

CORNELIUS DIECKMANN

## Houston, We are Stranded

Lot: Stories

By Bryan Washington

(Atlantic Books 223pp £12.99)

There's no lone star in Bryan Washington's *Lot*, just a cast of characters as drab as the Houston neighbourhoods they inhabit. 'There's the world you live in,' says the narrator of the title story, 'and then there are the constellations around it, and you'll never know you're missing them if you don't even know to look up.' Most of the characters in Washington's debut don't know each other, but together these 'short stories' (as the dust jacket calls them) form an illuminating city 'novel' (as per the copyright page). Although about half of the stories are told by a recurring narrator charting the decline of his family, *Lot* is primarily unified by place.

Each story is named for a different area of Houston. In 'Alief', a suburb 'where motherfuckers were born, lived, and died without coughing a word of English', the hood itself talks, narrating in an evasive first-person plural. After a Jamaican woman begins an affair with a 'whiteboy', word makes its way across the neighbourhood. When it reaches her husband, he strangles the other man as practically the entire block looks on. The crime, including the killer's identity, is related in the story's opening paragraph. Yet, the narrators later own up, 'We did it. We told him. We're the ones who opened our mouths. But not all at once. We're better than that ... But we spoke as one.' It's testament to the fragility of *Lot*'s communities that the book's most clearly pronounced instance of group identity is a voyeuristic chain of whispers at the end of which a man is dead.

Despite barely leaving the city limits, *Lot* is a book about the loneliness of migration, 'that thing we all share'. Its stories are populated by hyphenated Americans who have come to Texas from Mexico, Jamaica, Guatemala and elsewhere. Some of them are 'not-legals'; most fall into that sadly inexhaustible American class of 'invisible folk'. Washington writes about them with empathy and at times with painfully dry humour, but without resorting to heavy

pathos. Some of *Lot*'s most devastating moments hit as hard as they do because the characters don't comment on them.

'Javi said the only thing worse than a junkie father was a faggot son' begins one of the six stories narrated by a gay teenager, Javi's younger brother, slowly learning to navigate a world in which love is hazard enough, let alone when you like boys and you're 'too dark for the blancos, too Latin for the blacks'. Unnamed until the final pages, the narrator doesn't reveal how being abused by his brother makes him feel, but we don't need to be told. Washington is at his best when writing about the impossibility of truly knowing other people, even if they're family, even if you've shared a bed with them. The narrator confides:

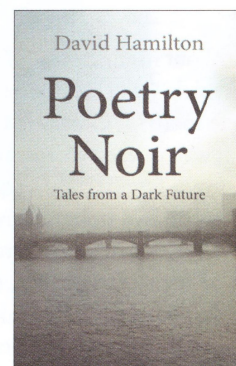
Now that I've rolled around and had some lovers I can tell you a secret: the difference between people with the wildness in them, and people like us, is you usually can't tell until it's past too late ... Days and months and years'll pass before a person reveals themselves – and then all of a sudden they've fucked the postman, or left the gas on, or stuck their hands in your child's pants.

Each time *Lot* allows a glimpse of the young man's family, it has fallen apart a little more. The father cheats on the mother; the sister moves away; Javi dies in a freak accident while on military service. At the funeral, the pastor 'kept fucking up our names, and two niggas in the back bounced halfway through when they figured out it wasn't their Javi'. When the narrator's mother finally decides to forsake the city in which she has raised and lost her children, the only thing that remains for him to ask is: when everyone has left, how do you go home?

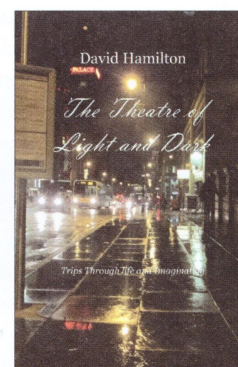
*Lot* is a slim volume, but it doesn't feel like one. There's a lot of sadness in it – and a little bit of hope.

To order this book from the Literary Review Bookshop, see page 32.

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