

So Below – the promise of more to come

By Mary Paterson

Steam rises from the teapot at the back of the stage. At some point – if not now, then surely later – the water will be poured, and steam will rise from the cup. That's what freshly boiled water is – anticipation, preparation. The promise of more to come.

So Below is a duet that unfolds as if Karen Christopher and Gerard Bell know what's going to happen, but they haven't discovered it yet. It appears like a story glimpsed in a stream of words that have tumbled out of a book in the wrong order. To watch, it is surprising. To remember, it is full of sensory pleasure, like a mist of steam rising from a silver spout.

Sometimes you can hear Karen's footsteps before you see her: the sound is a crunch of boots on something hard, and it sounds of longing. You think: *if only I could dance a ritual like Karen and Gerard and make absent bodies reappear. If only I could make the sound of Karen into something corporeal.* They dance like they're praying – swinging back and forth with the words of gravestone inscriptions falling from their lips, their tidy bodies folding and unfolding like envelopes of magic.

But that comes later.

First they dance like they're dancing. They slip into a stagershow routine – something nostalgic. The song is a crackly recording of unrequited love and the stage is ripe with things that are missing. Their bodies move gently together in rhythm, except when they don't. You look closer, and think: *This is not harmony. This is something more veiled and modest, like a shy sister hiding her face from my gaze.*

Sometimes you can sense things before you see them. Here are mounds of earth waiting for future roots and here is water, steaming with anticipation. Here are four feet kicking out in music hall style. Here are the elements – comforting and soft – of our mortal earth.

She hovers, she teeters ... she almost falls. (But that was earlier.)

Sometimes you don't know what is coming. Here are mounds of earth and here is a foot kicking them into a dusty mess. Here are two hands worrying the dusty mess into flat squares like freshly dug graves. Here is a story about a man who had something to prepare. Here are words coming out of Karen's mouth as if they are as new to her as they are to you.

Steam rises from the teapot.

Gerard has a clutch of pebbles, lost or found. They clatter onto a hard surface but Karen and Gerard don't turn to listen. Sometimes they know what each other is doing. Sometimes one of them leads and the other follows. They work together but apart in quiet disharmony, like a family of veiled sisters. Like the elements: earth and water. Like busy feet, worried hands, the sounds of longing.

And now they dance like they're praying. They pray for the long dead, the buried, the underground. They pray for the bodies marked in stone as someone's beloved, devoted, dearly missed. The bodies marked by two dates that mean nothing to the living: the day you're born, which you can't remember, and the day you die, when there's no memory left. The dates fall from Karen's and Gerard's lips like prayers and the prayers fall from their bodies like veils of magic.

Everything that happened to the beloved happened in the absence in the middle. It happens still, in the sounds off stage; in the questions left unanswered and unsaid.

How does it feel for a grown woman to walk on flowerpots, lifting each pot gingerly as she topples on one leg? What do you hope for when you watch her lose her balance and almost touch a toe to the ground? What is lost when she hops off, picks up her flower pots and leaves? Can you guess what will happen? Can you guess whose words she borrows when she starts to speak? Whose gestures he copies when he starts to dance? Whose body is itching? When they talk of itches, do they mean the interminable kind, or the pleasant kind? Is there a pleasure in watching someone else's discomfort – existential or otherwise? Can you tell there will be an end? Can you tell from the steam rising and the earth arranged in rootless mounds and the chains waiting for buckets and the two people dressed simply like peasants that the stage will vibrate with absent meaning? That in a number of minutes or hours you will be putting your hands together to make a noise? That you will try to work a ritual, form a prayer, to bring their bodies back?

Gerard is an absent body in the middle; but that comes later. Karen would like to jump and remain in the air, like a ghost or a photograph of a breathless moment. Earlier, she nearly fell from a flowerpot tower.

There are three doors in the theatre, and they are all open. Offstage there are sounds and lights and sometimes movement. Something is happening in the leaks that slide in from elsewhere: it could be a rehearsal, or the main event, or both. It could be two people hovering in mid absence. It could be two people dancing in the middle.

Later, when they dance again, their dances will remember things that have happened recently. A gesture, a glance, a breathless moment. Their bodies hold memories more vivid than a scratch of a date carved into stone.

You think: No doubt there is steam rising from the teapot, although I have stopped looking. No doubt there is unrequited love, itching and a shy sister behind every promise of harmony.

Here is a man, and here is his voice, further away. It is Gerard, and he can imitate the dying. Here is a depiction of what it looks like to communicate with people who are neither present nor absent. This is what happens when a body is as frail as a ghost, with a voice that leaks from the far side of elsewhere.

Earlier, they stood together in silence. When they started to speak, they spoke as if the conversation had already begun.

No doubt there are already people speaking, silently or otherwise, about itching, dying and being born. No doubt there are words under veils and bodies turned to ghosts and sensory pleasures that I had forgotten to remember until they were drawn into this room with a ritual and a dance.

Here is a letter, written some time ago, that outlines the rules of happiness. The letter is being spoken and the speaker is being covered in earth. Here is the silhouette of an absent man, Gerard, who gets up, shakes himself down and stands next to his inverse silhouette. It looks like a man has been killed, marked and buried. You think: *everything that was said about happiness happened in the absence in the middle.*

What do you hope for?

Here is earth and here is water – a drawer full of water, hiding in plain sight, that has been persuaded all of a sudden to make a wave. Here is a flowerpot of water, spilling over Gerard's coiled hand like a spring of life that can't be contained. Here is the middle of something, the sprawling excess of living in all its wasteful necessity.

Here is everything.

Sometimes you find out just as something happens that you had known about it all along. Karen raises two buckets of water on chains, and water begins to flood the stage like anticipation. Water dripping. Water spilling. Water rushing round the thirsty roots of plants newly tucked into freshly dug graves.

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Here is earth and here is water. Here is fire: candles floating on a drawer of water that sways with the memory of persuasion.

Here are gestures unravelled as if they brim with meaning, but they don't know it yet.

Here is *So Below*. It appears like a truth traced across a pair of bodies that dance a duet almost out of time. To watch, it is surprising. To remember, it is full of sensory longing, like a mist of steam rising from a silver spout.

If only I could touch that water and feel the movement sweep along my fleshy body. I would play it over, like a ritual, or a dance, or a conversation that has already begun.

The stage is empty apart from the elements: earth, water, fire, burial, rebirth, memories, a spillage, the voice of a dying man, the dates of the beloved, the rules of happiness, the sound of unrequited love and a leak of light from elsewhere. The promise of more to come.

You think: *Longing is the sister of anticipation.*

You think: *Karen and Gerard have left the stage with everything in it.*

If only we could turn the knowledge of their absence into something corporeal. We start to clap. We clap a ritual. We clap to bring their bodies back.

We keep clapping.

Mary Paterson is a writer and producer who works across text, visual arts and performance. www.marypaterson.tumblr.com

SO BELOW, a performance duet, is a Haranczak/Navarre Performance Project by Gerard Bell & Karen Christopher (2012). www.haranczaknavarre.co.uk