

‘THE SKY WAS EMPTY, BUT STILL THE THUNDER ROLLED’

A BOOK REVIEW WITH AUTHOR DOMINIC LYNE
BY CASEY MORRIS



ANALYSIS

Dominic Lyne's "The Sky was Empty, but Still the Thunder Rolled" is an unflinching portrait of grief, friendship, and love. Divided into three sections, "Act One," "Intermission," and "Act Two," Lyne details his stages of grief and emotional processing after losing a close friend.

In "Act One," the story unfolds quickly, shifting between past and present, subjective monologue and retelling. We read of the simultaneous forces of pain and guilt, of shame and disbelief. Family and friends, paramedics and doctors drift across the page as Lyne narrates every angle of Tree's death; as the longest of the three sections, "Act One" peaks before the pain finally breaks. A transformation occurs. In "Intermission," a few years have passed since Tree's death. Lyne's style here feels more connected, more rooted to time and place. Flashbacks, when they happen, do not totally displace the present. Tree's death remains in the past. Though Lyne's grief still lingers, we read of moving forward, of honoring her legacy in thought and deed. This notion defines the collection's final section, "Act Two." In expansive and reflective lyricism, Lyne looks to the future. He seeks reconnection with the physical world, the present moment, and to disentangle suppressed and misunderstood emotions. Lyne discovers that such distillation is time-bound yet unforthcoming. By accepting pain and suffering as determinations of grief, he allows himself to heal.

Healing fortifies the will to carry on, to face each day with a fresh reckoning. This balance, ever-changing and fragile, is what Lyne accomplishes. A work of grit, lyrical beauty, and poise, "The Sky was Empty, but Still the Thunder Rolled" leaves no loose ends or word unsaid.

In "Act One," Lyne names each poem in ascending numerical order. Such a choice resembles the yoke profound loss imposes on the conscious mind, as he attempts to confront Tree's death day by day. The collection opens with a series of memories of Tree. Writing of how they met and became friends, Lyne quickly shifts from one to another. The thread of memory blurs at times: we read variously of Lyne and Tree at a house party, on a bus-ride home, before a sudden waking days later with a blaring phone. Its automated message forms a refrain for the opening lines of "two," cited here from the second stanza:

[Rustle, rustle]

"I hate my phone."

[Click]

"End of message,

To listen to this message again, please
press 1;

To delete, press 2."

[Beep]

[Rustle, rustle]

"I hate my phone."

[Click]

"End of message,

To listen to this message again, please

—

Her voice.

What is this little sentence?

The voice of a ghost,

The voice of a ghost is captured after death,

Faint whispers

Hidden beneath layers of static and noise.

This was captured in life;

Her voice converted to 1s and 0s,

On replay reverted back to physical waves.

A portion of her essence remains alive,
Tangible.

It is all I have left.

Not connected to any visuals

That trap her as a memory,

She could have left this today, Yesterday,
Tomorrow.

The words will never change.

Who am I kidding?

Simply a stone-tape recording.

The past looped.

When she left, the sound quality changed.

It became empty.

Hollow.

It sounds like what my voice became too.

In "two," Lyne establishes the collection's thematic and stylistic hallmarks. The poem begins with an automated message from Tree's voicemail, one that sounds hollow as Lyne alludes to her recent death. Its "static and noise" fades, giving way to lyricism and reflection. The "voice converted to 1s and 0s," trapped in binary code, is a metaphor for the philosophic and emotional exploration Lyne embarks on in subsequent poems.

Binaries like life and death, pain and healing, acceptance and disbelief permeate Lyne's self-understanding. They also influence his perception of events around Tree's death and others' opinions of their friendship, for better or worse.

In "two," we also discover Lyne's style. Probing, relentlessly digging for connection and truth in supple, enjambed lines, Lyne moves from one thought to another. Thoughts build and gain momentum before clashing with the real world: he asks "Who am I kidding?/ Simply a stone-tape recording." The roving mind inevitably confronts the present. Later poems expand this movement, as Lyne traverses the real and imagined, impressions and lived-experiences. By examining the extremes and what's in-between, a full picture emerges of Tree's impact in his life. We understand the layers of friendship beyond shared experiences and even memory itself. We see first-hand how the process of grief empties the souls' contents, not unlike tipping a suitcase over. One by one, each bit, each faculty and emotion eventually retrieves its place.

