

Classic Poetry Series

Peter Boyle
- poems -

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Peter Boyle(1951 -)

Peter Boyle is an Australian poet and translator.

Peter Boyle was born in Melbourne, Victoria, in 1951. He has published nine collections of poetry, including *The Blue Cloud of Crying* and *Coming Home From the World*.

Boyle has also published translations of Federico García Lorca, Luis Cernuda, Eugenio Montejó, César Vallejo, Pierre Reverdy, and others.

Education

Seven years old,
on loan to an uncle
and a bundle of cash went missing.
For three days locked in a room, beaten.
The golden orbs of pennies roasted in an oven
removed by tongs
glisten on a child's skin
as she screams and screams.
These round white scars
that remain even today
without pigment
without the shadow of colour
with only the ash's afterglow.

After telling that story
you burnt your hand on the iron,
burnt it yourself,
your punishment for breaking silence.

You rushed to the balcony but they pulled you back inside.
You wanted to spit, to scream insults at the soldiers
to stop them beating up the old man in the street.
"Listen," she said as she held you back, your mother.
"Listen, you have to learn to say nothing."
Learn to be nobody.
Learn to be the white wall
that has no face and no tongue.

Peter Boyle

Four Voices For A Century

1. Rilke in Paris (1902)

I am learning to see:

long dark streets, a certain wall,
the intestines of houses left open to the sky,
pipes hanging like disconnected throats.

Hours spent in the hospital,
a face among all the faces,
watching the play of sunlight on a wall.

When later I sought to explain my predicament to the doctors
the phrases learned off so carefully
all turned into birds
pecking and banging wildly
against the window.

Asked to wait once again
I caught the smell of electricity poured
into people's heads,
then fled a long way down tunnels,
to wake on an embankment
facing the deep quiet of the Seine.

I have seen more:

a troop of madmen holding hands
as they enter the clinic,
old lottery selling women
whose toothless mouths
suck and slather,
a family of acrobats setting up for their performance
on a path through the Luxembourg gardens.

Above all,
the blind man on the bridge,
so grey and worn and forgotten
like a chalked stone on some long disused road.
He had about him a frayed cloak marked by
what I took to be stars.

As he tapped his way through the crowd
I saw in him a powerless judge
bringing the world to a halt.

And beyond all seeing
invisible roads carrying me
to the edge of breakdown.
Some twilight from a high window
a tear that stretched
across skies, across years.
Meeting the truth of hands:
my own hand among all the hands,
going out, losing itself, becoming indistinguishable,
and then (my pen does an ellipse
of shame as I write this)
the pure moment of horror of others,
of disappearing forever among them,
of their skin and their smell
and of quiet anonymous deaths.

So I walk each day across this town
as in an evil wood without end.
For when the forests of Europe were felled
the wolves and the fears fled into the cities
like the secret leer in the handcrafted woodwork in Nuremburg
or the goblins, the dark duendes,
that conceal themselves in the corners of great Cathedrals
as in the Kölner Dom.
At times it is as if I could touch the coming horror
and then it is all inside me
but without words
as I stood the first time
before Rodin's Portals of Hell.

For the moment I seek to grow and be worthy.
I live on vegetables where possible
to be close to what is simple
and alone without wine in this city of dying laughter
I seek to grow clear and invisible.
To be empty and whole.
To be the road of a single journey.
To be
only expression.

2. Hitler in Vienna (1909)

I write these notes because I do not yet know what myth I want to construct.
I am learning to hate
this above all
am learning the science and exact measure
of how others hate, how hate is transmitted.
I am seeing behind the faces
seeing so accurately
how this animal, the city, is put together.
There is in all this a form behind surfaces
a formula I can almost name.
I believe I am touching truth, not truth as others have known it
the truth of the past
but future truth.
I see men and women moving around
believing this is the past
still 1850
tea on the balcony
a stage-set managed by families with names.
Yet a new earth is present in the eyes of the very poor, the outsiders,
all those seeking work
and the beautiful anonymous thugs I will one day use.

I know I must harness my strength.
I live almost entirely on vegetables
and avoid all alcohol.
I seek the sharpest concentration
to realise what I know is inside me.
In the bars and on benches
I see men crumpled by life
and at times I have stood transfixed
by horror of others, of their skin and their smell.
I have discovered –
I think you could call it terror –
of all those for whom life
is one long anonymous death

So I walk each day across this town
as in an evil wood without end
and I seek out the ones to blame.
I let the voices inside me

dictate the ones (so, so many)
to hate.

Above all I despise the assertion of values –
today when required to fill in my occupation
I put 'writer'
yet in truth I may be the supreme anti-poet
for I feel in myself no inside,
no space out of which to address words that might be
any more than steps towards
other advantages –
Shifting from room to room
to confuse the authorities, to avoid Militärdienst
in this polyglot mess of a dying Empire,
I enjoy and despise
my profound tastelessness.
(Even as I write this
I whisper through my teeth
"every word is a ploy".)

And I say
the earth is open for
the one who will seize it.

3. Thomas Merton in Bangkok (1968)

Outside this hardened glass window
is all of Asia.
I have been out there all day
sweating and chilled
in a conference with monks.
Here just a few hundred miles from
the burning fields of Vietnam
remembering (is it dream or memory?)
the flight out of Japan
inside the jaws of a bomber
falling asleep on the hatch
dream of being sprayed out along with napalm over the rice fields.
Memories of my last night in Japan
flags tied to small barges on the river,

little peace offerings floating
down a river corrected by concrete.
Remembering my friend, the young novice from Nicaragua,
who taught me the lovely old poem of Jorge Manrique
"Nuestras vidas son los ríos..."
and yesterday exhausted,
watching the enormous sermon of mud
flowing in afternoon heat through the city of Bangkok,
the great brown river-god
laden with ferries, barges and silent old tankers,
the tall spires of oil burning by day and by night
on the city skyline.

