

Independent author

Peter Boyle

Of fate and other inconveniences

Abstract:

In one of her last essays, Val Plumwood wrote of her vision of how poetry and expository writing might find ways and forms of mutual excitement: ‘The enriching, intentionalising and animating project I have championed is also a project that converges with much poetry and literature. It is a project of re-animating the world, and remaking ourselves as well, so as to become multiply enriched but consequently constrained members of an ecological community’ (2009: 46). Such a project in these times seeks to open creative spaces in the midst of confusion and despair.

Biographical note:

Peter Boyle is a Sydney-based poet and translator of Spanish and French poetry. His collections of poetry include *The Blue Cloud of Crying* (1997), *What the painter saw in our faces* (2001), *Museum of Space* (2004) and *Apocrypha* (2009). He has won many awards for his poetry, including the Queensland Premier’s Award in 2010. His latest collection *Towns in the Great Desert* is being published in 2013. His translations from Spanish, *Anima: poems by José Kozler* and *The Trees: Selected Poems by Eugenio Montejo*, were published in the UK. His translation of *Kozler’s Anima* won the 2013 NSW Premier’s Award for translation of poetry.

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Creative writing – Ecology – Anthropocene-noir – Surrealist-poetics – Satire – Fate

1. (The fellow travellers of good fortune reach the river of darkness. A very bald fascist lights up a cubicle on the moon. No excuses, no message left.)

If it was true the Earth had crossed that thin margin where it might continue – its systems breaking down, the plastic graveyards and garbage mounds of its oceans gone septic, spawning new poisons in a million eyes and stomachs – how many would be tempted to mass-suicide or mass-slaughter? What new ideologies would arise urging the elimination of some new category of people – the tribe of the Sinestri who dwell in odd-numbered houses, those who say ‘Da’ or ‘Sí’, those who lisp, those who can count beyond 23, those with the wrong genes for heartfelt submission?

2. (Catholicism plunges 20 points – Buddhist stock holds firm. All this despite continued reports of a major attack on the nirvana pipeline by unknown rebel forces in the south. No action recommended.)

No one knew better how to entertain termites.
From the entrée of her wooden cane
to the after dinner mulch of banana leaves,
grandiose beyond telling,
she was a cynosure for all
winged or crawling creatures, an implacable
outsider to human obsessions,
an old lady seated comfortably in the rain.

3. (To be or not to be. Wild nights in the cemetery. Cinqueterra ponders.)

They had led us to a circular swamp or low lake. There they issued us with toothpicks and told us to scour the brackish water for Russians. In a flash I saw our future: we were to be rows of hacked corpses piled each on the other, there in a dry lakebed under the tortured blue sky of paradise.

4. (Descartes offers analysis. Plotinus a quiet evening with angels. But your shopping trolley is already full with small wedge-shaped cones that all carry the stamp ‘made in reality’.)

Bicycle bells sound and resound along the narrow paths a few moments before sunset. Suddenly the pink has been withdrawn from the sky which has grown merely dark, layered in sea-blue clouds. Orange leaves have fallen all around me. The liner I had been watching all afternoon is no longer there. Precocious geckos are already laying out their geography of night.

5. (A cigarette twisted on a spike, cones of purple rice, candies in wrappers: such are the offerings for the spirits of the Old People. Again the sea had retreated to reveal its stepping stones etched with their green inscriptions, the ancient trans-ocean highway.)

In fifteen seconds all the world’s computers entered oblivion.

Born Again Finance Salvationists
fell asleep at their desks,
the death-as-interactive-spectacle project
stranded once more
on some Mesozoic mudbank.
The sea spelt out every name
such as it was in the first noosphere.
Prospero's wand hung suspended
over the frozen dumbshow of buffoons and frauds
and each man saw himself
such as he was.

Nymph sheltering in the forest glade
while the motorised cavalcade of zombies passes,
long may the green waters of the world
cover thy nakedness.

6. (Goalkeeper sent off in thermonuclear meltdown. Lies, lies, scream the punters. No playing field, no winner, rules urban warfare tribunal.)

