

Peter Boyle
&
M.T.C. Cronin

Also by M.T.C. Cronin

Zoetrope – *we see us moving
the world beyond the fig*

Everything Holy

Mischief-Birds

Bestseller

Talking to Neruda's Questions

My Lover's Back ~ 79 Love Poems

The Confetti Stone and other poems

beautiful, unfinished ~ PARABLE/SONG/CANTO/POEM

<More or Less Than> 1-100

The Ridiculous Shape of Longing

— New & Selected Poems (English/Macedonian)

The Flower, the Thing

Our Life is a Box. / Prayers Without a God

Notebook of Signs

Irrigations (of the Human Heart) ~ fictional essays
on the poetics of living, art & love

Squeezing Desire Through a Sieve ~ Micro-Essays
on Judgement & Justice

Also by Peter Boyle

Coming home from the world

The Blue Cloud of Crying

What the Painter Saw in our Faces

Museum of Space

Reading Borges

(as translator)

The Trees: Selected Poems of Eugenio Montejo

HOW DOES A MAN
WHO IS DEAD
REINVENT HIS BODY

?

*the belated love poems
of
thean morris caelli*

Shearsman Books
Exeter

Published in the United Kingdom in 2009 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-016-3
First Edition

Copyright © M.T.C. Cronin and Peter Boyle, 2009.

The right of M.T.C. Cronin and Peter Boyle to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Acknowledgements

(Australian publications unless otherwise indicated.)

Best Australian Poetry 2004 (UQP); *Gutcult* (USA); *Jacket*; *La Traductière* (France, in French translation); *Meanjin*; *Otoliths*; *Postwest*; *Stylus*; and *Southerly*.

**HOW DOES A MAN
WHO IS DEAD
REINVENT HIS BODY**

?

EPITAFIOS

AFTER LIFE, AFTER DEATH

Had he lived, Thean Morris Caelli would have died. From that death—as from all deaths—poems came. In the Melbourne suburb where he lived, had he lived—with his son and daughter and Irish ancestors from the gallows to the Gold Rush, from the Gold Rush to the Republic, with his small obsessions and incorrigible passions, not forgetting his bountiful inebriation—he loved absolutely. To love this way means to accept the great amount of living that must be done in death.

In his long post-death life it seems he split himself, a natural thing the dead might do to remain in conversation. But maybe a dual voice simply seemed more suited to talk of what it is that joins us, our shared exposure, an expression of any number but that is greater than one. Without doubt, he fragmented and if it were possible to count the true nature of things he would be counted therein.

In the afterlands where he travelled, almost incognito, it was natural for him to encounter other poets. Had he lived in 1890 he would have written letters to Mallarmé and lived in China. In his late 20th Century stumblings he fell into the company of Paul Celan and César Vallejo, their words echoing the crowded glitter of betrayed faces, their stranger-speak bearing the due frivolity and jaggedness to let a world show itself. Thean listened, then wandered further. Flipped cards left in a bar in the afterglow of eighteenth century Madrid became a tarot that wandered to India, all roads intersecting. In a pond in East Anglia he heard, whispered by reeds, the story of a woman who lived in Japan and her sorrow at not seeing ghosts.

Wandering in realms that were vast, or perhaps staying still in a space traversed by many layers, oceans and storms swept across him. Sometimes he spoke in dreams or borrowed dreams or had dreams borrow him, a natural thing to do among the dead where living and dreaming merge into one voice. Indeed dreams and daylight living he considered two languages as intertwined, as necessary to each other as body and breath, as the babble of speech in the quick ear and words that sleep in writing.

The imagined erotic, terrors out of childhood, future hallucinations that being hallucinatory were also real—his poems kept returning to such experiences as they were after all his lived experiences, different, being lived in the multiple dimensions of the afterlands, yet speaking to, unearthing, what might have been the life of anyone.

CONTENTS

QUESTIONS THE SEA FORGOT TO ERASE	15
--	----

TAROTS

Trousers and Shoes	34
The City of One Thousand Windows	35
The Spectacle Maker	36
The Juggler	37
The Goldsmith	38
Shadow of a Traveller Found in the Wood Where Oranges Grow	39
Eggshell Lovers	42
Sitar Tuner	43

FOUR DREAMS

& A STORM THAT BEGAN AFTER THE IMAGINATION OF IT	45
---	----

DREAMBOOK OF THE MIDDLE

Beetle Diaphragm (The Secret of Now)	60
11 + 7 + 9 is 25 (10 + 9 + 6 is 25)	61
Oblivion (Night of Nights)	62
Nets (The Texture of Happiness)	63
The Collapsing Kingdom (Hiding Out)	64
In the Dream (In the Dream)	65
Red Worms (Holy Soldiers)	66
Instar (Where the Sun is Born)	67
My Own Dream (Witnessing)	68

