

Three Poems by Peter Cooley

I SEE A CITY IN TEARS

New Orleans, Hurricane Katerina, 2005

And he said onto me: What do you see?
Then I answered: I see only darkness.
And he said: that will not do. Answer me.
Then I said: I see a city in tears
abomination of desolation,
bodies of the drowned afloat in back streets,
graves of the dead buried above ground sprung
open and skeletons whole and in piece
set out to decimate the morning light.
And he said: that is better. But what else?
Then I answered: my words are little, poor.
Why do you persecute me to write this,
I, who lost so little, I who was spared,
who drove home to find his house staring back
with eyes none of which had a single crack
nor was its head to suffer but black rain
which rose before him in the blazing noon
unscathed, therefore, why should I try to speak?
And the voice, which will never let me go,
voice standing beside me in my torment,
my jubinations, all my days before,
spoke again, merely repeating: what else?

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Night Bus to The Afterlife (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2014)

TELEVISION

Because we knew we were nearing the end

of our long term together, my parents and I,
this last year of their moment on earth,
watched television all day, drawing us closer.

It was our campfire when I visited.
Morning: the news of last night's murders in Detroit.
Noon: the latest on the morning's death count.
Evening: after 4:30 dinner, more bodies piling up.

Of course, I was bored. Boredom was a balm
to watching them descend the long hill I'm still climbing.
We talked about my son, 16: his car scoping out heights of the night.
Because he was theirs they loved him—the comfort of lineage.

And after they both died, while I cleaned the apartment,
I kept the television on without ceasing.
I prayed the kaleidoscope of color would bring back
that ravening, the hollow in my chest

I grew up with, always starved for more from them.
Dying betrayed that hunger, leaving me everything
in trust. Television worked: clamor and flash,
childhood in fast-forward, not the numb question of immortality.

appeared in *Divine Margins* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2009)

SUMMERTIME

First day of summer when you were a child,
the morning school was over until fall.
Remember how you slept a little late, then woke
to feel the day was open like the sky,
the windows watching you, your room their blue?

You'd never have to go to school again.

Fifty, sixty years later I've gone back
to be that child again: sun on my face
waking in June, waking without a rush
to go, to be, to do, to carry on
some fragment of my life from yesterday.

This picture holds time-still and dying-still.
You can be both the mother and the girl
and the- ducks- stared- at- and the wide water,
everything held in suspension of the past.
You can be watched and watcher, stilled and still.

Summertime, Mary Cassatt, 1894
Oil on canvas, 29" x 38" (73.7x96.5 cm)
The Armand Hammer Foundation, Los Angeles, California

appeared in *Thirty Three, An[niversary]Anthology*, Negative Capability Press, 2014