Throughout "Act One," we experience the effects of Tree's death. For Lyne, this starts as a spiritual unraveling, drawing on every part of his soul. Poems "three" to "twenty" follow a meandering, introspective course with numerous references to the cosmos, Christian imagery, Daoism, and memories of Tree. Together, these shape Lyne's internal dialogue and processing of events.

However, the binary of subjective experience and objective reality is always at the fore. He grapples with understanding how such tragic loss actually transpired, how it resolves itself in both himself and the physical world. These lines from "eight" are a strong example:

How would you like me to remember you?
Not in sadness, but with love.
An alabaster bust carved to perfection,
Placed upon a pedestal for all to see.
In snow white purity you could gaze
Forever at the world that fascinated you
In never-ending ways.
Always finding beauty in anyone,
Even when it was hidden so deep beneath the
surface.
A more forgiving being than even God
Himself.
His eyes never quested through the circles of
Hell
To gaze upon Lucifer's beautiful face
In search for even a glimmer of remorse.

A rhetorical question unleashes both physical and spiritual imagery: Lyne first imagines Tree as an "alabaster bust carved to perfection," one whose "snow white purity" would best capture her attributes. Loving, kind-hearted, and fully accepting of Lyne is how Tree is described elsewhere in "Act One." Hence, the superlatives build to place her "upon a pedestal" finding "beauty in anyone." But from the concrete we move to the abstract. Though Tree's virtues are not obvious, they are transcendent. Lyne expresses this by comparing Tree to God, whose beneficence never "quested through

the circles of Hell." For Lyne, Tree's friendship was more powerful, more uplifting than divine love. This is because, as detailed repeatedly in "Act One," Tree sees through his tough exterior, his imperfections and insecurities. More than friendship, her faith in Lyne is so keen that she instills a sense of warm contentment, of completeness. This is illustrated a few stanzas later in "eight," where Lyne writes:

How should I remember you?

As my soulmate, the Yang to my Yin.

Tàiyīn and Tàiyáng.

Place half of my moon next to half of your sun
To create the never-ending circle of life.

The rhetorical question this time is answered by the opposing forces of Daoist philosophy. The Yin and Yang, represented by the famous circle divided into black and white halves, is a fundamental idea in Chinese culture and Daoism. As opposites, the Yin and Yang attract and accompany each other, each containing bits of its counterpart. When unified, they create an ideal balance of Yin (i.e. substance) and Yang (i.e. function). In Chinese life and culture, this balance is associated with optimal health and well-being. Lyne's reference suggests that Tree is his opposite: her outflowing love and kindness runs against his depth and reservation. Realizing this, Lyne sees her as the other side of his incomplete being. His language then turns cosmic with a second allusion to Eastern thought.

The union of the moon and sun is a reference to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, specifically one of the seventeen tantras about death. The tantra teaches one how to enter the intermediate state between life and death, called the "bardo," with awareness and how to attain enlightenment. Lyne's reference implies Tree's passing, yet he is urging both their souls to increased awareness, to enlightenment in life and death. By transcending the bounds of space and time, Lyne and Tree's friendship abides for eternity.

A second, interesting challenge to death appears in "twenty." In this piece, Lyne explores an extended personification of death. Described as evasive yet irresistible when the moment comes, death figures here as a universal nemesis finally getting his due. Lyne turns the tables on death in these lines from the first stanza:

If Death could be seen, it could be fought.

Could you kill Death?

Lucky for it I could not witness it

Pulling you away from me,

I would have let go of your hand,

Taken both of mine and choked

The life out of Death.

It would have been Death's eyes that dulled,

Not yours.

It would have been Death's body sprawled
On the carpeted floor.

As Death lay there I would have returned to
you.

