

## Selected Poems

### Peter Boyle

read for The MUD Parcel Reading Series, Aug 5, 2022

#### THE TREE'S AMBITION

A tree with the deep ambition of becoming an ant: long evenings in night school, first attempts at rapid movement, countless resits of *Thinking like a team* (Business Studies 5071).

One day the tree realises: becoming an ant requires the perfection of smallness. The tree would start by concentrating its being in a single leaf, a dry leaf, preferably, scored with old wounds. Next it would work on narrowing its life span, ideally to no more than a few intense hours.

The tree thinks: living like an ant means living inside death – so much industry, endless conferences on collaboration, decisions taken in micro-seconds. Death as a name for a species, a destiny.

Here, inside its bark, watching a tribe of ants, unable to join their purposive non-stop rush hour. The sadness of being a tree. Its branches fall back around it like a song of defeat. “Farewell boys, comrades of my dreams, I must sleep with my silence. Always trying to mouth the one green syllable, condemned to the dunce’s chair. Me and my eternal shadow. My inability to organize a planet.”

--from *Towns in the Great Desert* (2013)

## IN THE SMALL HOURS

It's three a.m. 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.

## CROWDED OUT

The world presses in,  
a towering river of debris glittering  
with specks of one on-going explosion.  
All of us are morphing,  
our faces layered with many faces, two eyes  
gazing upward from the ending of time.  
Our skin is travelling from country to country  
even as we sit still  
and the second hand stays  
frozen on the wall clock.

From somewhere far inside us  
a young woman from a millennium ago  
rises to the surface, comes close  
and we shiver with all her tenderness.  
At the place where our breath is suddenly held back  
a child is there, watching the trees above him  
spin in fast motion. In the vast  
empty bar room of the mind  
a skeleton holding a wineglass  
gives us a familiar nod.  
Birds fly in and out  
of the multiple cages  
that are our rib cage.  
A single cry from any one of their throats  
is enough to thread

white light across the darkness.

So large, so impossible --

our hands shake

as we carry the world.

**--from *Notes Towards the Dreambook of Endings* (2021)**

## BECOMING TREE

The lost world is there again  
before me in this small corridor  
of stars. Pluck one and  
open, fold down at every corner  
and watch the butterfly of ash  
wiggle free from its glittering  
origami casket.

Is it summer  
in the leaves of where you are? Write to me  
often -- tell me of how  
the underworld is treating you.

*--from Notes Towards the Dreambook of Endings (2021)*

**from *Apocrypha* (2009)**

two poems by Irene Philologos

*Book V, XXIV*

When all that dreadful predictability  
comes trudging up from the depths of the universe,  
pleading "Say me. . . give voice to my long life",

how beautiful to hear the waterdrop  
and its great tumble  
from the broken gutter to the wooden floor.

What lies below us, what lies above us, suddenly the one sky.

*Book VI, XXVII*

There are words -  
we don't know what they are -  
and summers -  
we don't know if we'll get there -  
and doorways left open  
into bright courtyards  
and an arrangement that looks like life  
though the water is rising past our ankles.

Through all the thirteen tiers of the serried hillside,  
sleep, we can't find you.

The distances are what they are:

magical.

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

From *Ghostspeaking* (2016)

a poem by Antonio Almeida

THOUGHTS IN A CAFÉ

Day and world on a road that leads beyond.

I pass them by

and it's good to know

sparks left behind have lodged

in the leaves of the chinaberry tree

I saw in a photograph of a Cuban sidewalk, circa 1912.

Nothing is lost.

Sitting beside a mirror that runs

the whole length of this café

I wait at the very edge

of a double life. Every person,

every table, cup and plate

persists in its glassy being

and the tree outside, the buildings of the street

swim towards me, ignorant of death.

Men and women lean into each other,

stand or drift. The stillness

of a Sunday without end

muffles their voices. We have

all the time of that unmoving cloud resting

above the shoulder of the young girl

with her far-away smile and long long ponytail.



My eyes lift to see your face  
on the threshold of the corridor that descends,  
goes on descending through  
the mind's still centre:

gone gone utterly gone.

**from poems by Ernesto Ray**

**ELEUTHERIA**

Water spirit of small bowls  
beyond the bamboo curtain of my window  
a black bowl harbouring green shoots I have no name for  
maybe the small slick of water  
on the surface  
is enough for you  
maybe the few early morning raindrops  
are enough for you  
an ornamental tree spreading fan-like branches  
two small stone steps into a garden  
with room only for a few  
well-tended weeds (if everything non-native  
is a weed) sun water  
a few flourishes of stone  
I would have liked an ocean a tidal inlet  
a riverbed at least or clear creek  
cut like childhood between suburban allotments  
but where you glide is my renewal  
telling me a cup will do  
a line of silver in air  
to swim and glide and curl up  
within a water-drop  
in the tracery of moisture at the end of a leaf  
what this morning the birds harvest in the long  
silence of the skies

**Concluding two sections of 'Threads' by Ricardo Xavier Bousoño**

between  
each breath  
the mind  
descends  
(the blurred  
pain  
all over me  
fine nails  
brushing fire  
against the shell  
that holds me)  
I enter the  
millwheel  
and  
clock-house of  
the benevolent  
spiders  
from far off  
I hear  
voices  
(tides of  
anger  
about to  
break  
over me)  
a child before  
my father's

between  
the (three  
years now)  
sharp  
knife blades

downtown office door  
the silver gleam  
of its surface  
where  
trapped forever  
I see  
my awkwardness  
this body  
I couldn't  
own or give  
back  
or in the  
spider's inner  
clock-house  
I see myself  
aged twenty two  
walking off the bridge  
into Brazil  
free and alive  
a clean slate  
for the decades  
to inscribe  
all the wild  
colours  
pouring through  
the  
third eye  
in this still  
space

between two breaths

a

nowhere-bubble

bearing

all my life

crests of calm

this

emptying

out

this

momentary

ghost-becoming

a

nowhere-beacon

flares

behind

barred windows

glow

of two bodies

on rainy season

nights

a simple trust

that flares

beyond the world

bright

tramcars

on steep streets

bells of

vendors' carts

beside a

church's

small

side entrance

poised women

strolling

on evenings when

a storm has

almost come

bright  
flutter of kites  
above a line  
of housetops  
avenues  
that open to  
the sea  
bougainvillea blossoms  
bangled wrists  
and ankles  
shimmering their  
music  
scents of  
fried bananas and  
dried fish  
narrow doorways  
children  
huddling  
while  
a great rain  
passes  
I  
hold fast  
to what is