What is this world outside the window to me?
Gestures and glances I cannot read.
In this city of millions
reduced to an ageing man
who wanders lost
as in an evil wood without end,
my eyes drink heat and petrol,
drink slowly the heavy sky,
that coffin lid.
Even as I miss
the contemplative quiet of Kentucky
I feel I have never understood prayer,
the one power I have in this darkness.
I would like to simplify my life,
to live entirely on vegetables, to keep the mind unclouded
to let the voices inside and outside me
heal and speak praise.

The heat of the day steaming over,
I head for the shower.
Time later to try out the portable fan
that sits looking battered
in its own due corner.

4. Child on Smoky Mountain, Manila

He eyes the fishbones.

An elemental hush in the collection of junk.
He strips bare the husk of tape
from a broken cassette.
The drowned automobile is striking roots.
No matter how thin the poet
wants to get
his lines
they will never be as thin
as this
child's
wrist.

The mountain of refuse is the magic mountain
of the ending.
It is not words or dogmas
not beliefs or passions
we fight for now –
only gnarled raw things:
a doorhandle, the rusted shoulder of a car,
a shrivelled stalk of some stripped weed
as lean as
the stick legs of the grey unshaven
males behind the wire
on a hillside in Bosnia.
The hot twisting wind
is the mountain's ear to this earth.
In the refuse pile
a shoe without heel or sole
stumbles forward.
The boy searching for food
grazes the edge of a dead pipe,
its cylindrical ache for water
now filling with mud and fishbones.
With the fragrant smoke
above the jeepney fumes, above the brown haze
of this colonial city
silting up with a life it cannot feed
this is everyone's cemetery.

On Smoky Mountain
the gulls perch.
Blown batteries leak their blue stain.

In shunting yards
slow trains grind their cargo
of foodstuffs for Japan.
Tinned and perfectly segmented pineapples
creak down towards the docks.
Lachrymose as angels
children drift across the refuse, a face mask over mouth and eyes,
the extraordinary heat of the tropics
crawling across shoulders that
never quite rise above the stench
like a swimmer whose lips
graze the crust of salt.

While just beyond them
the thin river trickles down
to Manila Bay.

Peter Boyle

From Instructions Given To The Royal Examiners In The State Of Chi

Examine the candidate's state of mind
as he inscribed the answers to all of the above
and estimate the temperature of his brain cells
as he lay awake in the cubicle at night
longing for the raw oysters with calamansi juice of home.
Assess the longevity of his nails
as they quivered lightly over the brushstrokes,
the density of his gaze as he reread the instructions.
Reckon to the nearest decimal place
the honesty of his bones
as he let memory drain into the page.
Calculate according to established formula
the expression of his face, old or young,
as his lips guessed the first hushed sounds of the rhythm
and fix clearly in your mind what lay behind that face,
the trembling moment of pure emptiness.
Identify the direction of the wind
as it hurries the leaves of all the provinces
away from everything known,
brushing them with the fragrance
of unnamed creatures waiting to be born.
Remember for what purpose
you are setting down these dreams
under such limited starlight.
Remember the waves which are forcing you
further and further off all courses into the terrible wilderness
of death.
Then forget all of yourself and all your hopes
and write your mark and comments in the correct space
for the perusal of a higher order.

Peter Boyle

Group Portrait, Delft, Late Sixteenth Century

They opened the dikes five times that year to flood the land.
Cities were torched, the inhabitants bound and gagged,
then forced at lancepoint into the frozen canals.
I was executing yet another portrait of the public trustees of an orphanage
that their bald correctly-laced presences might shine
in remote museums a thousand years hence.
I enjoy the delicate way their hands rest on the title deeds
for these most Christian places
even as the order "No prisoners" passed along both sides
or another cannonade ripped through the munitions factory
burying in rubble the girls' school for genteel deportment.
Each year the orphanages increased.
The portraits grew heavier and heavier.
The regents must have thought they would lug the weight of them
into the other world.
Nice money if you can get the work
and no one questioned motives:
fidelity to realistic details
right up to the end of the earth.

These stone embankments that look like Venice but they're not Venice,
here where the dark river finds its terminus,
where the ship's prow seeks a tomb among the currents.
Every day as I paint,
winter water shivers under the footbridge.
The gaunt trees shelter their starved layer of birds:
at each level they define a new habitation.
I once captured the local birds in a Biblical triptych:
those rounded brutal mouths shaped by the one cry of begging,
stuffing everything visible into their darkening crevasse.
I wanted to paint as bluntly
as words spoken during an avalanche
yet all's this inevitable smooth,
these muted blues that are the fashion of the age
recording everything precisely as it is:
each official, each battle, the new born child,
the fruits on the table, the windmill on the hillside to the left
at every change of season –
that's what they wanted and I could do it,

making present to the touch
each thing as it passes into amnesia.

