

TWENTY-ONE

PETER CULLEY

For Kevin,
whose book this is as much
as it is mine & who should take blame
or credit along with me. But we
both know my name is on the cover,
bigger than yours is on this page
& that I did the actual writing,
but a mere dedication almost
cheapens my love, thanks & respect
for all your efforts, both as friend
& unknowing editor, toward
this book, my whole life in poetry,
my whole life.

None of this would have been
possible without you & I hope that
these & future poems, that is,
poems that speak to our futures
in love & art, can begin
to repay that huge debt.
Now & in the future,
to my dearest friend,
love,
Peter

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TWENTY-ONE

Mina draws three birds at her kitchen table
& talks, she's having trouble
getting the colours right
for a litho she's doing,
some idiot lost the piece
of clay she was working on,
her voice is angry
but birds fly
in & out of her conversation
beautiful
as the light that falls &
falls across her face
as I chainsmoke a blue crown
around her head. I have
nothing to say for beauty
& I'm running out of cigarettes.

Nothing to say

So deal a new hand
or throw away the cards
& the symmetry
they offer. Superstition
offends me. That the card for death
has your face
is of no consequence--
you act
as if our lives could be reduced
to the carvings on a chessboard;
the cheap mathematics
of the sophisticated.

The birds
outside the window, fluttering,
swooping & diving, this
is a poem
almost. The words we use
to avoid beauty, our bodies
so familiar
that new markings are needed. The way
this mouth
this forest of hair
leans against a wind
we've forever turned our backs on.

& the fucking
is like a wind sometimes. Unable to focus
the wind blows
through the curtains of Daphne's
room as she sleeps, her arm
across my chest. The night
as endless
as the games of 21 I played
with Vic in Edmonton.
I get up
& wander naked through the house,
sit on the couch in the living room. The games
of 21 we played in Edmonton, the snow outside,
Coltrane on the stereo, the admission
there that we had nothing left
to say to each other.
Hit me, I would say, grinning
as the Scotch
took hold. The orange juice from the fridge
tastes good & may
fight off the cold
I feel coming on,
the vitamin C in my veins
orange & shining.

GIN & LIME

Six months in this awful apartment.
The need to move
down to the Red & White store
for bread & tea,
for Rose's lime juice, down
to the liquor store
for gin, for gin
& lime. The need
to get drunk, to watch the cherry tree
in the next yard
not bloom, watch the blue
glow the television in the corner
throws off. The need to

Throw off
like dirty clothes
this useless life
I've come to love, seeing
how
for so long
I've avoided
the inability
to say anything
that does not add to confusion. But

I cannot tell a lie.
I would chop down the cherry tree
& use it for firewood, would set fire
to my neighbours' house &
as he ran out
I would blow him away
with the big rifle
I keep hidden under my bed. Would
kill him for the noise of his
truck revving, revving
at 6 in the morning, his drunken
friends coming in at all hours, slamming
their car doors, would gouge
out his eyes,
cut off his hands.

The need

to be left in peace,
my ears bleed from the noise of your screams, my guts
are on fire, the dull noise
of someone nailing my hand to the wall. I can't say
I love the world any more. Or you. So long
taken for granted
that the poems would be there
to clean up after me. But
they are no longer real,
they don't own televisions
or drink gin, or stare
& stare at the blank screen
waiting for the hum
to go away. They don't own
imaginary rifles, they
don't need an explanation
for all of this.

Gin & lime, an awakening
fought off, as gin & lime fights off
scurvy & madness. The need to
walk out in the warm rain
stripped of meaning
like a car stripped down, able
to go faster, corner
better. Able to see the town
that surrounds & destroys us
can offer solace, i.e.
these buildings
could be the houses
of those we love,
if anyone lived there.

Down to the bar
for beer, for beer
& skittles. For some explanation
as to why we so thoroughly
fucked up. Beer & skittles, the heady
promise of poetry. Unable to love,
to write, these things
are bearable
after a few hours with this
sour, sweet English
drink.

The need to get
drunk, after 7 years
in this awful town, a wilderness
of shopping malls, after
twenty years
of a life
without consequence,
the consequences must be faced.

The need to move
to some country
where sleep
is again possible.