On days interrupted by devil worshipping strangers, trying to find in ourselves a ragged ounce of their gentleness, their capacity to let the world be. A sprig of jasmine indicates the contours of the air down which the first mosquitoes of midday, explorers of all standing water, are tracing their tentative map. Elsewhere my lover walks, a canvas hat tilted loosely on her head, her kimono fluttering loose. Damage generates the finest gradations of longing.

7. (Mozart's madrigals continue to plague investors. Who will rid me of this bliss? complain merchants of perishability. A seahorse in sunglasses scoops the floor on Wall Street. Sell now.)

In the design of her fantastic garden she always left something for dawn to unmake. The tilt of a flower's shadow, a small waterfall half concealed by some felled logs. It is dangerous folly, she said, to compete with the sun's perfection.

8. (My beautiful native land is there on the margins, a fine-spun fabric of lies in a myopic necromancer's illuminated manuscript.)

In the new Republic established during Prospero's absence freedom of speech achieves its enduring definition – citizens are free to speak only on topics of which they are completely ignorant. So, on pain of death, lawyers may offer opinions on the growing of cauliflowers but never about laws; farmers on the proper nets to use for deep sea fishing but not about crops or land usage. Whole villages in the great inland desert dispute for hours on the correct way to address a sea urchin. No one who works for the government may talk about the government. No one who teaches may talk about education – they are free to talk about daily life on remote planets provided

they have never visited them. Public opinion managers replace counsellors and statesmen. Meanwhile plague and war remake the earth.

9. (Meetings by night on mountain passes. Cinqueterra's journey to the Eastern Marches interrupted by rival film crews tracking poltergeists. Fortinbras and the Afterlife Investment Fund move west.)

Sent back from Parinirvana he sees:
the golden pulse of the sun
spinning wildly like a potter's wheel,
dry salt-crusted earth
and a sagging banyan hung with voodoo dolls.

10. (Whoever owns the war owns the fallout. Maverick judge hits out at neo-Catholic imperialists. A quiet day in Lhasa. Cloud of knowing promises heavy storms by nightfall.)

I knew she was a white Russian since
she was wearing a white bikini. In a corner of
the poolside bar the ghost of John Forbes
downs a black Russian, glancing nostalgically
at French sylphs swathed in the flimsiest snippets
of international news. The other side of the veil
of life and death, the fate of the great poets of the 1970s:
eternal summer sipping on Pink Muscovites:
vodka, grenadine, milk, triple sec
with a dash of lime and chillis to remind them
of the Tropics.

11. (A hundred mute gods, their eyes all put out, crowd together on a stone altar. Starved of blood. Linger on in their hunger for one more sunset. A Sybil dozing lightly in an iron lung prophesies.)

It may be a day of lunar celebrations in Lhasa but kindly don't treat me as a pretext for gnawing on ravens. Manage your own indigestion with diligence. Not every household fire needs more ghee.

12. (Elder statesman lounges back on the terrace. Golden fields of insomnia blossom under his gaze.)

I regret that of myself and all my trembling vulnerability before
the outer limits of beauty
only a riderless horse will reach the basilica where the young
Contessa Laura Mercatore
is singing Mozart's madrigal 129 'The lost staircase'

and that, in the infinite traversal of all worlds,
I will never hear the lips of Bob Hoskins as he intones
the speech of return from all islands
to that quiet inland kingdom known to us only as
'reality'. I regret the eyes of the young
Elizabeth Taylor on the forever erased pirate video as she first sees
her double the Prince Leonardo DiCaprio
emerge, his doublet soaked from the rough waves
of *The Tempest*.

I regret my late arrival at the Palace of Mirrors
where the fall of a single plate from a table
might have stopped all wars, all death camps.
I regret that I did not purchase my options
in Late Tang Buddhism
or steer the planet on a kindlier course
beyond the Pillars of Mind Control
towards Purgatory's Fortunate Isle where
the Guardians of Forgiveness would have taught us how to see.

13. (The lights of remote citadels came on all along the windswept seafront. Usurper
of the one true sleep asserts, 'I have taken charge of the writing'.)

There she was, trailing some scraps of Kant, Germanic and beautiful.
Above me, the almond tree spread its immense green sun.

14. (Small island declares clouds illegal immigrants. Pundits claim: alien water a
threat to Fountain of Eternal Ignorance. Border guards urged: no soft landing for
stratocumulus freeloaders.)

