickery

has brought five faded masterpieces back

to life, but does not make my daily routine

any easier. If you believe what Peter says

the past has been rewritten according to

fugitive and rather lovely principles.

It took a month for the inks to dry

and the scan to be processed but I was

signed off in the end. All clear! Or not so

clear: I can't see where the tumour isn't,

nor where the probes went in. Angels

and devils stay in orbit and out of reach,

all that heaven allows is hot chocolate

and a singsong. Faith is just a sound

in the night, the same rituals re-enacted

time and time again; radio voices mutter

as you play with random images onscreen.

Something has gone horribly wrong,

this story is made up, there is nothing

wrong with me at all; I am merely riding

a wave of discontent and hoping for

better things to come. Editing isn't

an option: compare the restored photos

with the faded paintings on the wall.

EVENTUAL NEEDS

‘We’ve got a surfeit of information

and a deficit of meaning’

– Felix Gonzalez-Torres

a collection of sayings

inherited or passed down

television gives us time

fields of experience

can be further broken down

presence read through the lens

zoom in slowly as we approach

pretend it is coincidence

imaginative infrastructure

based on conversation

opening or unfolding absence

illusions may be truths

original zero of the loop

lost sequences and codes

different surfaces

form local groups

twilight paradise

EVEN THAT

I never liked anything

as much as his first book

and he never liked me

saying that. Later on,

he got serious and it all

went wrong; you can

have too much of

a good thing, even if

your motives make sense.

I must drive to the funeral,

to pay my respects, say

the things I have to say,

mainly hallos and good

-byes. Don’t think about

how we are composed,

decomposed or composted,

are all over the place.

I never liked anything

very much but now

even that is gone.

LEFT BEHIND

Who is that man who can't remember

how to work the computer, who cried

when he lost his wife? Who forgets

to send the work he has promised

and struggles to speak on the phone.

Not the poet I knew but endless words

which jabber and twist, excitable phrases

collapsed into awkward conversation.

Endless digression brings me back

to the hospital where my father died,

the big house where great aunts and uncles

lived. There used to be an airfield, a mansion

on the corner; you could turn right across

the main road or cycle up the hill to work

with its racing car stored in the warehouse.

The past will not stay away, it returns

in old films, in the notes to the books

you read. It is online, in photo albums

abandoned in my study; it turns up

in letters or phone calls, or you see it

out of the corner of your eye. How long

since we lived there? The past I mean.

It always moves away, leaving us behind.

Things are so unclear when you look aside.

HOME RUN

'Someone we loved is under this ground so we all come back   
 and call it *home*'

– 'Ground', Cecilia Woloch

Someone we loved is under the ground

and one day it will be me, one day it will be you.

I miss us already, am not ready to die.

To me, the glass never looks full, and anyway,

I have a habit of spilling my drink, the boys

will tell you all about it. That and my sneezing;

we don't know if it's chocolate or beer

or perhaps dog hair in the pub. Maybe I'm just

allergic to life, should get ready to move on.

Shaving in the mirror, the new bathroom lights

reveal that my hair is going grey. I don't mind,

it's just I hadn't noticed until now, am surprised.

Summertime ends tonight. I'm glad of the extra hour

but will miss the evening sun, the few moments

in the garden this autumn's warmth and light

has granted me when I'm home in time. I watch

someone else's mother die on television, listen

to the voices of the dead, singing me to sleep.

Someone we loved is under the ground

and one day it will be me, one day it will be you.

I miss us already, will not be racing you to heaven.

THERE FOR YOU

I didn’t go to your funeral

because you haven’t died

and I wasn’t sure about

protocol or what to wear.

My suit is tight, my shirt

unironed and it looks as if

it’s about to rain. I always

have an excuse, you are

always disappointed. If

you decide to die I will be

there for you, I promise.

I didn’t come to your party

because you didn’t hold one

and I wouldn’t have been

invited if you had. It’s not

as though we’re friends

or even acquaintances

but I like to think about

what might have occurred

had things been different.

It’s not even an excuse,

more a type of daydream,

a different future or past

where we might have met

and become inseparable

or perhaps drinking buddies,

maybe people who nodded

to each other on the street.

Anyway, trust me, when

it’s all over, I will find out

where the funeral is,

and will be there for you,

crying with everyone else.

INTERFACE

The failure of propositions to engage with the viewer

is entirely dependent upon the space of the document

and how fashion photography is defined. Within

the economy and the common code of commodification

and exchange lies the heart of the beast, and living

in the heart of the beast is a small erotic exercise.

The failure of participation is noted on a pink sheet

of paper but is a secondary concern compared to

the actions of the viewer. The self-consciousness

we all share tends to demand an ideal body,

although the project might have been different

if a dance studio had been booked and populated.

The failure of communication is often due to

layers of activity that occur beyond conceptual

understanding. This can lead to new collaborations

entirely dependent on goodwill and gesture,

neutralised networks and visual choreography.

Yet social codings are only forms of ideology:

we all endure the concrete conditions of culture,

often failing to catalogue unusual opportunities,

our absurdist inventions and feedback loops.

With ordinary work clothes and live tableaux

we should be able to persuade the others,

interface between the external and the self.

PURITY OF FORM

The capacity of the market to absorb its enemies

should never be underestimated; it is no longer

clear where the point of balance lies.

The heroic self prefers alertness and action

to mediation as the dream dissolves; members

document their intention to bridge the gap

between one verse and the next. We see it

from the point-of-view of cultural presence,

a discursive formation of community arts

and research into sleep. The text is constructed

in binary opposition to less-received poets

along with small-scale, marginal cinema

and collaboration. From the outset

it was clear that we are all implicated

by a traditional and authoritative voice.

Most readers ignore the obvious route

preferring to delay the move from

external world to semantic device.

Audience figures decline, we fail to fulfil

the proper work ethic; only a comma

separates us from heartfelt radical praxis.

INTERNAL LOGIC

The primary rules of the game

determine a pattern of interaction,

an innovative theoretical system

for poverty alleviation and development

in the new era, a pattern of experience

which undoubtedly feels more coherent.

Brutalism evolved into something bold

and confrontational, internal surjections

correspond to external split epimorphisms,

an ongoing relationship between the two

approaches regarding flow related to image,

quantifiers and their relations to control.

A type theory derived from the relation

between models and sentences returns

as a logical column vector using only

the fixed-point property of fix, a mode

of connecting images and sounds

which will always get false positives.

Listen to events defined by responders.

If you have a fireball flinging mage

then the damage of their fireballs

should be consistent. You should not

permit organized opposition to emerge

nor build circuits for said operation.

A neurobiological language can be used

to explain cognitive structure, behaviour

and interaction, a one-party system

determined on the page and by

the dream-leaps I can make writing

within the application boundary.

It really is a nuisance when internal logic

breaks down, even if you accept the idea

of failure as a form of learning. Take

the most ordinary parts of our lives, crack

them open, and find the weirdness within.

Our history has already been written.

HOW TO DISMANTLE A SCULPTURE

The sculpture should be dismantled progressively, with every step introducing new components and mechanical connectors which are to be detached from previously built art.

Taking sculptures apart can be fun and a learning experience, as my class found out at a Take It Apart Party. Students found magnets, small speakers, spirals of wire in a cone shape, and lots of soldered pieces inside. Dismantling turned out to be at least as much fun as putting it together.

Offer multi-step dismantling instructions in vector graphic format, grouping the graphic primitives into semantic elements representing individual parts, mechanical connectors (e.g. screws, bolts and hinges), arrows, visual highlights, and numbers.

The order of dismantling is not crucial, but top down is a good way to go. Begin with the easy-to-remove external accessories, using an open-ended wrench to disconnect. If bits do not spring loose easily, give them a gentle tap with a hammer, then lift them clear before abandoning the project.

Loosen all of the bolts and disconnect it from its mount. Push. Apply excessive pressure.

We are taking things apart because we want to.

IN THE SHADOWS

Sometimes someone else has to sing the song

before we notice how great it is.