Today at the abandoned Cathedral
the Italian master continues his rehearsals.
No one notices how there's a wobbling at the core of his music
and no matter how high the dancers kick their heels
they will never find solid ground.
The goodly burghers will follow the streamers
and no one thinks twice of the five servant girls
penned in their cages
awaiting the sentence of beheading
for certain lewd practices
as reported by their illustrious employers.
Each day the ocean grows outside the dike.
The wounds in the sky slowly multiply.
Ever more threatening the viking ships come closer.
I continue these stern faces, hands folded in laps,
apocalypse near Delft, the circle sealed.
Long needles knit the great cloaks for our third winter in the trenches.
The troops of the Duke of Alba torch another outlying settlement
while the regents' faces betray no emotion.

They know the civilization I smear on this canvas will last a thousand years.

Peter Boyle

In The Small Hours

It's three am in the morning
of a day you won't enter for so many hours.
Where you are
yesterday's sunlight still bathes your feet as you walk
and tonight hearing your voice
I worried that one day
I'll lose my images of all those I love.
Outside the city's still restless:
taxis alert and shiny as golden birds
waiting for the crumbs of dawn.
At fifty-five I know so little how to live.
In cafes across this city
lovers still hold hands
and cups balance on the edges of tables.
Darkness falls around me like soft snow.
Beside the narrow bed
my night-light is staring right into me.
I will hold your voice inside me as long as I can.
When I sleep you'll go on walking
through a steady explosion of white flowers.

Peter Boyle

Missing Words

I don't know how many things there are in this world that have no name. The soft inner side of the elbow, webbed skin between the fingers, a day that wanders out beyond the tidal limits and no longer knows how to summon the moon it has lost, my firstborn who gazes about himself when the TV dies and there is a strange absence in his world. I was looking for a great encyclopaedia, the secret dictionary of all the missing words. I wanted to consult its index and find out what I could have become. The sound the clock makes when it is disconnected and taken down from the wall but can't lose the habit of trying to jerk itself forward. The look of old socks drying on a rack in the kitchen all through a winter night, hanging starched and sad opposite the wedding photographs. A word for your face when you know you can't love but would almost like to try. The blurred point of merger between fresh storm damage to a house and the deep fissures that have always been there. Walking down the corridor to the front door with inexplicable elation in my chest as if everything was about to start, as if my love had just arrived, escaped from a burning world, and at the same time clenched in my taut wrists, my hands, the thin bones of my arms, the certainty that everything has long been over.

Peter Boyle

Separation

You in the high-walled fortress of sleep
I on an island of wakefulness
bird-haunted, trapped by mist

You eyeing the warm milk of suspicion
I drinking the green rain of the seagull's ocean

You on the red deck of the last ferry going under
I on the amusement pier lost in the crowd

You going forward into the mirror
I crawling backward into the teeth's cavity

You in sunglasses
walking towards the sea on a street that backs into the sun
I sliding on ice across the abandoned freeway

You in prison waiting for redemption
I in the asylum counting billiard balls

You climbing stairways, humping buckets of soapy fisheyes
I descending the silver elevators, escorted by clouds

You on the night bus that leaves from the ferry wharf and goes
across the stone desert to the other side of the earth
I on the top floor of the brightly lit hospital,
beating the glass with my hands

The night is cold
The poplars are grey in the headlights

You have opened the paragraph of silence
I was closing the volume of inaudible sound

Peter Boyle

Some Mountains

The mountain beyond that pass has no name. It is too old for us to name it. The sea has the same colour as the sky but the mountain has the same colour as sand. Sand is not earth but a fluid shoreline that leads to the great cities. When we are tired we buy up land on the edges of the great cities so we can sit and watch the insomniac journey of sand. Its slow exodus across the horizon teaches us how to prepare for sleep. When flowers open on a day filled with sand all the water in the world will not quench their thirst.

I send words to you from so far off aiming to shape you towards the exquisite openness of love, but over and over I collapse in the effort to invent a life. Walking on sand has taught me I can no longer count on making it to any shore. Your eyes as I imagine them I will go on kissing gently and sheltering beneath. It may be that simply wishing you such tenderness will help you wake one day calmer, more deeply held by the world's alignment, ready to find another and love. We cannot name sandgrains or some mountains but perhaps they can name us.

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book I, Xvi

In the time of the great emergency Enobius, the Emperor of the Palmyran legions, was banished beyond the Ister on the charge of necromancy. Yet it is well known that, rather than contacting the dead, he was simply a man haunted by the future. "Wherever I go," he lamented, "I see only the future." The turning point happened on a day of unprecedented calm throughout the empire. On the battlements of a fortress on the Illyrian coast he heard angelic spirits reciting in a voice louder than all human voices long intolerably harsh lines of verse which he knew were being dictated to a poet who was to pace these same battlements over a thousand years in the future. Enobius heard only part of the angelic speech but knew that the poet of the future likewise heard only a small part. And there does not exist any one time, he found himself saying, when all the fragments of the angels can be heard simultaneously. This lack of simultaneity haunted and tormented him. He came to suspect that every true utterance slipped between the ghost future he sensed all around him and the physical future that would come. After this revelation in the Illyrian fortress, wherever he went he began to secrete notes in hiding places in the several languages he knew and whatever other languages he could master, foretelling what the whispered voices around him were saying. Yet despair overtook him as he fell under the conviction that all the languages of his world would vanish before the future could arrive. A tormented and wearied man, his one hope, he said, was death – in death, he said, he might at last be released into the limitless blessing of the past.