*(Ricardo Xavier Bousoño: manuscript poem given to the translator, August 2010.)*

from *Ideas of Travel* (2022)

87.

Teardrops laid out on bare earth--  
an offering to the spirits of the place.  
No two teardrops are the same, you tell me,  
and on this smoothed out patch of earth  
only teardrops grow.

If we were wiser we would have words for everything,  
for this line a faltering hand  
shapes in the soil,  
for this mark where one foot has sunk  
deeper than the other,  
a word for the precise mid-winter cold  
rising from the earth to pass layer by layer  
into the hollow space at the centre of breathing.  
And there would be a separate word  
for each star we see above us  
when all the lights of the planet go out.

We would empty ourselves  
into the purity of an endless  
litany welcoming each being  
one by one  
and, around us, catching their true names,  
the dead would gaze calmly back at us  
from inside their other life.

97.

At this hour shirts make their way  
off clotheslines and huddle in windows.  
Between the rows of freshly planted shrubs  
the dead have given up  
on resurrection. From now on  
they will speak only from inside us --

whispering scrambled incantations  
from their manuals  
of grief and love, trying to mend  
the broken universal translation machine  
that ferries us across time.



108.

The star that replaced her left eye  
was a door to a distant corridor --

you walk there in the evening  
and she is quietly  
cleaning dishes  
and adjusting the cups

from which  
small winged insects  
sip tinctures of lemon balm  
and white  
bruised hailstones.

Through her left eye  
she guides you hand in hand  
to where waterfalls stop  
and space takes over.  
'We belong there together,' she says  
gesturing at the stillness  
of light cascading  
through light.

In the starless realm  
where dreams split open  
only the frozen night dew  
cradles your head.

All down your left side  
the shivering  
wakes you to the raw  
dangling non-sequitur  
of life without her.

114.

I don't know what to do with these silences.

I carry them from room to room,  
from life to life.

They belong to all hollow objects, to all  
wooden objects, to whatever  
once blossomed and is now cut off.

Perhaps I should give them to the fire  
but the fire is busy reciting  
its own familiar, slightly Slavic,  
ghost dialect.

Under the bridge  
poking at lumps of charcoal  
a crew of survivors burn  
the salted eyelids of tomorrow.

**Excerpts from *ENFOLDED IN THE WINGS OF A GREAT DARKNESS***

if light  
the sun's light  
its bright dependable  
presence among us  
moving into our rooms  
brushing our bodies as we wake

altering nothing  
(so it seems)  
yet subtly  
changing everything

arriving and retreating  
beyond all interventions  
indefinably here

is the closest  
we will ever have

to a metaphor  
for being dead

vanished  
from so far off  
we will glow

among our objects  
and our traces

unspoken irreplaceable

the underworld's  
almost undetectable  
shimmer

\*

As if  
each breath  
might be  
a separate life,

each with its own  
window of fine glass,  
a house, a garden with a tree,  
a fountain,

a birdbath tilted  
at an odd angle among  
a small flock of white  
and black birds.

To be there as  
my lover sleeps and count

her breaths:

each one

suddenly infinite,

a loop outside of time

\*

down the side path of the house

in a proliferating

parallel universe

the hydrangeas of the dead woman

emit their light

for some time yet

for some time yet

the light over her shoulder

falls across a wind-stilled pattern in water

that looks like a long

procession of doors we could almost

touch and pass through

a circling stream of faces

like a tree

rooted in the earth

that outlives us  
how its branches lean  
towards us  
in the slight  
3 p.m. breeze

the way  
a young woman dips  
one foot in water  
and holds  
her whole body  
suspended from the other

and the corridors of water opening before her  
shine  
as if she were weightless

is it the light that emanates  
from the dead

all this  
we have no name for

\*

we are people gathering in waiting rooms  
our gentle patter

builds a smooth  
human feel to mortality  
  
through words  
our joined breaths  
renew their task:  
  
to push helplessness a little further  
off our shoulders

\*

above the empty  
asphalt carpark  
you climb up the steep  
narrow stairs  
towards the narrow door,  
propped against  
some makeshift cathedral  
a wooden shelf  
of the sky --  
  
at each rung of the ladder  
how much smaller you grow,  
barely two arms  
waving from a sack of dark linen --



there to enter the unknown  
whatever it will be,  
whatever it once was,

whoever you are  
at that moment

\*

eight or nine words  
fall on a page  
slowly

blood drops or  
stars of a remote  
heaven

eight or nine  
markers of  
a sentence

torn out of  
the white wind, the everyday  
shuffle of time

the daylight goes  
in one phrase

empty

\*

out there

towards the exploding edges

the back-and-forth

dialogue of the blood

bone-cages the breath

makes its way

between

this voice

isn't us

it isn't not-us

it is through us

in harrowing circles

vast wheels spin

towards us

at the whirlwind's

still centre

cosmos-fragments

glitter

ourselves

stripped bare

enfolded in the wings

of a great darkness