Personifying death is not too uncommon in verse, with Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for death—" renowned for its dark humor and insight. Lyne spares nothing, however, in his vision. Cowardly, unassuming, death is still dangerous and vicious. But, Lyne writes, "if Death could be seen, it could be fought." Imagery of a deadly strangulation followed by Death, defeated and spread "on the carpeted floor," comes full circle. How have we arrived at death construed as a negative, menacing force? What happened to the pursuit of spiritual transcendence, of Nirvana in pages past? As part of the grieving process, we see and hear the inner turmoil of Lyne's mind. This is not to discredit the legitimacy of faith or spirituality. It is certainly not a crashing down to Earth of Lyne's beliefs or value-system. It is simply the upwelling of a traumatized mind, the fault-finding and reassessing of the past that sometimes follows flashbacks and nightmares. We also feel the anger, the contempt even at the ineffability of fate. This does not mean Lyne is a fatalist; far from it, he turns from death back to reality. The closing lines convey the shift:

That is what I would have done if I could see
Death,
However, I can't.
So instead I watched it pull you away.
I watched paramedics take over from me.
I watched as one approached and told me
They had ceased their efforts.

Though painful to read, Lyne's tone suggests the beginning of acceptance, of fortitude in the face of Tree's death. A sense of closure appears; not one of permanence as much as the ending of a long chapter. Looking to the future and moving onwards are ideas further developed in the collection's second section, "Intermission." Written several years after Tree's death, the section opens amid global lockdowns during the pandemic. Lyne's lyrical, introspective style evolves as thoughts blend less into each other and more into cohesive arguments. The passage of time, of space from Tree's death lends a stabilizing quality to his voice. Lyne's reflections peer deeper into the complex of trauma and grief, unraveling layer by layer. Another feature of "Intermission" is that every poem receives a unique title. This again confirms the cooling of intense pain, as Lyne remembers Tree with precision and self-possession. Its first poem demonstrates this new perspective. Here is an excerpt from "thirty/ four/ twenty twenty-one:"

Can I face the trauma?
Can I move on, move beyond
Without fear, without guilt?
Can we sit together now,
Change my iPhone's background
From my favourite photo of us
To something just of me?
Just the lock screen though,
Small steps, baby steps.

Lyne's perspective is now firmly grounded in the present. The reality of Tree's death is speakable, one that he considers facing "without fear, without guilt." He confidently asks Tree to "sit together" with him and change his smartphone's background. The question's symbolism is twofold: first, Lyne is able to speak clearly with Tree. Though imaginative, this is far removed from the inarticulate pain and emotional spirals of "Act One." Secondly, changing his background to a different picture, one without Tree, is an act of courageous loyalty. Lyne's courage to reassert his individual needs signals the return of self-love and self-care. And Lyne's loyalty to both Tree and himself has deepened. No longer restricted to photographs or other mementos, Tree's place is steadfast and internalized. Other emotional currents are flowing, too. Foregoing visual cues to mourn Tree hints at the first steps of self-forgiveness. Such "small steps, baby steps" are evident in the poem's final lines:

If I forgive you for leaving,
Can you forgive me too?
For I finally understand that
The process of moving forward
Is a process of forgetting.
Your image is in my heart,
It doesn't need to be on display.

Self-forgiveness forms the mental and physical paths to healing. As Lyne explains, it is a "process of forgetting." More precisely, it is letting go of pain, guilt, and trauma. It is acknowledging and accepting one's role in

past events, while affirming the past is irreparable. Such forgetting does not mean the loss of memory.

On the contrary, memories are preserved, shorn of their weighted chains and returned to the heart. Lyne's decision to change his phone's background picture initiates this process which, over time, heals and restores. The healing process is imperfect, however. Other poems in "Intermission" attest to this, with pieces like "a sacred place" and "seconds of a memory" portraying the lingering effects of grief and PTSD that naturally surface over time. Though we never approach the lows and fragmentation of "Act One," Lyne still battles the grief. The closing lines of "complet—" depict such competing currents of sadness and forgiveness:

When I am good enough to complete her
The prize is death. What else would it be
When I leave only darkness in my wake?
Maybe I set her free, and one day,
When this is all done, she will return for me.