(Diogenes Caserius, The Deeds of the Neglected Emperors)

Footnote: Much of Enobius's best work was lost as a result of his relentless habit of writing in as many languages as possible – most of these tongues now long since forgotten. Among the papyri in various libraries in Alexandria and Cairo are fragments thought to be in crypto-Dacian, early Numidean, mezzo-Akkanite and the secret language of Ur. In the last year of his life Enobius wrote the poem that begins "In which of my languages will I die?" but was then overwhelmed by the conviction that someone in the future was writing the same poem but with some teasing slight variation. In despair he wrote "Everything I write plagiarizes the future."

(Dr Antoine Leme12:08 23/07/2007surier, assistant curator, The Secret Library Trust of Lower Egypt, 1855)

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book I, Xvii

Anaximenes was the first to calculate accurately the size of the universe. Whereas Nepenthe, daughter of the mathematician Ptarchus, devised the constant for the weight of the sky. Her cousin Mystra proved the different weight of varying dreams. Mystra was the first to show conclusively that dreams of water are far heavier than dreams of fire. When all these great and learned calculations were presented to Sarsus the third, King of Kings and ruler of all Parthia, he remained unimpressed. After all he was a man who for the first twenty five years of his life had lived in total seclusion, speaking only the language of spells and unaware that any other languages existed. To utter a word, for him, was to make that thing happen. He had difficulty understanding the idea of a language that merely reported what was – for him all words were there to bring things into being.

(Zenobia, The Chronicles of Parthia and Palmyra)

Know then of the three great languages. Beyond the Indus developed the language uniquely capable of expressing philosophical speculation and matched to the knotted and intricately curved play of reality. In Greece the true language of poetry arose with its fusion of beauty, power and the precise contours of human endurance. And in the lands of upper Egypt and greater Parthia was born the delicate and terrifying language of magic, the language that brings about whatever is desired to happen. Whilst the languages of Greece and India remain among us and have been well recorded, the language of the Magi and the Invisible Ones never travelled across borders. It was a speech that did not survive because it did not want to survive. Yet numerous are its fragments. It speaks itself in dreams and in water. It translates stars and rivers into birdsong. Once its spells raised cities, united lovers and gave youth back to the dying. But it became a confusion on the road of warriors. It feared the powerful and warlike – so it left earth.

(Macrobius, Of the Eastern Kingdoms)

Macrobius was wrong in supposing that the language of magic disappeared. Coptic as spoken in Egypt is one of its dialects that degenerated into the acceptance of everyday life. It is also a common second speech among the Scythians, Dacians and the peoples of the great desert of Fars.

(Evander, On the folly of contemporary wisdom)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book II, XII

Among the ancients of our people, the Hellenic homeland and its numerous colonies and sister cities, the poet was a figure uniquely admired and deeply feared. It is well known that poems can always be altered by a poet and that therefore the only way to ensure the canonical survival of a given poem is by killing the poet. For this reason poets were reluctant to write poems, let alone complete a poem.

When a poet did know that he had finished a poem of great value he immediately had to leave his home and city, first binding his fellow citizens on solemn oath to change nothing of his poem while he was away. It only remained for him to die in exile – in this way his people would be eternally obliged to preserve his work faithfully.

In Ebtesum an opposite tradition prevailed – that poems should not be preserved but that poets should endlessly invent new poems. Though poets were deeply honoured in the same way as musicians and singers, their specific names were rarely mentioned and, in the books later surreptitiously produced – such as the Black Book of Ebtesum or the Green Book of Ebtesum, ascriptions are not made to individuals. During my own stay in Ebtesum after an evening of extraordinarily moving poetry I made the mistake of thanking and congratulating a poet on his work. As if disturbed while searching bewilderedly among lost shades, his aged face looked far away into great distances. He spoke then in a language I had never heard before yet was able to understand immediately by instinct: “For these words to flow through me,” he said, “it is necessary never to think thoughts like that. Only by eliminating all desire to own, even as much as the name on my grave, can speech bless me and the silent ones allow me into their home.”

(from Theophrastus, Compendium of poetic practices, most likely produced under Theophrastus' supervision as director of the Lyceum after Aristotle's death and possibly written by Aristotle's pupil Mendron who had lived many years in Egypt and travelled extensively in diverse realms.)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book II, XVII

In those days the sun was always sliding off the edge of the visible, vanishing then reappearing in the least likely places – a locked cupboard, a woman's sandal, a darkened mirror or the shallow mound of earth where a gardener might be planting a rosebush. Sometimes at noon it would turn itself inside out so that its black core glared terrifyingly towards the homes of men.

Then the great Continuator took measure and numbers were assigned to the heavens and the geometric forms were invented – the circle, the rhombus, the triangle and the apeiron eidolon – the figure where an infinity of lines redraw themselves according to the secret numbers of the universe.

From all these numbers and formulae the goddess that presides over music ordered the realm of the audible, creating the five tone scale, the nine notes and the 360 variations of resonance.

Likewise these numbers spilt into the visible and the tangible, creating architecture and the knowledge of the proportions, and the yearning for the intuitive numbers that men recognise as beauty.

Yet in the human heart the sun still vanishes at random and all formula fail. The black core of the universe cannot be caught in the web that measures, does not answer to the laws of the Mathemasis. Heedless it burns through eye and hand. As space it is the vortex that consumes, in the world of men it is the unlimited war that destroys. [???????? ????μ??, ?? ?????????μ??]

(Photius of Aegispotami, Against Pythagoras)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book II, Xx

At the front of our house is dawn
and the mist of the sea that enters our valley.