TO REMAIN	71
------------------	----

THE SUMMONING WOUND

(BOOK OF PAUL CELANS & CÉSAR VALLEJOS)

Conversation Beyond the Cloudline	102
Clothed (César Vallejo)	105
Open the Chinese Fan, Paul Celan	106
César Vallejo's Handshake	107

Undrowned	109
César, Well-Dweller	110
The Severed Head	111
Paul Celan and the Pointless	113
Vallejo's Jacket	114
Paul Celan Stepping Out	115
The Poet Vallejo, Announcer of Movement	116
Conversation at the Juncture of the Napo and Ucuyali Rivers, Amazonas	117
OBJECTS OF YOU IN WATER	121

QUESTIONS
THE SEA FORGOT TO ERASE

Which stretches further,
the lines of an open palm
or the one wave the ocean endlessly sends towards us?
How many dimensions intersect in each death?
Tell me,
could you really have held both of me?

The sea opens—
that gravelly sound sucking on tiny pebbles,
your eyes clear, green
like the underside of stones.
From our discarded clothes on the beach
two paths—
one with footprints leading out across the sea,
one going back into doors and spaces,
selves that keep
splitting into other selves. My life
this shared bread your lips give back
moistened. And if I had been strong enough
to carry your fire?

Like a person I don't know,
your distance from me
obsesses me . . .

Like the pebbles.

We argued over dinner
while they sat on a ledge in another room,
already losing their life-colour,
falling like echoes of the beach
when our angry arms swept the afternoon
to the floor.
One of us had brought them home;
the other had seen death in that.

A feather the wind tears, a river that flows on under the ocean,
the owl with its face burned into the window
perched like an infinite yesterday
over the village—
which to prefer, the sadness of permanence
or the sadness of what never happened?
Would we see any better
if we had stayed forever
in the darkness inside a wave?

Your book, on the chair beside your pillow,
has fallen open at the last page.
I try not to see the words
when reaching over to flick off the lamp.
Your face twitches
as the cold rush of dreams pulls you under an ocean
made of all the lies
you have ever told yourself.
If I know the end of a story,
it is ruined for me—
a chance that could destroy everything;
or, the temptation,
choosing to?

Why does your face tremble into stillness
when a bird crosses your threshold
or your daughter flicks drink
at the faces of the men who watch you?

Early, when you rose,
I turned my body, the shape of absence
bending me to accept those dreams you tossed
so lightly to the bed.
In other rooms were children and clocks
I could hear,

small voices that played against the walls
and outside time.

Why does an enormous oak tree blossom under the house?
Does it understand that passion is a language
spoken by the sounds left out of reality?

How many years we have lived believing
this house holds what is inside it;
thinking ourselves
in some way related to the world.
I felt passion when you refused me;
that's the kind of thing I want.
You felt it only when the body became just
a body.

The inherited gift of fear
I touch each day
under the ribcage—
can it too make trees blossom?

I knew you were afraid
when we talked about having a child.
Someone we could both imagine—
and imagine wrong.
You thought birth was a moment,
an instant in which you were overwhelmed
by my strength.
You said,
and I laughed, crumpling,
It looks like a tomato.

If the tomato and the onion could speak,
would life be any different? Would we still prefer to eat what is
stolen?

As has been written in flowers:
' . . . What is thrown at you—
is it free?'

The poet on the balcony, the president martyred in the empty palace,
why was your face forming questions when the world was dismantled?

Your greatest sadness
was evident in questions.
Always suffering and impossibility.
But which of us comforted the other with this reversal of truth:
that suffering is the sand trickling from one end
of the egg-timer which,
tipped on its head, is joy?
What is not possible is such a relief.
I swear the stone won't speak,
though you listen at the wall of my chest
for its heaviness . . .

A palm tree, a wave breaking, summer and its imperceptible declensions:
why is a boy walking, his shoulders clenched like deep lessons,
into the steady collapse of the surf?

Your stories gave me the boy.
I never met the man
though I held him in my arms
and all his children.
The beach always let us be together,
an image of paradox when finally we shared
our separate histories.
You love water and find nothing to fear
in leaving the land.
For me, it was my embarrassed body, the sand
simply going on forever and the sea full
of the hands of the dead.

Fishermen spilling squid into the liquid ink-bed of sunlight:
do they count the sandgrains caught in a single eye
or the burn-marks left by nets too hungry for whatever is bottomless?

Do you remember the evening we slept
under an upturned boat
on a narrowing shore?
A plague of ladybirds came from the ocean
and filled my cunt, your mouth, our packs
opened and spilling clothes, passports,
contraceptives.
We had gate-crashed a wedding in a cafe
and eaten chilli prawns without language
or offering to pay.
Thousands of kilometres away
the bugs were still with us.
I recall looking at your palm and seeing
a speck of quivering red:
Put down the lightning you hold
and be inside me.