When it seizes Lyne, the pain causes self-doubt, self-destructive thoughts and conclusions. But, contrary to "Act One," these spasms do not radiate and fester. The negative surge passes. Lyne returns to himself, stating "maybe I set her free." Though cycling of negative and positive, self-judgmental and self-forgiving thoughts is prevalent throughout "Intermission," it is poignant that Lyne ends with the latter.

This further illustrates the healing process at work, the tapering of emotional pain and urging towards the future. This new path is fully realized in the collection's final part, "Act Two." Containing some of Lyne's finest writing, "Act Two" showcases the poet's range and depth at their best. The processes of healing and forgiveness have strengthened Lyne's self-understanding. His perspective broadens: Tree's death, though still at the fore of his lyricism, finds its place in the order of things. We read of Lyne's childhood, of relationships fractured or preserved, and more widely of Lyne's views on life and death. The truth-making power of a refined, disciplined mind comes to fruition. Just listen to the first lines of "Act Two:"

That's what I desire to achieve,
To reconnect to the movement of the ocean.
Reel in, raise the anchor from the depths;
Free this vessel from the same repetitive tides
That have rocked and battered its sides.
Maybe there is a message hidden in here,
A cataclysm, forbidden knowledge.

Out of the bewildering mire of Tree's death emerges Lyne, bruised but intact, fearless yet vigilant. Seeking reconnection, Lyne vows to feel "the movement of the ocean/ reel in, raise the anchor from the depths." His metaphoric language is rich with possibilities. Reconnecting with the physical world means a return to living, mindful engagement with the present. It is also an expression of the will, an example of the same courage from

"Intermission." Lyne's metaphor of the ocean, its swirling expanse, represents the wilderness of grief from which he moors. Once on shore, he finally turns inward. But what is this "forbidden knowledge?" What has his journey from hell and back revealed? Lyne hints at an answer in later lines, in which stepping back from Tree's death opens unforeseen vistas of knowledge and experience:

Reconnect to the sound of... what?
I don't know the name for it yet,
Nor the words of the language to express.
Grief is just one part, a wet part that washes,
It floods and pulls you under.
I have not drowned, although I am still
Under the surface waiting.

The "forbidden knowledge" starts as a feeling, incommunicable as an ember in the night. What's clear is the fissuring of grief from the conscious mind. Grief is now recognizable, speakable as a flood that "pulls you under." But when it swells, Lyne welcomes it with poise. He's aware that greater knowledge, the thing "I don't know the name for" leads to deeper healing and self-understanding. Throughout subsequent poems in "Act Two," Lyne embarks on his most direct analysis of grief in all of the collection. Binaries of friendship and loss, life and death slowly lose their tension. A major accomplishment for Lyne is not yielding to necessity. To name the unnameable, to relax the "fist" in his heart, Lyne turns to himself. The flourishing of the will, not time or space,

is the key to resolution. Tree's death is best understood in the terms of her life: friendship, love, and a belief in Lyne's potential and vitality. The last poem of "Act Two" describes it best:

Now is your time of grief. [John 16:22]
A time to learn a new language,
A new rhythm of words, a new vocabulary.
A visceral and tactile library that connects
Physical experience to emotional depth,
Inner biology to the external world.
Leave the world of shadows and spectres,
Meanings and sequence;
Embrace the undefinable nature of existence
And the raw brutality of life.

The first line is a quotation from the New Testament Book of John, chapter 16 verse 22. In this verse, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the coming pain and persecution they all will face. But he also offers words of comfort about the joy of reuniting with them after death. For Lyne, the quotation suggests a new orientation towards the future, one in which reconnection with Tree is merely part of a new perspective. To solidify its arrival, Lyne must learn "a new language" and "a new vocabulary." The register of grief, once so dominant in his poetic voice and life, has gone. In its place is a sturdier, more stoic and accessible view of existence, of "the raw brutality of life." As I said before, Lyne's transformation is not one to fatalism or determinism. It is not exactly a move towards humanism, either.