Sometimes a stranger points to a painting

and the whole things comes alive.

Sometimes we go back to the dusty corners

of our lives and excavates the past,

uncovering people and places, happiness

we had chosen to forget.

Sometimes it hurts and we wish we hadn’t

but sometimes we need to know

what is hiding in the shadows and why

we chose to put it there.

Sometimes it is unclear, sometimes things

sparkle in today’s new light,

sometimes we wrap it up again in newspaper

or an old curtain, return it to the

sometimes we correctly decided

was where it belonged.

Sometimes the corpse in the corner stirs

and the whole thing comes back to life.

The Shape of Paradise

OFF TO THE FUTURE

'Take away his camera and he'll draw on   
his eyeballs with a felt-tip pen.'

– Iain Sinclair, *The Last of London*

Compulsion and a flying heart. Nothing

will go away, nothing stays the same.

He is behind the curve or ahead of

the game, never quite where he wants

to be. How very sad, how lovely, how

does he manage to cope? Picture this:

animal tracks and bone, black glass,

Sunday morning childhoods. Gone

or tidied up. Memory fades away,

the past is open to interpretation.

The darkness falls as flowers do,

wilting in the light; although we are

earthbound we can't wait to get away.

Don't make me choose, don't make me

explain or err on the side of caution.

I need to see, to undo the damage

and find out everything for myself.

We can argue about the secrets

of the past but I am looking forward,

ready to go yet full of regrets.

Hold my hand and we are off

to the future, walking sideways

and dodging our own reasons

as well as the camera's flash,

mumbling damaged prayers.

WHAT GOD SAID TO ME

Echo and bulk and warp and flood,

ways to navigate the city, ways

to think and push over the edge.

Theology demands questions

and answers in equal measures,

ideas which make no sense.

Cloud hands, rain and fallen leaves.

Suck on light, explain it all to me;

come along and say you will.

THE ONLY KNOWN PHOTOGRAPH OF GOD

'When you get a clearer picture you can understand

why so many want to stand in the dust cloud,   
where there is comfort in confusion.'

– Thomas Merton

The only known photograph of God

turns out to be a silhouetted skyhook

slung from a wire, holding nothing

and not moving at all. It is not

uplifting or impressive, the sky

is grey, the image black and white.

What did the monk who took the photo

mean? Was it a surrealist joke or a way

to make an oblique comment about

expectations or absence, the unknown?

He took up meditation, talked in zen

and went to meet the Dalai Lama,

then his maker. Left us notebooks

and a damaged small black painting,

photos and calligraphies, a mystery

shaped hole in the centre of his work.

It is totally absurd to expect answers

that might help explain our world.

GOD THOUGHTS

'The poem is a prayer spoken to a God

who only exists while the prayer lasts'

– Eugenio Montejo, 'El Taller Blanco'

The poem took flight and took off for heaven,

where the angry forgotten god was surprised

to receive it; it had been a long time

and email was never quite the same,

especially with a dodgy internet connection.

He didn't want any more hallelujahs, songs,

pleading or special cases, any more sermons

that tried to make people laugh. After all,

it was him who'd created jokes and humour,

and there was nothing left to laugh about.

Everything was spoilt, the poems didn't

even rhyme! Art was just splodges of colour,

vague ideas, or light projected on a wall.

What on earth had he done? The poem

stayed there, getting in the way.

God hated being nagged by words.

They'd bugged him from the beginning,

then teamed up with consciousness

in an attempt to make people think.

He used to know how to walk on water.

NOT HERE

for David Grubb

And if the god is not here then we must find him

or invent him, make him up and make him stay,

take up residence among the silences, the cold

damp stone and peeling paint. He might not

like it here, of course, but it is our universe

and the god must play by our rules and listen to

our songs, along with the angels on the roof.

And if the god does not like us dreaming him

then he must leave the world and walk away

into the night, leave us in the dark to pray

and wonder where he has gone and where

he might have been before. The blue mountains

are his, and the grey seas, even the small city

where we once lived, this village where we do.

And if the god will not talk to us, then we will

have to shout louder, and argue and plead

and make promises we cannot keep, especially

when we wheedle and whine and make requests

no real god would bother with, what no wise god

would allow us to do. He will not fight our wars,

he will not make us rich, he will not show himself

to us, for if the god is here then we will not

have to find him or invent him, and if we do not

we will never know him for ourselves and if we

do not get to know him then our dreams will be

empty and pointless, and we will never be granted

our wishes and desires, however worthy they are.

And if we cannot get what we want, then we do not

need the god, because that is what we want him for.

If he is not here he must be elsewhere, or nowhere,

maybe with the angels. The bells crack and clang,

our buildings remain empty. It is hard to imagine

why we thought we needed the god or could not

live without him. He would not like it here even if

we could find him or the time to make him up.

A THEOLOGY OF ABSENCE

'The melancholics concern themselves with the

structure of doubt, rather than the structure of

belief, because doubt is inventive. Doubt

complicates.'

   – Lisa Robertson, *Nilling*

If we had known where we were going

we might not have gone. 'Paradise'

is mostly beige with yellow stripes

splashed diagonally across the canvas

and light orange hidden underneath.

It is poured and scraped and brushed;

not one of his best. I cannot face

reading any more of my poems

and was disappointed I am not

in the new issue of the magazine.

All night we emailed each other

with strange strings of association

and despair, questions about

whys and whens and wherefores,

ideas of what to listen to next,

ignoring each other's answers.

Insomnia as a creative tool,

a fruitful exercise, not simply

being awake. You questioned

if either of us were actually real;

to be honest, I just don't know.

It would take longer than this

to find out if truth or Truth exists

or are for the knowing, if evolution

and colour, time, or a theology

of absence are worth any more

debate or worry. I am various

and you are concerned. We move

millimetre by millimetre towards

comprehension and deep sleep.

QUIET PRAYER

It was not a quiet prayer.

When it came, it was

wrenched from him, in anger

or pain, possibly both, but

it was definitely a shout

not a whisper, was certainly

something directed at god,

certainly heartfelt and

demanding, absolutely sure

of its reasons and concerns.

It was not a quiet prayer,

it was a scream of grief

ripped out of the night,

pain from hearing the worst.

It was primal and personal,

a shout about being alone

and not knowing what to do,

a request for a compass,

a map and survival rations.

But mostly a demand for love.

It was not a quiet prayer

and it whispered its way

around the village, out

into the world. Elsewhere,

on their knees, others

were shocked at the raw

hurt, the need; took prayer

upon themselves, spent time

begging for mercy

and pleading for his soul.

It was not a quiet prayer,

it was prayer nourished

by dissolution and despair,

a loud eccentric mash-up

of energy and anger,

questions and desire,

despair spun loose

into the world to see

where it would go and

if anyone would answer.

RELIGIOUS FUTURES

'Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense;   
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.'

– Psalm 141: 2

'Aimed at the peripheral frontiers of the digital world where the young people   
dwell, the Click To Pray eRosary serves as a technology-based teaching tool   
to help young people pray the Rosary for peace and to contemplate the Gospel.   
The project brings together the best of the Church’s spiritual tradition and   
the latest advances of the technological world.'

– *Vatican News*, 15 October 2019

This is an experimental device, a tool for learning how to pray.

The era of invention began and the machine came into being,

a wearable technology bracelet featuring a crucifix interface

with built-in camera, infra-red sensors, microphones,

incomprehensible incantations for deep coma worship.

Electronic rosary machines connect with smartphone apps

for guided prayer and hypnotic communication rituals.

The gadget aims to help the young achieve world peace

and contemplate, practice and propagate the gospel.

The equipment also awards Prayer Bonuses when used.

For eons, people have reached out to the Almighty

but now you don't have to have his e*-*mail address

or understand the relationship between structure

and culture or bother with religious demography

and survey results. The future is here right now.

Will our gods die out altogether? Human lives

are cheaper than machines in almost every country

of the world, but everybody still needs systems

and methods for enhancing prayer. We must look

to the past, to founding myths, old religions

and ancestral lines. Our jokes may be bad

but hopefully our content is more informative

than alternative scenarios and final conclusions.