On tree-branches
the cold dawn-smoke rests:

notes from invisible birds
give the dead back their sleep.

~o~

Stumbling out to watch the dawn
I forget I am lonely.
Two million suns
have still
left room for me.

~o~

The most remote land
is present on my balcony
at dawn.

(from The Green Book of Ebtesum)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book Iii, I

In the feast laid out at Alcibiades' house Terpander posed for us the question, "Why is it that time flows backwards?" Discussion continued on this topic for a while till the much-travelled Timon broadened our understanding with his sketch of the Menandroi, a people who live in a region of India that is constantly being invaded by the future.

"The Menandroi see clearly the past and the future but have great difficulty perceiving or understanding the present. To them a deep mist coils itself around where they are and the present is a core of blackness that travels everywhere with them. They spend much time writing letters to people dwelling in the remote past or a long way off. No sooner is one such letter written than they are busy writing another. Now they live on high platforms raised above the ground to discourage people from visiting them, but equally these platforms serve as convenient resting places for the highly trained pigeons that transmit their messages. From time to time it happens that those who receive their letters make the mistake of visiting them, for the Menandroi cannot perceive anyone who is present, but always fix their attention on elsewhere. In this tribe women conceive with great difficulty and rapidly lose all interest in their offspring. Accordingly it falls to the elderly and grandparents to protect children. For some reason it is only towards old age that the notion of the present dawns within the Menandroi. Sadly, as it has been said, for them the words 'now' and 'here' fuse into the word 'nowhere'.

"The Pravati, on the other hand, live entirely in the present, asserting that anything more than five minutes into the past or future has no reality. Likewise they claim that reality only extends as far as a man can throw a not too heavy stone. In their estimation beyond that distance things turn to water – or rather, so they claim, language ceases to be applicable as all elements merge into a soupy texture they call 'that'."

Socrates said, "It seems, then, if we dwell only in the past and future we lose reality, while if we dwell only in the present we lose understanding and soon become a shadow. Likewise with what is here and what is distant. Must we, then, spread ourselves like some thin paste so we grasp and clutch tightly at all times the distant, the present and the approaching? Must we be always pouring back and forth the luminosity of now, the diverse hints of then and the steady light of what will be tomorrow? But how can 'here' and 'now' be always different things, never the same for two people? If we had a house like that or a tree or a loaf of bread, what good would it do anyone?"

Proteon, a pupil of the illustrious Zeno, who was visiting at the time, said, "Both are illusions – that is all."

But sitting in the corner all the while was Zamindar, the one sent as a deputy

to Athens by the fire dwellers from beyond the Indus. Now he had resurrected sky books from the deep wells where they were hidden and knew how to read what stones say and in his childhood, transfigured by the beauty that lies beyond speech, he had understood the difficult prediction poems spoken by birds. He began then, as if the room was strangely empty, his voice reaching us with the softness of someone very close and very far:

“Where I was born, in the infinite dimensions that blended in my village, lived both those ignorant of the present, obsessed with tomorrow and yesterday, and those who could perceive nothing beyond themselves and the narrow corner of light that fell directly on them. After watching them for many days I realised they were identical. Since then I have travelled much. The high platforms rented by those obsessed by what was and what approaches will all be reclaimed every two years as another fashion obliterates them. The dwellers in only now die out, incapable of sustaining their voice. Yet the not-altogether absent or present, those who travel between places, are real. ‘Here’ and ‘now’, ‘past’ and ‘present’ are real – it is the gathering that makes them real. They are real because we are not one being but many beings.”

(from Xenophon, *Conversations from the last years of Socrates*)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book Iii, Iv

In Africa not far south of Kitez, only a few days journey from Ebtesum, in several rich and spacious valleys can be found the most beautiful language on earth. The sounds of this language so enchant all who hear them, the rapture is so exquisite, that every year a select band of visitors come from Ebtesum to hear this language. No one can translate what is said and words do not appear to have meaning in any normal sense of the word. It is not possible to order fruit, tidy kitchens or transact business in this language though food appears just the same and houses are built and water is directed craftily through channels and pipes to create coolness and abundance. The men and women of this land are reputed to be the most passionate lovers on earth and loneliness is a concept inexplicable here. The scholars of Ebtesum when I asked for their account of this language said, "The meaning lies elsewhere." And others said, "Think of the human voice as the central music to this planet – the music from which all other musics derive. Think of its curvature as landscape, its clear rippling, its dark forests and sunlit peaks, its harsh pounding and delicate escape. Go deeper into why the human voice was made so beautiful. Go deeper into why it can never be owned by rich or poor, never restricted or confined. We admire beauty of the body. The human voice is the beauty gathered by the breath, the sovereign of the body. Many are struck to silence by the beauty of bird song – far deeper is the beauty of authentic human speech. What sullies it is containment. What blights it is ownership and division. Most people accept that a sound is not, by itself, a meaning, but many believe that a word, a sentence, a phrase is a meaning. In that speech, in that valley, only a life is a meaning."

(from Herodotus, The Uncut Histories, Book XIII held in the Gades library)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book Iii, Ix

By morning
three women, an old man
with a cart, two children.

By evening
two women, two men,
a young boy with a dog.

This summer,
two years passed.

~0~

Flies zigzag on the air;
a stone lies
where it has always lain;
smoke stirs
in a green space between silences.

Days end.

~0~

Today, looking down on the plain
where three roads meet,
a white dove settled
on my shoulder.