Lyne's journey is a reclamation of the autonomous mind. Emotional processing, the struggle of reason against a vacuum of devastation, characterizes the early poems. But, page by page, we see a gradual return of Lyne: his voice, his optimism and compassion, his razor-sharp wit, and, most importantly, his belief. Belief in what? True to fashion, Lyne leaves to this interpretation. The unnameable, seething force that drives Lyne to write is perhaps the same driving our curiosity about what, exactly, he's after.

In "The Sky Was Empty, but Still the Thunder Rolled," Dominic Lyne ventures into the deep. In poem after poem, we navigate the extremes of intense feeling, of reason never far from the shadows of doubt and fear. This elegiac collection, defined by Lyne's lyricism and vigilant style, is less a memorial to Tree, to friendship than a triumph. A triumph of what, exactly? Of love, of friendship? Of fearlessness in the face of death? Having read Lyne, I'm convinced the answer is less significant than the question. The striving for truth, the affirmation of beauty exceeds its own justification. Celebrating Tree's life in verse is not just cathartic for Lyne; it is more than a space to vent conflicting emotions or share memories. It is the act of writing, marking the canvas time and again that nourishes the soul. More than this, Lyne shows how a determinate effort to confront loss without avoidance or fear actually strengthens our bond with the deceased. It is not always obvious that self-love, accepting our station as sentient beings with desires

and needs, is an act of love. This is perhaps the greatest gift Lyne has to offer.

Tree, like all those who were loved and lost, is honored more by living than insurmountable grief. She is remembered best as part of the heart, not the heart itself. Creation and destruction, like the Yin and Yang, are opposing yet indivisible forces. Their unity rests upon the journey in-between.

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INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR DOMINIC LYNE

It's clear that each section of the book was written at different time periods, with the first written not long after Tree's death. How did the time differences impact writing each section? Which section, if any, was most memorable or significant to you?

It's quite interesting that you say the first section seems really close after Tree's death. But it was actually six years after her death. I think what's really interesting about that is it kind of proves the point of the book, in a way. It's the whole thing of grief being like something that is constant and reliving. It's something you don't move on from. Every anniversary of her death, I would always be like: you know what? I'm gonna waste myself on some narcotic. And one year, I was like: you know what? I'm just going to use poetry. I'm going to write these feelings. And it's one of those things when you write six years after it happened, it could have been straight after her death. At the time of writing, I cried during most of it. And then, like you said, in the "Intermission" part, it was during COVID and also when I'd been offered my PTSD therapy. So I had to give myself permission to move on and make a conversation with her. I said I've got to get this out of my head. And then the final section is literally part of the therapy. I had to move the story on. Everything's done. When I had that therapy, it was a decade after it happened. As I was writing, I could talk about all these plans we'd made before her death and our last promises. There's no more beholden on her. She's free. She can go, and this is now a new start.

In several of the poems from "Act One," there are allusions to 1s and 0s, to binary code. Other binaries like life and death, friendship and loss appear throughout the first section. What's your thinking on binaries, and how did it shape your thought process when writing?

1) A lot of the references to binary code, especially toward Tree, refers to how you have this physical friend and then they're just gone. But you have Facebook memories. Every day you've got this memory of this day or that day. It's like your friend suddenly becomes this digital entity. You try not to, but every day you look at those memories. And she starts to have this digital life. In the poem you're referring to, she leaves a message. I've still got that voicemail. And you listen to it now, it's weird. It's the past. It's not a ghost because she was alive when she said it. So, it's this binary of this digital entity that, on playback, becomes physical. When you're grieving, or you've got trauma, everything becomes black and white. She died in front of me, and I was alone. Trying to save her was my responsibility and all this sort. A lot of my grief is: was I good enough? Or: no one could have done this. At the time, my thinking was from borderline personality disorder therapy. That's why my thinking was very black and white. Even during my treatment, I was reverting back to one thing or another, yes and no. In the whole process of grief, you kind of see everything in two shades. You lose all the colors. Like we know light spectrums into a rainbow and shadows are a range of greys. But when you or someone is hurting, you just see the one you're looking for.

INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR DOMINIC LYNE

Throughout the book, I noticed several references to Eastern philosophy, especially Daoism and Buddhism. How have these influenced your thought and writing? Are there any teachings that speak most to you?