This experimental device is our shared future,

now we should have everything we need.

The music of the prayer machineis constantly purring

through my body. For the most accurate intercessions

it should be kept flat and at a proper distance from

electromagnetic fields, fervour, interfaith communities

and cultural despair. Welcome to the temple of tomorrow.

The essential nature of prayer is a layering of sound

upon sound, controlled by an alchemy very similar to that

which generates worship music. Users can control piety,

dynamism, plurality and multivocality but please note that

salvation is not included in the price of your purchase.

PRUDENT REASONS FOR THE FADE OUT

'If a god can disestablish his own church,

why should not humanity in turn

vote itself out of existence?'

– Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places*

'I want to write an elegy but without the sadness'

– Brenda Coultas, 'The Tatters'

I would like to believe in my dreams,

am a stammerer struggling to speak:

consonants fracture into building blocks,

language regresses to a babble of sounds.

Landscape presses in on a distraught figure

raising a protective hand above his head.

The sky is falling and we must investigate

hollow spaces choked with household goods.

The human being is a botched job, a ghost,

a breath of wind. Turbines and busy pistons

reinforce an ongoing sense of estrangement;

there are faults in our ideological wiring.

Convulsions have given birth to what is

at best a mannequin, an orphaned runt

welcomed at first by its drunken mother,

ejected from the house when she sobers up.

The border affords us no way to escape.

We exist in flux, a condition of transience,

have stopped moving in order to watch

reality speed headlong towards disintegration.

Beams of light broaden out into abstract spirals;

violence and death have become harmless fun.

People only exist as part of a forgotten design,

a factory which manufactures pain and memory.

Do painted shapes or monochromes qualify

as aids to spiritual and scientific understanding?

History lies ahead of us, not behind; who

forbade us to be or think? What keeps us alive?

Journals of consciousness and images flickering

at the ragged fringe of our visual field, moment

by moment. We are corrupted by information,

must run the same set of notes backwards

and savour the ugliness of cut-price wares

as the last cold light of winter breaks through

the clouds. The world was not made for us,

we must not assume we are in control.

THIRTEEN CATHEDRALS

A **cathedral of feathers**

would weigh almost nothing

and be easy to move

but some people are allergic;

it might attract cats.

If choir or congregation

breathed out,

faith would blow away.

The god is not to be sneezed at.

The **cathedral of light**

is a beacon in the dark,

consumes more power

than it generates,

disturbs the sleep of all.

There are no shadows

or room for wonder.

Everything is illuminated

and bleached out.

The **cathedral of flesh**

is momentary and fluid,

collapses into disarray,

longing and memory

rekindled as desire.

The **cathedral of milk**

is pure white

but not needed by adults,

has turned sour and bitter

over time.

The **dream cathedral**

is the greatest of all

but is never finished.

Its spires touch heaven,

its stained glass windows

contain every colour,

its tower is the tallest

in the land, it's nave

and choir the emptiest.

A **paper cathedral**

can be unfolded

and folded at will.

One square sheet

and a few deft moves

see it gently lock

into place. It can be

recycled or made again.

The **mercury cathedral**

shows the temperature

in silver columns.

Quicksilver dogma

does not leave the body,

weighs both visitor

and congregation down,

a heavy metal heaven.

The **alchemic cathedral**

is always about

to become gold

if the right equation

or magic can be found.

You can waste

a lifetime here.

The **cathedral of bones**

is a grim place to be,

a sad place to worship.

There is no life

or resurrection,

just deathly silence

arguing with ghosts.

The **cathedral of sound**

is all echoes

and murmuration,

the faint memory

of song and readings,

a distant euology;

someone crying

for forgiveness.

The **cathedral of fire**

burns without smoke,

and belief and faith

are not consumed.

Their god is

a thunderstorm

passing through

a break in the forest

designed

to stop the spread.

The **cathedral of sand**

is waiting for the tide

to wash it all away.

Who made the bucket

and turned out

this crumbling mound?

Who did the spade work,

bought the ice creams?

The **cathedral of doubt**

takes uncertainty to new heights,

never offers any answers,

encourages questions

and wonder and worry,

leaves everything unsaid.

LIVING IN PARADISE

Down the lane, just yards from the main road, another small mews, its bright cottages all fitted out with grilles and shutters.

•

The same galleries in the museum I visited as a child: aeroplanes strung from the ceiling, a raised walkway to peer into the cockpits, a model of a water-raising device that appears to defy gravity, irrigates a miniature desert.

•

They are having to waterproof the pavilion, fill in the gaps with perspex, to deal with the unexpected sideways rain.

The vista of the park is cubed and squared, gridded; this is a building that lets in both light and air.

•

I count the sheep grazing in the pasture. I count the missing dead who they say are now living in paradise.

THOUGHTS & PRAYERS

The magic has gone.

Tell us again

how you were ignored

and looked over

for promotion.

Everything is archived,

nothing stays the same.

Make a home

in contested lands

and pretend you belong.

Later, when you

are who you want to be,

it will be a good story.

Travel until tomorrow

becomes a refugee today.

I am disgruntled;

watch the late-night news

then switch off the television,

bring the day to a close.

Nothing lasts this long.

A CLOSER LOOK

Eric Pankey, *Dismantling the Angel*

Smoke and fire, ash and fog,

birds flying in formation,

unseen shadows in the night.

Restless poems trace what you saw

out of the corner of your eye

or might have once believed in.

You want to flesh out these stories

but there are too many versions

and more to write about when

you take a closer look. The language

seems to mute you: you are happy

to be quiet and let others speak.

Wind in the attic, distant crows,

soot and dust, animals and angels.

How to put things back together

now words have taken them apart?

THE SHAPE OF PARADISE

A strange geometry of faith and doubt

defines the ruthless shape of paradise

in our dreams. There is no difference

between dogma and disease

except the degree of distance

from wonder and the watchtowers

whose guards look down upon us.

Feed the hostage and be generous

to yourself: don't ask questions

you can't answer. Noisy days are over

and the morning is waiting; you are

the song and yesterday was the last time

I was in tune with tomorrow. If we are

to return to forever, we must see things

in a different light, should experience,

not watch in disbelief. Wind up

the Gregorian chant machine

and break out the ritual bells:

we are chasing tales and marching

down ghost roads. At the gate

of dreams lies the angelic city,

as if paintings could ever lie.

The door is open but you cannot go in,

for there is more to understand.

I am not who I thought I am

and neither are you. Faint mystery

turns out to be closer to chaos

than the new frontier. Visitors

are turned away, a stranger's horse

is tethered outside, the safety boat

has gone adrift. There is fuzzy logic

at work and the magician in me

has run out of spells. Soft spoken words

will not keep us warm, it is always

winter in heaven and the flesh is weak

with nowhere to go. The god

of ocean tides has gone for a sail,

the crow of shadows and night

has stolen the sun. If we take care

of illusion then the rules of the game

should become known. Facts is facts

and now it's all clear as morning mist.

SELLING THE WIND

All the intricate connections formed without touching

cannot be undone. You may as well try and sell the wind.

Ever the casual optimist, I fulfil my own rules about

how to think in language, what to do if all else fails

and we come apart. It is like visiting the ocean bed,

all heavy breathing and decompression on the way up,

like songs I used to play in a foreign language,

intricate embroidery, or visiting the past.

Under pressure to do better, we possess an instinct for

both leeriness and unreliability, which does not endear me

to my friends. What is required is a first response,

a vision for the future, a poem from the rooftops,

a song and dance routine. Rumours of angels are all very well

but not when it comes to miracles and appearing on demand.

This toxic model of religion is mostly all we have;

when the end times come we will be glad to remember

how they shimmered in the light and told lies

about the mechanics of salvation. On my way home

I promised not to quit, to make an honest man of you,

but euphoria is wearing off; now I remember the rain.

We've never spoken but I would like to say goodbye.

THE MODIFIED GENE

'The past is

a junkyard.

We go there

to look for parts.'