Between crumbling buildings
a flag draped on a rock ledge marks a temple.
Flower-studded, the tiers rise
towards the statue of the lone fisherman,
grown old by the river where no fish remain.

A choir of ravens is conducting a funeral.
One by one, they add their wisdom,
these drawn-out notes fading
to form the underlying drone
behind the world.

To enter the stone temple
you must bring a stone.

15. (The plummet of World Inc. on the Nikkei Index poses question: what safe haven?
At the risk of reigniting urticarial responses, breathe in deeply the oil-infected

mangroves that whisper your tender secret name heard only in love-making. Spell your hour of transformation. Magicians' Union threatens walkout. Mass ego-deflation among balloonists.)

The squirrels come down to consider us.
Lovingly they examine our offerings.
Alert to all that is,
in an eye's blink they invert their direction
forever improvising a fresh image of transition
like a world suspended
between two languages.

And when the rain fills our hands
and we stand there, lifted
out of ourselves,
what words do we have for that?

16. (Neither hungover nor handsome. A touch of bad faith produces unpropitious headache in lower cranial cavity. Eyestrain for eavesdropper. Artichoke hearts make comeback. Spiced wine suddenly appears on all the menus in Baluchistan. Nominal investment benefits continue to flow.)

Like a half-finished tome of suspect theology
used to induce blindness
in unsuspecting acolytes

Like someone waiting on a telephone who hears
the slight plop of a lightbulb breaking free from its socket
and the almost simultaneous shattered clarity
of its meeting with the floor
and in an instant they know
the equations they lived within
from now on will bear the imprint
of a punctured eardrum

Like untamed scissors that remove
all greenery from the world

Like the difficult dreams of a time-travelling ant
Like luminous lies

Like the footprints that appear, frost over, then vanish
one winter morning on the ceiling of a monastery
as a failed runway for grief-laden angels

Like billowing dust clouds that paint the city pink
and leave your mouth sticky
with the spurned soil's reassertion
of pure Earth

Like sound investment

Like a mountain that suddenly erupts
all along the dreamer's skin
Like a lifetime's addiction to osmosis

Like a narrow diving board before the great unetched future
stain of your blood against the void

This last request to the Tribunal on Sky-Burials
this incurable nail-biting
love
this waiting room before
the Heavenly Emperor's reception chamber
these brittle days

17. (The rainclouds continue their interminable journey. The director of internal weather takes a leaf from a bandaged tree and raises an altar to coconuts.)

A blur of five languages on the wall of the caravanserai.
The tragedians have arrived – they climb down
from their cart – they know (who
could have told them?) that
a thousand years from now,
directly over their heads,
whales will be slowly swimming north.

18. (A butterfly flutters in and out of a sarcophagus filled with honey dew melons. Small birds ride the air like cowboys on hallucinogens. The Petite Larousse Dictionary of Avian Sign Language offers no translation.)

Neglected by all, Hanuman grieves in a frog pond not far from the deserted temple. Princess Sita has passed beyond the oceans to a land of ice where no monkeys can live. Hanuman's friend the Sea Eagle cannot approach that land. Its winds repel all creatures of the great forests. Sita has gone there, an unconscious prisoner hypnotised by a boy in a baseball cap and red and black T-shirt, a boy with all the charm of an unborn planet, gifted with a fine-grained knowledge of those spells that shrink the world.

19. (Mozart's madrigal 'The lost staircase' redefines spiral form in music. Ourselves seen from somewhere out in space. The earth turns. The trees forgive.)

An island in a lake – in the centre of that island
another lake – nestled in that lake
a further island with a lake,
and so on . . .

On whatever island she may find herself
she takes from her thin plastic bag

a bottle of toxic detangler
to strip from her hair
the ambient sky.

20. (Oil tankers on the horizon. Ants making hay with the guacamole. Sultan's war canoes approach the enemy's capital under cover of moonless night. A great epic interrupted by urgent household purchases.)

From far below,
the calling of clear water stirs where a stream
tumbles between underground rocks.
I woke, not as I had foreseen,
in a burning graveyard
but in a small narrow house
across a lane from the city morgue.
Winter sunlight crafted a bent tree.
Sent back from Heaven and Hell,
I was not to be the lover of demons
but to dwell in ordinary time.