THE EMERALD CITY
(for Kevin Davies & Pierre Coupey)

*

what we are,
what we love

is a ghost, a

reason
to return, to

blossom
as do flowers

beneath spring
snow. begin

in an emerald
city, green
diamond

of love's
confidence

*

begin knowing
the difficulty, to awake

in flesh

is not to
dream, you said, the

poem of Dorn
you read, a cowboy

raised his
hat above his head,
there is

no reason
to be,
here

*

awake
in fall's
ecstasy, orange
berry & dry leaf, we

leave, in that
other commerce, where
trees fall

& fall
inside our hearts

*

begin
in the suddenly

open forest, sudden
clearing of rain

& sky, le jardin

sous la
neige, beneath the

snow we found
a garden, placed flowers
on Dorothy's
sleeping

nakedness, our arms
open, too

*

you & i, not
tinmen, cowardly

lions, fists made
of flesh
& bone, not straw, a

city grows
behind our
eyes, each room

is filled with a
light that falls across
our hands un-
endingly, on the

page, words, a fig-
ure drawn from
air, these
cities, conversations, will
end, will never end

*

at the end of
love, no

epiphany, no pool
of dead fish at
our feet, only

this honey in
the groin, a magic flute

for our fathers, their
glances, their bodies
heavenward

*

heavenward
we ache, as those

in hell, told of
a face

above them
held close, to awake

in hell
is to be

unsure
of our own
beauty, come down

as it has
from the holy forest

*

riverbank, cutting
stones

toward a valley, a down-
ward journey rivers

& lovers
take, away
from mountains

& air; how will
our hearts
mend, this river

flow

*

awake in
love,

come back too
easily

from hell, into
a grove of
trees, a second

growth, into
a city

the light
of whose diamonds is

a regret, is in
itself

a compromise
with extinction

*

fleur sous la neige
we believed would

prophesy the
abruptness of

spring, blossom

as we do, knowing
the difficulty, knowing the

hardness of
snow, begin

in the sudden space
of our
hearts

Prince George is not the real world. How can
these voices, dry & crackt from cigarettes,
waking up at noon,
speak sense,
how can we explain
the principles of flight
to those who live in Cloudland?

We thought the clouds had fallen
& that we now dwelt there, but we
were in Prince George,
in a Prince George fog, no plane
will leave
ever again-

Prince George is air-dead, air-dead, air-dead,
we'll live here forever
on a nickel
a day. We'll live here forever.

Cold beer at three in the morning, warm beer
six at night, my ashes
on the white tablecloth petals
on a dark black bough.

How can we speak, knowing
what we know?

Assuming
love?

3

PRINCE GEORGE, THEN

well, it's us here now
at the edge of

the wilderness
ends here,

darkness

& the moon's presence
at the cloud's edge

signify
a southward
glance

to what has been
learned
& northward
to what will be,

the crazy realm of the physical
almost lost, as

desire
becomes

the tree's branches, the cat's
pawprints across the snow, as

we awake, shaking
our heads

in wonder

for Barry McKinnon

4

We ascend, in spite
of gravity & indifference, into
the clouds. But if one law
of flight were broken, you said,
the airplanes
would fall
as swiftly as the sparrow
God never saw

from its' tenuous branch.

The sparrow
which is an angel
in another life.

& we fall, out of the sky, out of
love, run out
of things to say
in the face of
what seems the betrayal
of earths' bonds.

No choice
but to stay here, to live
in these clouds, to become ourselves
angelic.

for Scott Watson

5

turn
& return. the sparrow-song
in the orchard
is perfect congress snow falls
in patches
on the grass i awoke

my hand
on the cat's pregnant belly
grey light falling

through a house filled
with warm creatures

& blessed as i am
with their discriminate love

i smoke the last cigarette stare
disconsolately out

from the edge of the bed, through

stained glass at the sky
at the blue & red clouds
full of rain

for Daphne Samuel

PETER CULLEY was born in Sudbury, Ontario in 1958. He has lived in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, and for four years in Ayr, Scotland less than a mile from the birthplace of Robert Burns, whose work influenced his first poems. Since 1972 he has been living in Nanaimo where he sings lead in a rock band. This is his first book of poems.

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