– *Avenue*, Michael O'Brien

THE LANGUAGE WE'VE LOST

Folk customs of Old England

often mimic and parody

the representation of desire,

surrender and fulfilment.

Beribboned and beside herself

with success, the upper-class world

takes place in the free zone

with grazing rights for six goats

and a small flock of sheep,

chivalric romance, the prospect

of satisfaction and a nice cup of tea

in the Women's Institute tent.

Notes for a language we've lost:

'You're the queen of the village green.'

Mayday. Mayday. Mayday.

ANOTHER LANGUAGE

This other language you speak,

is it something we can learn?

Or just glossolalia and nonsense?

Paul said it wasn't the loss of stories

or customs we should worry about,

but the likes of Cameron and Trump,

weasel-word magicians who say

the opposite of what they mean.

Should we stay or should we go?

Makes no difference in the end,

we will always speak another language,

xenophobia and racism

are part of a modified gene

that haunts the English.

Get off your high hobby horse

and gift the boggart under the stairs,

make peace with the past.

Your lawn is full of weeds,

the future of uncertainties and lies.

Summertime in England does not occur;

if it does is mercifully short.

MAKESHIFT SHANTIES

Adrian's makeshift shanties

and the primary school choir

reversioning some ancient tale

of revenge and lust gave us all

an excuse for cream teas, and wine

earlier than we should. Summer

has come. Yay! And midsummer

six days later. Just as the evenings

get lighter we turn back the clocks.

On the rock in the orchard, a carved throne;

in a cage beside the pub, a bird of prey.

In times gone by this was miles away,

now we drive in for the summer fete

and applaud the embarrassed youngster

whose amateur coronation is today.

It is apparently just harmless fun,

just like the wheezebox performances

in blackface on the esplanade

when the folk festival comes to town.

We have always sung for our supper,

songs of love and loss. Tunes echo

from the cliff, drowned out by the tide.

We must learn to forget what is meant

by the past, swim away from the shore.

OTHER VERSIONS

In some versions King Arthur

lives under the hill and will ride again

to sort just about everything out.

Elsewhere, there's a hunt that charges

across the sky, ghosts half-immersed

in water that's risen since they were alive,

and groans and howls and whispers

in the echo chamber of communal dreams.

England is dying but will be kept alive

as a museum for international visitors

intrigued by a nation who rejected

the future and fled into the past,

numbing themselves with dreams

and out-of-date fairy tales,

other versions of the same lies.

UNSPEAKABLE

It is unspeakable,

what has been said.

It as though we are locked

into a default position

which requires us to lie

and pretend that we're alright.

Something in the past

convinces us we are strong,

are different from the rest.

It is hard to know

what to say, to figure out

what makes us English,

especially when one does

not want to be English

with all the explicit links

between martyrdom

and ill-defined

rewards in heaven.

What are we to do?

It is clear that wrong

is right and right is wrong

nearly all the time.

Material Form

UNTITLED ABSTRACT

smudge of charcoal on the photograph covered her eye.

right-angle wire held up the painted strut. pink and brown

smeared into each other. several dots in several colours

gridded across the small canvas. a simple representation

of leaves. many greys. scribbled lines over a loose yellow

ground. mostly black with a few blue patches. untitled.

white over grey over black over canvas. thin lines of colour.

sprayed red and spattered with pale cream drips. outline

of an imaginary country. charcoal, graphite and pastel

on cream paper. all kinds of blue. several suns and many

squares. careful overlays and the idea of a circle. reds and

purple against the strangest green. ink and pencil. inversed

and dribbling monochrome rainbow. this grey, that grey

and several other greys. orange fire and erased charcoal.

sharp edge of hard colours meeting. soft puddled stains.

primitive figures on graph paper. untitled abstract. trace

elements. I tell myself secrets, offer you painted words.

LOOK THROUGH WATER AS WE LOOK THROUGH AIR

(Cremona)

A small city full of emptiness, shadow absences in the sun. I follow my nose from church to church, damp frescoes to chipped saints: smoke and wax, electric candles and patterned reliquaries below heavy ceilings. Beyond brick walls, private gardens and tall trees, in the squares dust and benches for us to share. I am lost in sunlight and market debris, in soundscapes and sound worlds, home-made films, pigeon talk and cathedral bells, eurodisco and late night chat.

Clear dark sky sends cool air into my hotel room. Space and time and the visual, Bill Viola’s slow-moving figures and the sounds of distance, of silence, the close-miked today; the sounds of steps and voices, cat purrs and paintbrushes, the echoes of a tunnel in time, characters who cannot see each other. Everyone knows someone else we almost know: zoom to rain on the windscreen, pan out to watch the clouds go by.

The market scaffolds itself into being, disappears by afternoon, so what remains can be swept up. Everyday perception is disrupted: five faces in a dark room, digital glitches and delay disrupt our point-of-view. I am above it all, immersed in it all, a visitor frozen in a hotel window, four floors up with no-one in the dark to pray for me.

Is it art or a documentary, a provocation or the avant-garde? What do we gain from drilling down in isolation? I like the shelves of found objects – glass and china, stone debris – in the museum of archaeology. Kingsley climbed the tower past the pendulum, swinging straight as the world turns. Traffic noise fades, frescos change colour, there are no questions from the audience. We are all immersed in sound and sunshine, concentrating on the view outside and the audio-visual equipment's hum.

MODERNISM IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

It’s difficult to stop thinking about

how it worked and why, how all

the great authors around at that time

knew and influenced each other,

and why their work’s so hard to read.

Modernism is not your friend, it makes

up avant-garde ideas and insists upon

experimentation. It wants to grapple

with love and sex, the invention of

time, photography, and ideas of the self.

It’s difficult to stop thinking and dream,

to take the subconscious seriously,

turn image into text. Fragmentation

and collage impede the flow of words,

disrupt both description and plot.

Modernism is not your friend, can be

detrimental to your health, sexist, old

and out-of-date. *Ulysses* is only useful

to hold open the door, *The Waste Land*

should be sold off for social housing.

'It is time to resume unfinished business.'

POSTMODERNISM IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

I don’t know what they were thinking about

when they invented the term, I mean

everything went to hell and back, nothing

stable survived, little was left to believe in,

and there was certainly nothing to read.

Postmodernism is not your friend. Complexity

can be *apropos* of emptiness, games become

gobbleydegook. It’s clear this was no accident;

there was a huge market-driven cultural shift

and everyone bought damaged goods.

What were they thinking about, the critics

who stopped critiquing and talked about

anything at length? In essays and books

they drew lines between this and that,

hoping it would start to make sense.

Postmodernism is not your friend, pastiche

only wants to be loved. It refuses to argue,

just gently satirizes, knows there is no truth;

wants to unhinge every stable identity,

recompose and reinvent the past.

'But I want to be a household name!'

MATERIAL FORM

after Mario Merz

My summer igloo is more of a nest,

reeds and grass woven in a circle

around me. The wind my home

has blown itself away and I am

indifferent to the weather.

Feedback should be courteous,

constructive and rigorous, it

does not matter what you like

or not: use the relevant criteria.

We have an inner and an outer

body, each clamped to a frame

along with glass and steel; it is

different from every point of view.

Reflections mirror the past

just as the architecture fails,

becoming twigs and field again.

Winter quarters will have to wait

until I have gathered up snow

and the momentum required

to brave the storm outside.

A TRIPTYCH FOR BARBARA HEPWORTH

(Tate Britain, autumn 2015)

‘They’ve stolen the moon

The magic is gone’

– David Sylvian, ‘Midnight Sun’

*1. Wounded Bird*

The man who looked like a crow

flying along in a fringed black shawl

is accompanying a child on crutches.

Together they circle small maquettes,

models where wood and plaster

have been freed and given flight,

having an endless discussion

about what they find if they look,

and how – and why – it was made.

*2. ‘Conversations with Magic Stones’*

The rock was silent

but sparkled in the sun.

I sang to it,

cajoled it,

commanded it.

The rock was silent

but glinted in the rain.