21. (While Ferdinand sleeps, Miranda gazes into a rough stone mirror of star-crossed water. Dystopic Druids whisper from the depths of the noosphere. Haltingly she scries her face among millennial wreckage. Miranda alone. An arthritic Atlas in ugh boots. Beatific sky-bearer.)

I come to the edge of my being.
I peer across. I draw the line
that passes through me
into the eddying world.
My father's speech on cosmic accountancy, the true
alignment of Heaven and Hell,
rots in water-laden books
while conmen and their servants,
information managers and gullible gluttons,
find new ways to make the kingdom theirs.
A biplane ferries the murderous twins
to yet another press conference
on fiscal management. Like true villains,
half-benign faces painted on death-riddled skulls,
they have no need
to come onstage.
My mother (the brains of the family)
sleeps in her silver coffin outside D'Este.
I lack the heart to tell my father
all that happens on this island
is the clever chordplay of demented monkeys

while the kingdom we return to,
nestled there beyond the waves,
is some Harvard whizz-kid's
renaming of Nepotism Inc.

In the land I return to
I dream always of the surf-break on the island, the day
my father's magic sprinkled the first dew of wonder
in my fifteen-year-old eyes.

22. (A small ferry transporting an orchestra of gongs, zithers and transverse nose flutes. The sky glowing pink with the first edges of sunset over the lagoon. He lingered at the helm of his life, as comfortable as a gondolier with a twisted testicle.)

All day the small round island
had been travelling imperceptibly westward
in pace with the writing.
The sun, as it entered the page before me,
kept changing its language. On the horizon
the island darkened and glowed.
A foretaste. Of infinite oblivion.
When all became as invisible
as the mountain across the strait, I knew my life
must change.

23. (Abandoned coach found on frozen bridge haloed in mysterious white glow. Travelling the ravaged lands Cinqueterra seeks counsel from the astronomer of Prague.)

Monkeys on the docks at Bremen. Antelope and elk
browse in the suburbs where the cloud has passed.
As in the time of lost migrating mountains
or when the sky burned for five hundred years.
Carbonised heavens. Metallic hail.
We understand a wall of stillness has moved over us.
Our bones are shining in the fields of midnight.

24. (She was about to cross the street when global market pressures intervened. Starlet in evening gown wings it.)

Predicting a birth.
Nomad shepherds always in the wrong place.
She lived in a house hidden
from the street's history of winter.
Unbeknowst and in an ill-accoutred hour
she had trifled with the things of magic.

So the last of life is transacted
under a salt-encrusted lightbulb
peppered with flies.

25. (Wall Street ransacked by delirious cattle. Nocturne of the disconsolate
Vrindabangopis. The capital left empty, an ideogram of white walls to be read only by
the stars.)

Mild ache in the bones
and a hymn to the benevolent grasslands.
What rises over us
but this tenderness
returning all pain, all folly
to the sky?

26. (He was destined to be the lover of fifty five women yet a fatal flaw held him
back.)

Forever left off-stage, Cinqueterra,
the hero or villain of Shakespeare's great lost tragedy,
recites in endlessly varied voices
the image-clustered lines without ever hearing
the other side of the dialogues. Fashion models, seamstresses,
daughters of oil tycoons and public opinion managers,
all file past the other side of a screen.
His heart pounds but the monologue
is all death-ward.

27. (Cloud of unknowing hovers over a frog-pond. A pelican with a stethoscope
probes the pulse of the water.)

Soon we will leave the earth.
Soon the numbness behind my eyes
will send slivers of oblivion
into the smallest wrinkles of the brain.
It is not enough to undertake the ten month journey
to the tin and canvas shack on the Simpson Desert's
westernmost edge
where Gustav Mahler has lived out his second life,
folding and unfolding
a text of intricately laced Hassidic prayers.
It is not enough to locate the lost music,
or recite an entire 500 Upanishads in Sanskrit
ensuring the breath and mind are focussed
on a single point in space.

Unutterably. The death of all
implicates us.

Works cited

Plumwood, Val 2009 'Nature in the active voice' *Australian humanities review* 46 (May), 113–29, at <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-May-2009/plumwood.html> (accessed 8 September 2013)