In the sweetness of the open hand
why is death the deepest line?

If you go out, you won't come back.
If you speak to me, I will hear your last words.
When I touch your face, I am trying to feel it—
to create in my hand
your flesh.
To want this is like being a ticket-holder
who doesn't know what the ticket is for.

A harvest of leaves gathered from hills where the birds translate
the verb 'to remain'—
is the best gold the gold of their beaks or the imprint of a tree

growing in your hand
out of all that is fallen?

I cringe when you throw the children in the air.
Not because I am afraid you will not catch them
and the day will become one of those horrible stories,
but because I begin to desire that they will go up
and keep going,
that I will never see their faces
full of that joyous fright.

When the poet sat down to speak with the birds
did he know that flying would be easier
than asking a single person for truth?

The cat asleep in the doorway knows
the truth about flying.

In the old hotel where we made love
is the sky still the same colour—
is the elevator still filled with birds?

I have written the story you told me
about your grandfather's death
and his return as a bird
to your father's house.
The cats watched that bird
and circled it with love.
It was the only bird that entered the closed garden
and left with its new life.

A bright summer extends along the line the waves mark—
would your hands slide as easily into mine?
What lies at the back of every mirror?
Is the sea wet enough for you?

Is your exhaustion only for me?
You sit so still.
You sleep so quickly.
Why don't you think at night
about our life?

(My imagination had another woman
always sharing the bed with us.
You loved her,
or at least did not ask her to leave.
She was young
and I wanted to see her cry.
When finally I banished her,
demanding both your body and your love,
you insisted she no longer made you hard.
This, I knew, was coincidence
for there was some part of your heart
she had already broken.)

Living is so easy for you that I can't stop watching.
I never sleep.

All night the cars wind homeward along the ridge,
the coffee boils in the kitchen—
in dreams, in thoughts
are there names?
What is the one syllable each wave repeats as it splits open?
How far can the dead hold onto a thought?
Tell me your secret name
when you fold inside me like water.

Listening to the ocean.
This is a listening that goes on
and on.
You begin in childhood

and by adolescence the sound grows louder and louder.
Then, fully grown,
you keep growing, the silence
and its broken tongue
still moaning out there
somewhere beyond this night
and this day.
The sea speaks the final words you hear
before tiredness murders your ears;
the sea whispers a tug
to the water inside you,
pulls your sleeping language to the edge of dreams,
soaks your mouth
and eyes with light.

You knew my name!
It was the repetition, my frankness,
that fooled you into listening
ever harder.
I whisper it now and yet you hear chaos
that has wrestled for itself
a neverending pattern.
An archetype,
not a woman . . .

Our language is stone—
chipped blue icons we fling at each other.
When you pass through a door
haven't you noticed the words
sliding, all jumbled?
Can you speak me
the true word for vanishing?

The man I left for you
is still in my dreams

and I am always afraid that I will meet him again
and have to explain the beauty
your love has given me.
I left him my clothes, my furniture, my books.
When I try to remember myself among them,
my body becomes transparent,
my hair fine, like trickling sand.
In dreams he is my husband
and I am happy and then all of a sudden, sad,
without questions.

And then, he is you
and my whole self becomes naked
and I ask: Isn't this better?
And smile.

When the spool of the present stumbles over itself,
spilling black spaces into your everyday room,
do you know what is right or left,
can you say which keys are yours,
which keys you pocketed?

Sometimes I think
there were finite ways for us to be together.
And then I see us, sitting,
heads bent forward in some unknown conversation
and realize I will never hear the words.
How many houses did we build?
At least one!
How many did we live in?
A dozen or more and from the window of one
you threw a chair
and down the stairs of another
I pushed a wardrobe.
We didn't know what meaning we wanted
to give the word 'home'.

On the stone path where she follows you,
always lingering behind in sunlight,
why does your daughter scowl at your heels?
And the trail of your skirt,
how it flicks against the anger of your feet,
and from under the earth
how I long then
to be anything that could touch you,
leaves that fall all over your body,
a doorway's shadow
trembling along your hands—
don't you sometimes feel this?
Don't we each come into the world
with our own strange
measuring cups for the ocean?

I was never able to tell you what you could tell me;
could not speak that beautiful language of the world
you seemed to know so fluently
whenever you addressed me.
That sounds formal but its beauty made it so,
and also so casual—your words seemed to break
about my body and enter of themselves
into the openings between my lips,
my legs . . .

At which moment does the bird between mountains
hear the true pitch of the enfolding music
that calls to it across space—
when lightning carves the pond to splintering ice
or in the long days of the frozen puddle
the moon leaves at the back door
by way of signature?