I spoke to it sideways,

whispered endearments,

pleaded and whined.

The rock was silent,

its magic stilled.

I walked away

and left it

to its own devices.

The rock called out

or so I heard.

I didn’t go back.

Magic can never be

secondhand.

*3. Last Day of Show*

There are a hundred visitors

being told how to look

and what to look at.

The stones are lifeless,

have been overwritten about,

theorised and conceptualised

until it is hard to find

their beauty, see the poise

and balance Hepworth made.

The stones have been boxed

in plastic, labelled with words

and ordered, spirit broken.

Give them back to the wind

and sea and sky and waves.

It is where everything is.

SCULPTURE FOR A MODERN WORLD

sophisticated understanding

self-imposed constraints

discover the essence

play with space and time

space and time must be

sculpture must be touched

to be truly experienced

explore virtual spaces

distances and topographies

discover the sculptures

discover the trail behind

echoing the eclectic design

a projection of forces

translated into a single form

a projection of forces

towards a particular end

exhibition spaces

resonate with profiles

weaving their spell

self-imposed constraints

sophisticated understanding

play with language

discover the essence

how the image should be

multilayered language

multilayered structures

the carving is large

allow your mind to drift

the blue marble

came out to drift

the blue marble

came out black

long time lines trail behind

echoing a faith integrated

in sculptural realisation

several levels of meaning

in your writing

a chisel of light everywhere

words weaving their spell

capturing the forms

words making up

your own textures and angles

your own deliberate dialogue

more like a projection of forces

several levels of meaning

see the relationship between

a work and its image

see the sculpture alive

in relation to nature

confirm the patterns of the world

find words for what she had

find words for what she dreamed

the beauty and perfection of forms

a particular abstract beauty

the images should be

the end of the story

SURREALISM IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

Behind the thinking, unknown thoughts,

juxtapositions and other meanings.

Ideas take flight and turn into birds,

the clock leaks time and everything

is fluid, wide open to interpretation.

Surrealism is not your friend, it wants

to seduce you into neural dancing,

wants you to believe that what is

secret and hidden is better than

understanding the world around us.

Behind the thinking, unknown thoughts

jostle and argue for attention. We make

up fantastic stories, attribute importance

to what was previously ignored, place

random thoughts in disorganized rows.

Surrealism is not your friend, it wants

to draw lines between unconnected dots,

wants to delve deeper into the sublime,

wants you to come out and play. Overhead,

a man in a hat floats towards the clouds.

'The stars are washing towards us.'

DADA IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

It does not involve thinking, this

collaged and cut-up text, the rigid

anarchy of process and performance.

Does strategy have any effect

or purpose? Not necessarily.

Dada is not your friend, although

it’s much better now. The kite dance

is the past tense, the close of a song

a broken bicycle on the motorway,

which was damaged from the start.

It does not involve thinking, this

way of misdirecting the reader.

So many ambiguities and possibilities,

impossible events and social pressures,

mean there’s often a wobble going on.

Dada is not your friend, although

there is room in the tavern of ruin

for us all to touch and seek revenge.

The poem is like a broken mirror,

only reflecting memories back.

'Give thanks for the chance to think.'

AN INTEPRETATION BEYOND UNDERSTANDING

We are visibly fading where exposed

to the sun. I have slapped myself

in the mouth with my mobile and still

can't shut up. I like to hear voices

offering an interpretation of the universe

which is beyond understanding; we have

exceeded ourselves to no useful purpose,

given ourselves to an end we're as yet

unfit for. Layers of glass and shades adjust

and direct the light forever if you've got

any sense; too much light can damage

or destroy pigments. Everybody needs

to unbutton, have an uneasy relationship.

Sometimes I think people make things up,

especially words. You do the past and present

as well as the future if you're in the know.

Too much echo, too much up; too much

echo, too much sound; I would really like

to hear voices. Measuring the change

was challenging, the results impressive.

Light can be used to restore the appearance

of lost colour without touching any of

the senses. Optical trickery has brought

five faded masterpieces back to life, an end

we're as yet unfit for. We are visibly fading,

went downhill fast: too much echo, too much

light, and I still can't shut out lost colours

without touching the canvas. I would like

to hear voices but we are sticks and sawdust

stapled to the canvas, echoes in the dark.

I think they call it the Golden Section,

which can't be seen in ordinary light.

APPROXIMATELY INBETWEEN

The thin colours and painted veils,

were like layers in the rock,

earth compressed, compounded,

stratified. Greys melded into blue,

covered other greys, allowed a red

to shimmer through. The ocean

and the sun shone in the window,

white walls framed the canvasses

he hung up to view. He could

not name all the shades or tones

of white, of grey, of colours

in between other colours, but

he would try to mix them on

the broken mirror he used

as his palette, learnt to

replicate layers by underpainting,

using collaged card, allowing

glue to spill and dry. The results

were astounding, the work

didn't feel like his. In one way

that was freeing, in another

simply shocking. Was he inspired

or in denial? Was it involuntary?

There were a million colours

he could use and when he did

it was clear he was to blame.

But here, trying to be subtle,

to approximate, learn from,

perhaps even study and copy,

there was a kind of shift away

from self to other, a slippage

toward another sort of inspiration.

He didn't like that word, because

all too often it was an excuse

for lazy thinking, for turning

experience into fiction or poetry,

relying on some idea of *truth*.

You could be true to yourself

by making it up, inventing

a process or letting words

and paint speak for themselves.

He knew he would always be

in the mix, quite liked the idea

of being hidden in the gaps

between or the splashes on

the edge. Let them focus on

the words, the shapes and colours,

anything apart from *story* or *scene*.

Let things be ordered but inconclusive.

He stood back in his studio to look

at the work pinned to the wall,

pretended he was a stranger

attempted to be critical.

The radio talked about nothing,

the rain was still falling outside,

the cat was asleep on the chair.

He wished it wasn't always so.

SCHRÖDINGER’S CAT IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

What was Schrödinger thinking? The cat

is actually either dead or alive,

whether or not it has been observed.

What does this famous thought experiment

really mean? Does anybody care?

Schrödinger’s cat is not your friend. If he was

he also wouldn’t be, would purr and hiss

at the same time, would eat and not eat,

sit in a box and out. He’s a flawed

interpretation of quantum superposition.

What was Schrödinger thinking? He was

thinking too much it seems. If only

he’d had a cat it would have calmed him,

distracted him from working, saved him

from answering hypothetical questions.

Schrödinger’s cat is not your friend. He wants

to sleep, without poison or geiger counter,

without any theoretical considerations to

consider, no flirtation with the impossible.

Doesn’t care or know if he’s alive or dead.

'Everything here changes and nothing appears to.'

EITHER A SNARL OR A SMILE

A triptych for Francis Bacon

*1. Often Disturbing Paintings of the Human Figure*

Put together entirely from prefabricated elements,

Bacon’s more figurative shadows emerge

nourished by his passion and his despair,

disturbing images of anxiety and alienation

in the heart of his favourite stomping ground.

Grotesquely distorted faces and twisted body parts,

a metaphor for corruption of the human spirit,

capture the abstract forms of trauma and denial,

the intimacy that binds its inhabitants.

Intellectuals really are a hopeless lot.

Visitors to the exhibition were shocked

by the transmission of affect through touch,

the eroticization of the disciplinary gaze,

the absolute power of the forces of the past,

painful beauty, endless boozing and desire.

From global billionaires to art market fraud,

the frame of mind of those around us

is a powerful mix of disgust and fascination,

a singularly spastic rebellion where style

is replaced by token visual affinities.

And you, forgotten, memories ravaged

drank everyone else under the table,

synthesized ideas of the harpy, electronics,

skyscraper housing estates, animals and cars,

into a puzzling version of elucidated thought.

Nothing but specialised activities everywhere

dissimulating cacophonic manifestations

of recent revivals of interest, the kind of art

that often surfaces into view, unconscious

forces operating beneath an impressive facade.