There is only
one journey.

~0~

Rain falls on dark roads.
Behind rough white walls
tears are endless.
In salt brine
olives best preserve
their sharp pure hunger.

~0~

Just above the level of the trees
two lightning bugs flicker their passage.
In the garden a single candle
shows me the path to the sky.

~0~

In the outer spaces of the world
the pure light awaits.

(Irene Philologos, A poetic journal of ten years in Boeotia)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book Iii, Xvi

In Kitezah and the kingdoms nearby, though they know of stone and timber and partly use them as conditions require, they prefer to build with water. The most prized houses employ three or more interwoven waterfalls for their walls and the roof is generally left open to the night sky. In inclement weather sheets of a certain plant painted with invisibility are used. Sleep, they say, is always deepest when surrounded by flowing water and the stars glitter with most tenderness when seen across a ceiling of shifting water. When a couple seek privacy they divert a waterfall around themselves – “to draw the curtain of the waterfall” is the common expression in their language to refer to lovemaking.

(Macrobius, A journey through Ebtsum, Kitezah and central Africa)

In periods of history when Eusebius has been on the wane or recently disappeared, following the cyclic collapse of its manifestations, alternate forms of wealth developed. For too long historians have neglected the lively trade in water and advanced water technologies that flourished in Africa. The export of such knowledge from Africa to regions of Europe, Arabia, and Southern India was crucial to the flourishing of the twin kingdoms of Kitezah and Ebtsum. Also worthy of further analysis is the fact that, when Eusebius triumphs, those parts of the world richest in water become the poorest – a direct punishment, many hold, for those eras when water regulated the affairs of men. Vast water distribution highways, of which the aqueducts of the Romans are but faint memories, linked many lands that the blessings of the fruitful clouds might be known to all. Likewise the craftsmen of Kitezah and central Africa knew how to use the power of water to run all manner of machines, to transport goods, to lift heavy weights. Many have written of the music created by special water machines, the criss-crossing melodies of water especially prized in Kitezah.

(Diogenes Laertes, Commentary on Received Knowledge)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book Iv, I

In those long periods when books vanished, when memory was the only way to record that the earth went back to the time (almost legendary) of one's parents, when it seemed possible that cities and roads, villas, harbours and fleets, marketplaces and farms were the product of some beneficent magician, springing into being somewhere around the time of one's birth. In those vast eras when the companionship of trees, the profound critique of flowing water and the wayside stone's almost haughty refusal to comment seemed perfectly adequate as a guide to the perplexed. At the time when night was never sure that dawn would come to interrupt it and not some other event like a shower of burnt-out meteors or perhaps afternoon would reappear and play itself backwards through the previous day. To be human meant to breathe, possibly to eat, have sex, feed a baby. To be human meant always to be heading backwards, towards less and less, towards zero. Rain fell and entirely unpredictable things flashed across what might be the sky or else the dreamscape of one's closed eyes. Forests grew down into stillness. Lakes appeared like hollow hands offering the soft petals of extinction. And always at the edge of sleep came the voices: "You have ten minutes, ten days or ten years before the vanishing of the world in death – what is it that is worth saying?"

(fragment from A paraphrase of certain writings by Leonidas the self-exiled, compiled by Omeros Eliseo)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book Iv, Xiii

The inhabitants of Phokaia are quite clear that their ancestors came from places far to the east, arriving in long ornately carved boats propelled by oars and a single sail. Yet the Phokaians possess no boats and had no knowledge of the winds before Greek traders came among them. They say their skill in making boats was taken from them when a great monster arose from the sea. Likewise they assured us that their ancestors possessed a wondrous music, using golden disc-shaped objects arranged in a line to produce the most varied and exquisite tones, yet their present music consists of a few rudimentary tunes delivered with no great dexterity on ill-made clay pipes or tapped out on small metal drums. One possession they retain from their ancestors is a secret calendar that can be used to chart the location of all the fish on earth though the few elders who know how to read the calendar have died.

The most remarkable achievement of the Phokaians is their language. It is said that, having reached the small island that would be their home, following the instructions of their holy men they burned their boats on the shore. That evening the ashes lodged in their throats and the next morning they found that, though knowledge of sea-craft and music had deserted them, a new almost intolerably complex language had taken possession of them.

The language of the Phokaians could be regarded as the extreme opposite of our languages. Not only do they constantly add to the beginning of words, producing the most intricate precisions of meaning and weaving extraordinary connections between all levels of experience, but the purposes for which they use language are hard to explain to those who are not Phokaian. The prefixes to words, the preliminary change-notes, as their grammarians call them, indicate, among many other things, the degree of formality, the time of day, the state of weather at the moment of speaking, whether causality in the word is to be perceived as flowing forwards or backwards, the degree of longing the word experiences to rejoin the things it describes and (most importantly) the five residencias or realms one might be talking of. Their words become extraordinarily long. In part because of this they do not use language to converse about everyday matters that are at hand or to issue instructions, but rather language to them is a kind of parallel universe, which flows alongside other activities, a music, a tapestry, a mirror that all attend to while going about other unconnected tasks. Their island is small – two days walk suffices to trace its perimeter. Their language brings the universe into their presence: from stars to sea monsters, from the delicate quivering of fish to the listless ripple of a desert wind. Humour and grief flash in jagged splices across their language. They have lost everything and they have gained everything. At times they wish they could forget language and simply hammer objects as other people do, accumulating

women and making money. At times they regret that their ancestors fixed upon such a narrow world, a tiny island generating endless verbal complexities. Yet their speech is beautiful and silence, they say, gathering in the space where the voice fades out, is the strongest word in all language.