I found no relief in silence, mine or yours,
and as you watched me speak,
I was growing sick with the tiny phrases
shut beneath my skin, thickening,
trapping sweetness.
I never even said 'I love you' . . .

Can a bucket find the depth of emptiness?
Would it have a fucking clue?

Sometimes I want to take pain
and carve it into my face,
peeling off all the skin.
You who travel from ripeness to ripeness,
can you understand that?

You feared me and I could see in your eyes the story
of how women, who do not stab and kill,
are the keepers of this sentiment;
how they foster hatred because they love those
who stab and kill
and those that are killed.
You thought I
was more whole than you . . .

The ocean flowing on under the cold,
flowing under the light,
its waves far and farther out, the few boats riding there, the glide and dip
of birds tracing distances,
this morning as light washes over my feet on the marble tiles
and the back of the house
is blue with cold and trembling with what has risen for the first time
so early—
the edge of summer—

and what lies under the cold and the light
is immense—
this world here not here that is always shining—
if I seek the salt in your hand
or the warm curve of your breasts
isn't it also that immense space I long to rest in?

If I rose early, after you, I would see you looking out . . .
At something.
And I was looking at you.
Back in our bed my aching feet found the warm place
on the mattress.
I dreamed that the ocean and the land were splitting apart
inside me; that you were standing in my womb,
complaining about what you couldn't see.

The rounded pebble, the budding nipple, tender awkwardness of the hair
that hides the sex:
why do you leave all that to invent unhappiness?

Fucking, I am scared of nowhere.
We make love even as you walk away.
The time in the shopping centre
was the best for me.
I saw in your eyes then that you have a life like no other.
The brittle reddish-white of your new beard
seemed like a snowline—burying
my lips in coldness.

How does a man who is dead reinvent his body
so it can flutter again in the breeze, enter once more his shoes left at
the door,
sit down and caress the shadows of those he loved?

I never said it when we lay together,
but I think you lived our love wearing handcuffs,
unaware of what they were for.
You wore a hood
as if to say to me
I cannot look at you
when I could not look at you.
You tied your words around each other
until they resembled small fists.

Do doors have names?
Can I open the door to the room
where your whole life blossoms in a glass of stolen water?

Take me every morning as soon as you wake!
I need to be pushed.
If you do not steal all you can from me
I will keep it.
Stagnant and stinking.

Does the sea remember each wave
or the garden broom fallen fruit?
Can we have breakfast in the mountains?

Your back is like a mountain to me.
I trace my hand up its face and feel longing.
Is this what it is like to climb?
Too often I let you turn away
comforting myself with the belief
that I cannot think with someone else's thoughts.

Things I never told you.
That night in a dream I was with my brother again—
he wore blue clothes, a blue tie—
he was stepping into a car that was also a boat

moored on the still flat river—
beside it the sprawling house, green fields,
the lushness of a world trapped in its own silence,
and on the other side of the river
what my brother and I would always see—
statues, their faces smashed,
ghosts moving in and out of ruined walls,
disfigured bits of people, what we carried with us
on a river that didn't flow.

How could I tell you that?

Or when everything in me died
and I spent a thousand dollars in two weeks
visiting prostitutes
and had to lie about it, did you believe me?
Holding me in the dark
who do you hold?
At the moments I am closest to you
do you smell my loneliness?
And when I long so much for your breasts
now I am not your husband, now they belong to your daughter
could I really have touched you that day?

I called out to you.
The world has arrived again.
We all recognize it,
stare at its new face
that we have never seen before.
My secret, the one I did not want to give up,
came to choke me every few years:
the need to be filled back up
with someone else.
I wanted my breasts
to be like that forever.

Who is the keeper of the honour list
for every emotion?
Why is pain measured in years, joy in seconds?

Such a short distance, this dance.
Your hand on my back
is felt as a hot drunken ache
in my kidneys, my liver.
And the world is ending now!
Even so, can you distinguish
between your real life
and everything else?

When the sea first invented the one colour
for love and emptiness,
did it know how perfectly it would fit in a pocket,
how easily it would close in the hand
of a child or a lover?

(Even noticing most things
the poet was still suspicious
of his senses.
He should have believed the concern of my flesh—
like words that determine those which come later
it could have held a special convenience
for the pieces of himself
he was trying to fling
into nothingness.)

How many questions does the sea ask each night,
letting them break over and over
against our dreaming bodies,
taking them back before dawn?
Is the past any closer
than every other mirror?

Pain is not measurable, though we live in a world that counts.
I am meant to know the value of you,
the precise degree of your suffering.

With the tears I catch I am building an ocean
deep only in the present.

I no longer look in my reflection
for the effects of your love on me.

When I swim
the dawn breaks in the small of my back.