*2. Absolute Mischief*

spastic shadows replace the past

global despair's drunk disgust

human passions distort surfaces

thought now memory's metaphor

elements of Bacon’s alienation

evidence of conscious mischief

forgotten forms of abstract nothing

body mix and disciplinary surfaces

distorted beneath twisted disgust

favourite memory transmission

faces more than hopeless

images of corruption and history

manifestations of erotic global art

blank forgotten memories replaced

stomping passions disturb despair

hopeless denials elucidate everywhere

past memories prefabricating culture

the human view in abstract surfaces

heart a drunken afterthought

improvised visual cacophony

affinities nourish shadow surfaces

gaze and alienation touch a face

passions twist around smashed coil

faces inhabit forgotten memories

powerful disturbing bodies blend

twisted forms of mischief mix

trauma manifestations of disgust

more ravaged body surfaces

figures shocked by intimacy

distort fraud's culture ground

beauty affects conscious gaze

stomping the disciplinary past

questioning mind forgotten

a puzzle figure once human

transmission touch operating

more stuff made from nothing

conscious ideas bind the grotesque

materials processed to deform

our history replaced entirely

painted beauty in denial

*3. A Nothing Box*

The pressure of exchange value and technology,

the idea of a self-contained subject,

encircles every form of conditioning;

the flat ground of the background colour

an essential product of the capitalist market.

The frisson to be found in injuries

emphasise sensation redesigned

in accordance with the development

of society as a whole: systematic exclusion

synonymous with utmost extremism.

The present as a historic problem,

reduced to torsos and mutilated heads,

Joe Soap intellectuals, pataphysicians, artists,

crypto-fascists and psychedelic impresarios,

offering us either a snarl or smile.

They look like nothing, foreshadowing

deconsecrated and fragmented myth,

imagery embedded within the origins

of animal and human consciousness,

cultural tradition meshed with cruel desire,

lurid scenes of violence and torture,

maws open as if howling or screaming;

everyone placed under the divine spotlight,

excited crowds watching someone who

has been driven desperate seeking

engagement with the ground, a place

where one makes oneself and a time

in which one plays: scrubby grassland,

blue ground smeared with a green tinge,

devoid of visible human occupation.

God was the guarantor of space and time,

a brilliant stage manager, not an original artist.

The end of all values is a nothing box,

a duet of paint upon paint.

You even get to like it in the end.

ARTISTIC STATEMENT

This is an artistic statement

which is heading into a brick-walled basement,

artistic activity

in combination with aesthetic considerations.

This is an artistic masterpiece

that can now be installed in your home.

This is artistic inadequacy:

how do you consume without getting angry?

This is an artistic event

which is wrong in leaving the object out of sight.

This is an artistic video

put together for spectators,

an artistic expression

of great significance, a means to ask forgiveness.

This is an artistic film

based on images created from found home movies,

an artistic memorial.

This is an artistic selfie

which is emotionally interesting and exciting.

This is an artistic choice.

Some results are more effective than others.

This is an artisticrendering,

an artistic interpretation,

so there's no right or wrong.

This is an artistic course

that aims to be fun and inspirational.

This is an artisticvision

of a person inspired by mirrors and dreams,

an artisticintention

to slow down our sense of time and return us to the primordial.

This is an artistic impression

of what a UFO would look like if they existed,

an artistic ploy

to select and defamiliarize familiar images.

This is artistic practice

as disciplined as it is heartfelt.

This is an artistic work,

an evocative combination of music and narration.

This is an artistic effect

tending toward the abstract,

an artistic representation,

not a technical drawing. It may not be to exact scale.

This is artistic research

where the art will not be fully translatable into a written form.

This is an artistic style

which is both coherent and at odds with tradition.

This is an artisticdisgrace

or a work of genius.

This is an artistic tool

to get things to look the way you want.

This is an artistic talk

that will be sure to inspire and challenge,

an artistic venture

with the power to drive innovation.

This is an artistic methodology

that acknowledges the fundamental mutability of data.

This is an artistic idyll of sorts,

an artistic field in tune with the landscape.

This is an artistic division,

a collection of disassociated practices.

This is an artistic term

the meaning of which escapes me completely.

This is an artistic convention,

an artistic position,

an artistic luxury.

This is an artistic tour de force,

an artistic gem to love from the word go.

This is an artistic relationship

based on hybridity and dependent on play.

This is an artistic decision,

an artistic gesture.

This is an artistic theory on the surface

but it is also an effective means of signification.

This is an artisticstrategy

called free-market pastiche,

an artistic way

of dealing with the matter.

This is an artistic village

and the work never stops,

an artistic quest

that is deeply personal.

This is an artistic partnership,

an artistic group,

and many of the decorations are of our own making.

This is an artistic view.

I always liked the surrounding city reflected in the glass.

This is an artistic forum,

people here are not alone.

This is an artistic performance

filmed outside and projected in real time inside,

an artistic journey

which celebrates and portrays ordinary life.

This is an artistic choice.

I think it's pretty good, especially the use of special effects.

This is an artistic diagram

which is constantly expanding and growing,

an artistic triumph

even if it is poorly printed and badly packaged.

This is an artistic voice

of fundamental integrity and modesty,

an artistic look at life,

a kind of troubleshooting guide.

This is an artistic interpretation

of how creation might look,

an artistic visualization

that facilitates trippy grooviness.

This is an artistic learning process

characterised by change on many levels,

an artistic collaboration

involving numerous talented individuals.

This is an artistic opportunity

with results determined by professional appraisal,

an artistic exercise.

Just do your best using what you have in order to get it done.

This is an artistic finish

which really depends on the style you are going for.

Bomb Damage Maps

*West London blues*

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.

Maximum Twitch

LINES FROM THE LIBRARY

The poems were configured for maximum twitch,

words threaded together with forward slashes.

Any dancing led to spasmodic jerks at most;

readers simply going through the motions.

I was advised to wear good shoes or go barefoot,

travel cross country and keep two metres apart.

Tomorrow will never be the same again:

into the back silence melt.

EMAIL BODY TEXT TABLE BUTTON TABLE

You're talking about the three buttons at the bottom.

If you look at the styles you have, you want the link

to jump to a new workbook and make it entirely clickable.

Select the piece of text you want to send and use columns

and rows to create cells which can contain text or images.

If everything looks good, you can achieve the perfect client.

Paste in content and put their data to good use automatically.

Send it to server via Ajax, send it in person with flowers

and allow users with permissions to access the source.

Optimize for sloppy swiping; references can be ignored,

vertical space should be optimized for artisan migration.

Remember to tell people what your poems are about.

LOOK SOMEWHERE ELSE

Imagine you’re the idea

and run with it,

discover a pattern

and change it.

Name the place

then go there.

Pay attention

to the mothmen

fluttering round the light;

music is a mirror

so take a look and see

what you sound like.

Please let go

of your survival guide

and walk in the jungle:

it is the first stage

of a long journey

towards the door.

Good times never end.

Sing with the wind

and come home with me.

It is time to visit

the circus of footprints

and join the clowns.

MENDING A BROKEN

‘How do you mend a broken etcetera?’

– Dean Young, ‘Not Trying to Win No Prizes’

First you make sure the battery

isn’t flat, check there is petrol

in the tank and that you have read

the instruction manual. Then you

wind the key, take off the brake

and press the button down:

it should move or turn at once.

If it doesn’t then repeat above

and when you are in a bad mood

call the plumber, electrician, mechanic,

and go and do something else.

Make do with candles and your bike,

perhaps shake it gently or bang

the sides, plug and unplug it

several times. Shout at it

then swear. Get it off your chest

and wear something else today.

Whatever you do, keep all packaging,

file the receipt and do not buy

extended warranties or insurance,

simmer gently and then boil

before allowing it to rest. When

you’re calm, do more of the same.

Etecetera, etcetera, etcetera.

NOTE TO STUDENTS

When I do not give you straight answers

you are confused, when you have to think

for yourselves you are cross. We are not

in agreement about how to learn or why

we are here in this room. You have not done

any preparatory reading but are prepared

to pretend and give discussion a go.

And you would like to blame your phone

along with the college computers

for not printing out what you need.