In a lot of my writing, I always have some kind of religious references. Sometimes, it would be Catholicism because that's what I grew up with. But Tree was Chinese, so the Yin and the Yang really said a lot about our friendship. I was kind of the dark side, the morbid one. She was kind of the good, the happy one. And a lot of it was her saying "you complete me with your darkness, you complete my light." So a lot of these references are bringing that kind of influence and to incorporate her and her beliefs more into the poetry. The nice thing about it is that, in Daoism, I love this idea of how you don't avoid the flow of the universe. You don't disrupt the flow of the universe. This is one of my main theories. Everything's that happened, you don't stop it. I could have struggled to prevent it, to prevent her death. But, by this point of view, one of the tenants is that existence is suffering. You can meditate. But you're not complaining about it. You're just working your way up so you can get on with things. Buddhism is a very human-led religion. It's not looking up to God to solve your problems. It's up to yourself to do it. There were many aspects that Tree taught me and helped me to focus on.

Each of the sections addresses unresolved trauma and the effects of grief and loss. If you're comfortable sharing, how has poetry helped you understand and perhaps work through trauma?

I think the language of poetry is easier to write than fiction. Normally, I write fiction. And I write poetry on the side. But there's something about the brevity of poetry that it's a sentence stripped down to its core. There's no padding around it. I think that for me if I write fiction, I can pad my emotions out. But in poetry, I get closer to the emotion. I'm at my core. That's why I think it helped because it also allows you to be visual in a way you can't really be with prose. You can compare something like your pain to a river, a cave, or a black hole. And people get it. They understand that emotion. For me, one of my issues was, even in PTSD therapy, I couldn't describe an emotion. I had to describe it visually. My language wasn't there. So, poetry allows you to have this abstract language. So, people can visualize that more in a poem. It's just there. It helped me get out this raw language.

When reading the collection, I noticed an evolution of your style and voice. In "Intermission" and "Act Two," your style becomes sharper. The poetry feels more complete, and your voice more resonant. How would you describe your growth across each section?

Like what we mentioned earlier, in part one there's a lot of repetition, a lot of anger, and there's a lot of emotions that come back. There's no resolve at the end of part one. There's just emotions. But I find in "Intermission" that something's happened in the world, there was COVID. And I ask: would this have happened if Tree were still here? The world's different now. And you can't even imagine her in this world anymore. We're not even living in the same place anymore. So, it's like these memories, this trauma, they're not even part of my existence anymore. My life has changed enough for me to question if I need them, if I need her. I'm allowing myself to have this option of saying: you know what? I'm ready to move on. And, in the final part, that was when I was in my trauma therapy. I think in this part I was actually processing the emotions. So, a lot of it was anger that's processed in the final part, a lot of the anger about past friends or events that appear in the first part are finally processed. And it wasn't actually my anger. That was her anger that I was holding on to. So, the third part is kind of like a resolution. I'm at that point where I'm allowed to write a conclusion. It's the most structured from a writing point of view. I know what I'm writing, and I know this poem will end the collection. Whereas with the other poems, it was just a collection.

In your collection, you often speak about a "fist" in your chest or indescribable emotions around Tree's death. How do these factor in your poetry? And what insights or knowledge have you gained from writing this collection?

The language of the "fist" again is about the inability to form the language of the emotion. The insight I gained from writing this collection is that I used to see poetry as my side hustle whereas fiction was my meat and bones. And I think writing this whole collection has kind of changed my outlook on appreciating poetry. I used to just write poetry every now and again. But now, I think poetry is special. Poetry has its place, has its meaning, and should be appreciated. I think I write more poetry now than I do fiction.

ABOUT

Dominic Lyne is a London based author. His work aims to challenge societal norms, and provoke conversations about the frailties of life and the complexities of the human condition. Dominic was diagnosed with Schizotypal Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder at twenty-seven, having suffered from psychosis since the age of four. He is very open about his mental health journey, and has presented, at length, about his experiences with different types of therapy, and his experience of living with, and recovering from addiction.

Published by Rebel Satori Press, he has also appeared in anthologies published by Guts Publishing and HarperCollins.

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