(Menander, Travels in Zam, Phokaia and the great ocean of the South)

Leonidas knew the language of the Phokaians, passing entire months living in their presence and their speech. During the busy fishing and farming seasons he would withdraw into the private world of Greek to write. Undoubtedly the intricate language of the Phokaians entered all his thought, along with their paradoxical relationship to time.

(from Monochrastes, A brief biography of Leonidas the self-exiled)

It is sometimes misleadingly asserted that the Phokaians forgot their ancestors' knowledge and even degenerated through living on a tiny island separated by immense seas from all neighbours. Those who have listened attentively to their stories know that nothing was forgotten. Choices were made to abandon certain practices which, however convenient or beautiful they might seem, lead to terrifying consequences. The Phokaians had fled a disastrous cycle of civil wars, an era when the quest for trade goods and luxury led to an explosion in the traffic in slaves. Cities were destroyed, wars waged that women and children might be captured and sold. All this was done that silks, perfumes, rare foods and wines, statues and glittering entranceways might grace the ever more sumptuous houses of the rulers. The long debated decision to renounce the use of boats was the Phokaians' way to ensure they would never return to that violent archipelago. It also served to protect them from chance meetings at sea, whereby others might be alerted to their existence and come in search of them.

The court music of their ancestors' archipelago relied on a peculiar gong-like instrument requiring very precise combinations of gold, silver and other precious metals. Not only were such instruments too difficult to bring with them or manufacture, but the music itself was always associated with the taste for luxuries. It had long been used to mark off the *atheremonistanika*, the caste of those who believed their refinement, their ancestry, their lighter skin colour, entitled them to despise and enslave others. However beautiful the music, the Phokaians told me, it always whispered of superiority.

The language the Phokaians discovered on their island became, in effect, their supreme music. Running alongside everyday life it also rippled and curved to its

varying rhythms – the arrival and departure of friends, the preparation of food, children’s games, the flicker of rain on the dry brick of their houses, the trembling of the sun above the sea. Their language binds the Phokaians, joining old and young, abolishing every artificial difference, diverting, informing, sustaining them with its humour, its shifting tones of a finely registered tenderness.

(Xantipides, My year among the Phokaians)

Peter Boyle

The Apocrypha Of William O'shaunessy: Book Vi, Xi

It is easy to believe there is another language always present at the edge of hearing, some slight, altogether bewildering shift in what we thought the finite reality called music, a colour no one has seen yet, familiar perhaps to some other people but hidden entirely from us, words with a nuance another tribe would grasp immediately but, to us, forever incomprehensible, something that could have lifted the whole of our lives into another truth, another intensity of joy and coherence and depth, the lost key that would redeem so many wasted years, so much bitterness. It was always so close and simple, like the fragrance of a certain sweet burnt on windy nights when the temperature drops to a level almost but not quite that of snow and the streets hold sound in a different way. For such things enlist no deities. Their truth is all in their simplicity, the richness they give to living, the richness that assures us living is always just a beginning.

~∅~

Made of the softest wood and manifesting at every step how perishable it is, the star-stair winds upwards and upwards from the dirt floor of the marketplace, a crowded chaotic space where pigs roam at random, beggars and thieves are always jostling against wide-eyed strangers, small girls cradle baby sisters. The tower that houses the star-stair is a thin soaring structure of perhaps 29 or 66 floors, reaching almost to the clouds. The young child named the Goddess of Dawn is said to live there at the summit and on a few occasions has been seen by visitors. All the tower's passageways are remarkably small, designed perhaps for five year olds while adults need to hunch over tightly to make their way up the stairs. The intervening floors are said to contain the world in miniature.

Every three years the building is first emptied, then burnt to the ground so that a new offering to the sky can be created – either because the wood perishes or because of a fear that magic slips from everything faster than water glides through the fingers of our hands. A new child is then found to be the Goddess. The mysterious thousand rooms that symbolize the world must be shaped once more. In this way the sea that goes away comes back once more.

~∅~

Returning by boat from Egypt and the Kingdoms of lower Africa I felt listless and ill at ease to be once more on familiar Italian soil. Then in the nightmarkets of Brundisium I came across an at first scarcely intelligible treatise on geography. Carefully inscribed on its front cover was its date of publication: MMMXCV: but from what era or what land? Slowly I began to accumulate a library of books from the future. In them I read of a sequence of world devastations, of the disappearance of the human species not once but several times and, connected to this phenomenon, of the philosopher Irenaeus of Chalcedony who taught that the chief error of the ancients from Socrates to Aristotle, from the cynics to the malcontents, was to imagine the ethical word belonged exclusively to man and not to life. "All imagine", he says at one point on page 77 of a vanishing treatise on the Interpretation of Sand, "as if individually they would die yet somehow the human species, the human word would survive forever. Let us suppose, instead, it is life not mankind that survives. Let us imagine that the ethical, the beautiful survives forever despite – or because of? – our perishing. Suppose one day in the wider trajectories of the cosmos the ethical, the beautiful will summon back snails, hillsides dotted with yellow flowers and birds with gracious wings, and perhaps, out of a lingering yearning for what passion brings, a young man and woman in their most intense lovemaking, their faces opened entirely to each other as if in those hours they could read in one unbroken gaze all that life utters, the infinite scripture of the world there in the tender curve of a beloved's face. In that scripture is the totality of surrender, a rippling outwards, what does not seek to clutch but to give."