No-one wants to research a subject,

everyone asks what they actually need

to know, and do not like it when I say

‘depends’. But it does and always will,

will always depend on what you want

to say, to do, and who you know, how

you spend your time and if you asked

or are about to ask the right questions,

have begun to think for yourself. It is not

easy learning how to learn, but if you can

life gets easier. There are no exams

to revise for, no tick boxes, and no lists

of facts, you just need to argue and wonder,

to embrace and value confusion.

There will always be too much to read.

NOTE TO SELF

Remember there is a narrator

in the poem, as well as an author,

that stanzas do not have to be even

and you can end with a half-line.

Resist the urge to tidy up,

a little sprawl intrigues the reader

and holds their attention as

they navigate the words

laid out on the page. There are

still colours in the darkness,

but they take some searching for.

When I first read Dean Young

I was on a New York hotel bed.

‘Listen to these,’ I said to Neil

and read several poems out loud.

I did not want, still do not want,

to call it surrealism, there is

more reason and connectivity

than juxtaposition and products

of the subconscious suggest,

but perhaps I am confusing it

with Dada or the idea of chance.

You can see colours in the darkness

but only if you persevere, force

your eyes open and look. I sat

in the Ad Reinhardt retrospective

and stared until his black paintings

went blue, then red: dark squares

with fuzzy edges. And then I sat

and watched other visitors walk

straight through, not choosing

to engage. How I willed them to,

although I must remember there

is an author as well as the self,

a narrator as well as the I.

NOTE TO ALL

Remember it used to be better,

when we were younger, before it began

to get worse, before it got to this point.

I never asked anyone about the meaning

of life, but probably should have, it’s

too late now, they’re dead, all information

lost. Trace material and knowledge

slowly fade and disappear, books

go out of print and no-one listens

to those records anymore. As we age

we turn nostalgic, as we turn nostalgic

the past becomes a better place,

our future something we must try

to avoid. Time travel is wonderful:

everything has a rosy glow, everything

we thought was gone comes back,

the people we miss say hi, we get

another chance to make amends

and do things right; well, only in

our dreams. Back in the real world

it’s raining, the roads are flooded,

the train tracks under water, and

hardly any students made it in.

I’d like to go home and hug the cat,

read, watch TV or the rain. Damp

shoes and socks, wet hats and coats,

make seminar rooms smell funny;

and my desktop computer is dead.

The beautiful sky will not be back,

sunshine belongs to the past;

it is time for the seasons to change

all over again. How will things evolve?

What will the future involve? And how

will you navigate our legacy, the rubbish

piled high and a world led by leaders

who believe in greed? Jessica says

she will buy a canal boat or campervan,

Natasha a much smaller house abroad,

but they may not have enough money

or permission to travel, now we have

stopped talking to our neighbour states

and each other. We hope it will change

for the better, become like we wanted

it to be, but that seems highly unlikely.

Dark energy is two-thirds of everything

and we still have no idea what it is.

MIRACLE STATION

Sphinx lightning suddenly

backlit the skeleton rain

as the greyness dissolved.

Love notes from the future

are all I have left of you,

the dust you left behind.

There is a place for your,

for my, for our, self-obsession

and compulsive disorder.

I am the protagonist

and you were my lover.

Now, the sun is still.

Honeysuckle, I am

thinking of you, exhaling

lust in the plural.

I breathe but you don't.

We sing makeshift shanties

to pass our time together,

are guided by the blind

toward ascension and

sound embodying space.

There is no room for flesh,

no place for the soul.

Abstain from life,

it is too perplexing,

like paintings about paint

or the kettle and teapot

nailed to the gallery wall.

This is the passing point,

with little room for manoeuvre,

this is where life flowers

and towers of emotion fall.

You are my kaleidoscope girl,

the splinter of light in my eye.

I am comfortably accomplished

at making yesterday better.

Hyacinth, your memories fade

in the smoke and mirrors of desire,

fields of fire across the land.

THE MOST PEOPLE

In the book I am reading,

a girl turns terrorist

and her mother flees

to South America

to hide and mourn,

run away from herself.

Guilt is scratched

into her every speech,

the kind of nonsense

crowds of strangers

or acquaintances produce,

but her stories change,

as do the names of the people

no-one she talks to knows.

She fills a void with chit-chat

that cannot stop the bomb

exploding with her daughter,

who made it and took it

to where the most people

would die. And they did

and the talking goes on,

not covering up the blood

or screams, the photos

shown on the news

we watched earlier tonight.

PERFECT LIVES

I have my own stash of coffee beans

and an attitude to match, may only be

the second or third best-dressed man

in the department but I know how

to live, and the shortcut into town.

If you turn left it will take you hours,

turn right and the hill drops down

to the pub and antique shop. We can

assemble the past from discarded junk

and live in secondhand luxury, or

give ourselves over to moping and tears.

Mourning is a condition where we

find time we can ill afford to think about

those who are now gone. We put Bill’s

exhibition up in a morning, dismantled it

in twenty seven minutes the next day;

there wasn't even time to say goodbye.

Some of the students are in fancy dress,

few have read the work. I was crowned

king for a day by David’s class but then

deposed as the curriculum moved on.

Dan does not believe in fairies,

Nic is looking for a big bad wolf,

coffee has gone straight to my head.

None of us have perfect lives,

mine is out of focus and in disarray.

A PERSONAL LIBRARY

Slow change melt: horizontal actions in progress

always presents considerations about *something*.

In this case, the main focus is constant velocity,

the result of a now lost sculpture and a series

of psychedelic textures, a complex of reverse

walkways and bending truths, leading to states

where open minds can peer down hidden corridors,

as melodic patterns become two-way mirrors

to rooms beneath the floorboards. Inquisitiveness

is unencumbered by swells or expressive emanations:

there are memories all around us, technical miracles,

snapshots of ghosts, and nameless coloured skies.

SO MANY WORDS

'There are just so many words that fit on a line'

– Peter Dent, 'Their Forecast Not My Forecast'

I like the ending and then I don't.

A Mexican ghost town crowds in,

detectives in London are on the case,

trying to pin the moments down,

put them into the correct order

so they can solve the problem and

go home. I am scared of the future

and not very keen on the past:

too many variables and unknowns,

so many ways to join the dots

but none of them make sense.

This new music tries to evoke

a past that never existed,

where everything stood still

and we were in control, able to

relax and confide in one another

face to face. Masks are mandatory,

and if we speak at all it is by video

or phone. The museums are empty,

in pubs we sit apart or in the garden;

everyone sleeps in as late as possible

and fails to submit on time.

Deadlines come and go, guitars

shred the minutes and subside.

In a dream I visited all the places

I never saw, probably never will.

A man with a flashlight illuminates

the rules and tells us what to do.

When we were fewer and healthier

there was less to do and the list

of things pending was shorter,

the agenda quickly dealt with

before coffee and cakes arrived.

It is about to end then it doesn't.

Even the small bright lights

have gone out, we are in the dark

and alone, afraid of the now.

I jump before I think, weep later

as it all sinks in. It's our world

and look what we have done.

I am lost in the humming air,

the rain is endless, the last

of my dismantled boat has gone,

collected by a man from Kent.

PUNCTUATION TO FIX

for Martin

I have punctuation to fix, and miles

and miles to go before I drink. Imaginary

escapades and propping up the empty bar

at small press fairs are not what we had

in mind. I have never met a normal poet

yet I find myself attracted to pamphlets

and chapbooks, obscure American imports

and the utterances of writers from small

European states, and others who clearly

cannot write. I often introduce myself

to editors who do not expect me there;

they are always surprised to see me

and I enjoy watching them wriggle

in discomfort and find an excuse

to leave. Trickle-down poetics is

an ingenious idea but all too often

it is only spittle and spilt beer,

for nothing puts off an audience

like a bearded poetry reading

or a glamorous emotional outing

by a well-meaning young woman

or fashionable comedienne. Is that

even a word any more? Is the pope

a bear in the woods? Who would dare

to start a poetry press in this day

and age? Our business model is

a long tail of bullshit, lies and

shouted rhymes that pile up in

the inbox. We can't face reading

and rejecting them. *I'm sorry* *but*

*we are no longer accepting* *submissions*,

says our out-of-office reply. We'll invite

friends and the famous to give us work

for free. Dangle the carrot of publication

and all the donkeys will rush to

your end of the field, hee-hawing

and waggling their poetic ears.

