

cairo



Louis Armand

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FICTION

The Garden
Menudo
Clair Obscur
Breakfast at Midnight
Canicule

POETRY

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Erosions
Inexorable Weather
Land Partition
Malice in Underland
Strange Attractors
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Letters from Ausland
Synopticon (with John Kinsella)

CRITICISM

Incendiary Devices
Techne
Solicitations
Literate Technologies
Event States
The Organ-Grinder's Monkey

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Set in Joanna, composed by Eric Gill in 1930, with headings in Futura, composed in 1927 by Paul Renner

For he shall live whose name is named.
– **Book of the Dead**

CAIRO

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☾ DOME CITY

30°1'42.58"N
31°13'14.65"E

Everything about it seems fake and yet too-real. More real than any place on Earth.

Standing on a bridge, traffic streaming from the black open-cut of the City, smog radium-tinted. The tower lights fuse in the river's oxidised sheen, slithering down into it beneath a strangely lit sub-surface. The vertigo of their reflection, descending and forever descending, like the image of a city hung upside-down from a night sky carved out of huge geodesics. Luminous. City of God.

The last thing he can remember: lying on a cold slab like the ones in morgues. A ceiling fan slowly turning. Maybe he was dead. That seemed real, too. But what's real mean anymore?

There's a dry, sour taste in his mouth. He tries to spit, but nothing comes out. A pounding in his head that won't go away. And a smell. Ozone. Sulphur. Combustion. Decay. It's the smell that forces him back from the edge, kicks him awake. He struggles with the desire to slip back into the dead zone, lost inside a thought that's on the verge of being erased. Someone else's thought. Then an image in his head, like *déjà vu*. *I've been here before*. Not knowing how he got there or who he is, but still familiar with the routine. *Exactly this place, at exactly this time*. He can see the words floating behind his eyes, blinking out of the darkness. *Time. Place*. So abstract, remote. As if they didn't concern him at all. Just bits of smoke and haze circulating behind a mirror.

This's how it seems, that he's woken up inside someone else's body. In a wrong set of coordinates. Like the coordinates of dreams. Except this's nothing like a dream.

Out across the vista, a constellation of taillights drifts through smog and drizzle. Behind it, the City shudders and groans. He can feel the dead weight in his arms, inching its way up. Behind him,

someone grunts. The word *move* through clenched teeth. He's gripping the steel railing so hard his knuckles look like they're about to break the skin. That voice again. Familiar. He strains, willing his hands to open. One tendon, one muscle at a time. It seems to take forever.

Then it stops. Something inside unfreezes and the programme takes over. Somewhere actions have been graphed, positions triangulated, cross-sections mapped out against a lower brain immediacy. His hands come free, lashing the air. It's then he sees they're covered in blood. Blood down the front of his shirt too. He doesn't know where it came from. No-one's there. Then the voice again, repeating. *No time*. Coming from behind him whichever way he looks. He stares at the blood on his hands and it starts to come apart then shudder back into focus. Degauss. Like staring at a computer screen with an error in the system. Perhaps he's the error. The system already scanning him out, quarantined in a sub-programme...

No. Time.

He knows he's got to get out of there before it's too late. But too late for what? The programme, call it instinct, guides him. His body feels wrong. He has to think about each of his actions. To consciously put one foot in front of the other. Keep balance. Get a bearing.

Something stirs behind his left eye. A flicker of green numerics. Data. Actions become automatic now. The transition is so swift it leaves him dazed. *No time*. *No questions*. He moves, faster now, heading east along the Bridge. The drizzle ebbs and flows, making everything gleam. The blood on his shirt gleams too. He tries to focus on the lights up ahead. Already they're receding. In his mind he's running, willing himself to reach them. His thoughts race, too. Indistinct. Half-formed. His body nothing but a blur.