~Ø~

We were on the highest terrace where the image of the sea glittered in a wide endless sweep. I do not know how long it was since the last flight of birds had gone, tracing their way beyond the horizon of the visible. Certainly for what seemed an immense trajectory of time nothing stirred or changed beyond the narrow world of the terrace with our few movements of the head or an arm, our slight leaning towards or away from each other, perhaps the momentary gesture of touching a plate of food only to draw back from it. The woman who sat beside me moved forward at one moment as if to kiss me only to draw back, just as our hands, though exquisitely shaping the same air, remained separate. I do not know her age exactly but she seemed very young and kept slipping backwards into the unguarded instant of being an adolescent, almost a girl, ready to love and go on to marry, have children, while I, whatever my real age, drifted steadily into being an old man, half paralysed, my face creased and life-worn, with only a few brief years left. It was a transformation she sensed in me over which I had

no control. But a delicacy of absolute longing and stillness held us enraptured for those hours that were at once, though neither our words nor our gestures said this, one unbroken outpouring of love and leave-taking. For so many years, the long years of bitter aloneness, I hated myself for this shame, this desertion by life when life had summoned me. Now at the ending of days I sense only the beauty of her face, the mutual truth of blessing.

~∅~

Facing the dark and naming it, I remind myself, doesn't mean wanting to live there. The beauty of the earth is seamless and obeys no logos. It prepares its own remedies – the dream cure, the writing cure, restoration through music. So the return of the sea follows the charter of the moon and tenderness lets life flow back. Inwardly we walk the earth as many people. Outwardly in dimensions visible and invisible our speech, when it has left demands and grievances behind, continues

(from Lucius of Ocampo, Interrogating a lost life – notes towards an autobiographic philosophy)

Peter Boyle

The Joys Of Mathematics

At fifty I will begin my count towards the infinite numbers.

At negative ninety nine I will start my walk towards
the infinitesimally small.

At one over twenty seven I will inspect the first bridgeworks.

At twenty two over seven I will write a message in a bottle, entrust it to
a sea turtle, slip under a wave and sleep.

At eighty seven sparrows will land on the windowsill, pecking a hole
that leads inside my arm.

At 127 I will begin to arrange the children's pillows, carefully filling
each one with warm handfuls of snow.

At ten to the negative six our friends from the White House will arrive,
handing out glass beads and broken shells filled with recently
perfected poisons.

At the inverse square of sixteen the sky will curve over blue lakes, songbirds
settle at dusk, a small train rattle off towards a village that leans
against a single church spire.

At one over negative twenty two I will start to dream in Sanskrit, creating a
swarm of brown ants to bring back a baby's rattle from the
edge of a mud slide.

At ten to negative two over three I will open my heart, letting go of all vanities,
right down to the wilted bones.

At the third transfinite number I will give up easy answers.

At e to the i pi the earth will bristle with skulls and weapons, dolphins will
proclaim the first inter-stellar arms bazaar in Antarctica, the
new born will drink only lead, the elderly will wander the moon
in the quest for warmth.

At one I will open my eyes.

At zero I will put the key back under the mat.

Peter Boyle

The Unknowable

Who had children. Who died.
Who found himself lucky after thirty years
and stumbling home realised
it was a simple error.
Who ruled behind the scenes in the Department of Misinformation,
who was later conscripted
to underwrite Armageddon.
Whose hand was lost in a sawmill
and was met again as the strange dust
of a new-found galaxy.
Who migrated to the other world
but came home to bury the dog.
Who divorced and died of alcoholism
in the country town where destiny misplaced him.
Who topped high school, failed everything else
twice, married money, then slept through
the death of three children.
Who was invisible, became a wall, became a street,
entered real estate, bought a city,
retired into owning world opinion.
Who saw his son indicted for reluctance, shackled and maimed,
blamed for the colour of the sky.
Who inscribed his name in the old script,
the one no one reads anymore,
the one where things inscribe themselves
so what they are
reads itself back
in us.
Who was my shadow when daylight was.

Peter Boyle

When Eagles Pause To Talk With Your Sleeping Body

When you wake again
the donkey will be standing idly in the road,
the old man will open his shop,
the seagulls will tread critically
among the piles of garbage,
wind will flap small religious photographs
pegged to the ice cream stall,
the old woman and her daughter
will be sitting under the black cross
near the santo ninyo,
a man from the desert will go mad
in the bar by the marketplace,
a boy bandaged like a doll
will gaze from the tenth story window.

When you wake again
dusk will be falling across the harbour,
fishing boats will be rocking by the stone wharf,
cold night air will ripple the line of water,
a sinker will fall from a bridge
and bury itself in darkness,
the last train will climb the hill
turning its back on the sea.

When you wake again
drunks will skate in wide circles over the pond,
the ice cream seller will fold up his van,
a blonde-haired stranger will stroll uphill
with melons and cheese for dinner,
the neon signs will come on
and tomorrow's clothes will hang in unopened wardrobes.

When you wake again
a favourite pillow will cover a magic toy car
that glows all night in the wind of silence,
a voice will cry out in a dream,
a woman will open the door
and recognise only the layer of dust on your shoes.

When you wake again
your life will fill the house
like a tap left running day and night
for a thousand years.

When you wake again
when the balcony crumbles at last
into the swimming pool
when eagles pause to talk with your sleeping body.

Peter Boyle