RAT FINK LIE

'How dare you assume I want to parlez-vous with you!'

– Mark E Smith

He'll always owe us but he doesn't want to know.

He's trapped in three dimensions, one of which

is a lie. The other two compress him flat,

which makes it easy for self-storage.

He's a new breed of rat: same as the old

but nastier, with much longer whiskers

and carrying more disease. You wouldn't

want him in your house, but he turns up

like a regular, can smell you opening

the fridge or uncorking a bottle of wine.

*Yes, of course you can come in, good*

*to see you.* I know how to live a lie.

THE DESERVING PORE

‘I’m a big advocate of wellness and daily happiness;

happiness begins my morning meditation.’

Gratitude is a positive mindset and contributes to

stress-relieving therapies. And stress-relieving therapies

are increasingly becoming part of the beauty

we have in our lives: we can all be bought and sold.

Routines of the skincare-obsessed are happy and positive,

suggesting that it should be more frequently prescribed

for the negative. It is to do with genetics (although

beauty influencers add to your happiness every morning.

Yes, every morning.) Time and/or money to burn

is more likely than science: take some of the wackier

expensive creams. It takes three weeks to focus on

the positive but don’t expect dewy skin. We know

that stress contributes to intrusive self-help practices

put forward by those who have already made a lot of money.

If you are loathe to spend then create an optimistic mindset,

be grateful and keep saying ‘Thank you skin. Thank you skin.’

Skin has a lot to offer. Tucks and cuts don’t ever work

but at least gratitude trains the mind and can be the way

to deal with acne, eczema and psoriasis, or the kinds of people

who want to add radiance to your skin. Forget it, you are free.

THE NOW DELUSION

'So do we really need to mourn time's passing?'

– Michael Slezak, *New Scientist*, 2 Nov 2013

We might think of time flowing from a real past

into a not-yet-read future but the idea that

time flows past you is just as absurd as

the suggestion that space-time is warped

by the presence of matter to produce

the force we call gravity on a surface

we call the present, shimmering into existence

one moment at a time. You might not be able

to determine what's on the other side,

two events that are both now to you will happen

at different times for anyone moving at

a different speed; the result is a picture known.

Fantastical as it seems, there are things that are

closer to you and things that are further away.

When you gaze down upon the universe,

the only things that are real are language

and moving backwards into the future

with no clear view of where we are heading.

If we gather enough data we will still disagree

on what is happening; there are still wrinkles

that might seem like a zero-sum game

but the prize on offer is a better understanding

of experience in a universe like ours. We are only

ever likely to have a clear backwards view.

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.

ON THE WAY

'We enjoy the fiction of encounters, their meaning

in the margins'

– Ian Seed, 'Vein'

I am in Santiago, I am in Cremona,

in Samarkand and other places too.

I slip from page to page to country

via an unfocused torrent of poems

and serendipitous reading. Summer

has been and gone but at least I am

back in contact with Mike and Maria,

and poems are starting to leak out

of my computer and nearby printer.

I am going to get a haircut and must

remember to wear aftershave so that

I smell nice for Monday's conference

call. We will have to listen and not

talk, can turn off the camera, drink

coffee in our pyjamas if we wish,

as long as we turn up. Ian's poems

flow everywhere and anywhere,

tracing tributaries and streams,

diverting around people we meet

on the way, pausing to take in

what is written in a notebook or

spraypainted on the wall. There

is nothing can not be in a poem,

nowhere I cannot go if I relax

into my bath with a good book.

If Spain and Italy are out of reach

and I don't dig archaeology then

new poetry criticism offers me

the chance to think about what

Allen wrote, how and why he did.

Maria's draft gongs sound like

a klaxon, disturb my morning,

but with a little editing they ring

and shimmer, conjure sunshine

from the rain. Alistair emails

to give me a link to photos

of missing buildings, it seems

we are all wandering online

looking at what's no longer there.

What isn't there often seems

better than what is. The marks

of demolition, history, fiction,

excite more than the actuality

of the place where we now live.

How quickly we forget to visit

the dissenters' graveyard or walk

past the cathedral; the town

becomes car parks and shops,

just somewhere else to go,

another way to pass the time.

SHORTWAVE RUINS

Warm drones layered on cold textures

filled with radio chatter, distorted

vocals that sound like a whipping wind,

signals drifting into a place of comfort.

A burned out car lies under my pillow

as I slowly turn the dial, searching

for volunteers to patrol these remains,

all the ruined cities of the world.

Potential anomalies on our maps

indicate a fictional, virtual landscape

where hoodoos cower in horror,

shuddering at what might have been.

I come from nowhere and only know

one language, had problems with speech

from the start. I have learnt to mistrust

what is said then abandoned around me

and to watch what I say when others

are about. Voicing oblivion is what

we must do, I need to tell you about

all the things I have not heard or seen.

WATCHING A TRAIN WRECK IN THE DISTANCE

smoke and spark *over there*

impossible to intervene or interfere

sound out of sync with suffering

instinct for calamity and survival

dazed distress impossible to infer

others' screams hurt silence

now more than ever

because and despite

UTOPIA

It wasn't as dull as she remembers.

We did not sit around in silence,

we went for drinks, riverside walks,

sometimes early morning swims

in the local council pool. We might

have scrubbed up nice for church

but it wasn't all grim silences

or chaste remarks. The world

was breaking up and family, school

and city were each part of that.

Revolution was in the air,

although I was too young to know

that at the time. I was a teenager

who watched huddles of hippies

in the corners of Notting Hill pubs,

rock mutating into punk, the bangs

and whistles, textures and tones,

of carefully improvised noise

played in damp grey rooms

near the railway in Camden Town.

I asked the security guards

to turn the lights on, so we

could look at Ivon Hitchens' mural

of dance and song, found my way

up to the borders of Hampstead

but never went back again.

My patch was further West, where

there were concrete flyovers

and busy roads, a small park

with swings and football pitches.

We made dens on scrap ground,

wobbly platforms of wooden pallets

tied into trees, and cycled everywhere.

Later, bikes became motorbikes

and the city opened up. It wasn't far

up town, and skateboard parks

out East were possible, if you didn't

mind the drive or distrusting looks

from locals. You could park anywhere

and walk into other worlds, could

hear music everywhere, and find out

other words for states of mind

and girls. Scuzzy bookshops sold

secondhand books, science fiction,

experimental novels, strange poetry

and countercultural zines. Friends

who thought the world would change

were everywhere but then started

to disappear. Book and record shops

closed down, it wasn't easy to see

new bands, the basement full of

LPs you could take a 10p punt on

was no more. Everything became

'antique', 'collectable' or 'rare',

as hippies went into business

or moved abroad, having had

enough. Utopia never happened,

its prophets scattered in the sun,

with their confused memories

and straggling unkempt beards.

THE SADNESS OF THINGS

The sarcasm of birds:

two crows bickering on the empty bird table.

The disappointment of biscuits:

too sweet and crumbly for middle-age.

The distraction of other things:

screens flickering, new music demanding attention.

The disintegration of light:

darkness reflected in a discoloured mirror.

The enigma of memory:

what I remember, what I choose to forget.

The destruction of history:

ancient monuments deliberately reduced to dust.

The seduction of the unknown

rather than what we should care for and love.

The impossibility of calm

and quiet and order, of making a perfect home.

The absence of speech:

words unrecognisable, books left out in the rain.

The elusiveness of meaning:

playful disjunction is not the same as synchronicity.

The sarcasm of birds,

their caws and cries waking me up too soon.

The drawn-out day:

silences, pauses, worry and dismay.

The fickleness of language,

refusing to mean what I want to say.