

Bruce Boyd

Selected Poems



Bruce Boyd

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Boyd was born in San Francisco to Harold and Vera Boyd. He was an early member of the San Francisco Renaissance along with Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer. He met Los Angeles poet Stuart Perkoff in 1958 and eventually moved to Venice (to escape “what he described as the confining provincialism of the San Francisco gay scene” according to a biographer) where he lived in a house on the canals. (Some records indicate he might have moved to L.A. earlier, in 1956.) He eventually moved back to San Francisco. Boyd was, along with Perkoff, one of the two poets associated with Los Angeles included in Donald Allen’s seminal anthology *The New American Poets* in 1960, though it is possible his poems were written in San Francisco. He never published a book of poetry (several of the poems reprinted here have only appeared in underground journals). He was living in North Hollywood when he died.

This Is What the Watchbird Sings, Who Perches in the Lovetree

Who has but dighted his tricks in a bed,
And never delighted in anything said,
He'll nibble dry leaves until he is dead.

For love is the kind of a tree whose fruit
Grows not on the branches, but at the root.

Who with his lover's real presence has talked,
And enacted his lover's least speakable thought,
He will find out what it is he has sought.

For love is the kind of a tree whose fruit
Grows not on the branches, but at the root.

Venice Recalled

on the salt water streets
that rose & then fell with the ocean
when the fish that were caught in the mud
underneath the wooden footbridge started in to stink,
soon there was always the incoming tide

there, we were

each his own man

to speak, the play of sounds, pleasant or
otherwise, but only open & discursive

differently, here, at the language

the oblique sense of a word to stamp one as “in”

whose dialect (not

dialectic) held

“right or wrong”

invents a greater crime than just to force the song:
to force it back,

& closets them wet & huddled together.

they are fearful in their heads
of being on the outside looking in
—to the center of language:

but we who would live openly are its natural peripheries,
& take the unborn where the dead leave it
to grow, at our hand

“always to prefer the common,” thus the noble
Heraclitus, in “this world, which is the same for all
our language is although induction
the topology of what we live:
thus not its substitute but its enlargement.

there, with us

a new poem was something
the making, something
that asked to be shared at once: seldom a “result”
to praise or blame, & never this only, we mostly looked
behind it for the ways that came together,
between whom, intended, a clearing was being made

in which to discover what, having forgotten
is recovered

in measure, apart from direction:
as in accord with old codes,
codices,
a kind of law
of least action in language, or

to the origin, taken as return

a place of actual
welcome, always the nearest
stone path that is watered

against the coming of guests
is to say,

cooler:
& the poem, what it means to say,
for the natural motion of its body, is the clearer
that remarks the wider movement of its actual thought.

Summer Nightmusic

1.

blue-green in twilight, with the moon
comes the sea-bird now,
springing from the middle of the river to

enlist & arm responses; & downstream to sea-mist, through
responsive word-spun shallows, moves / the moon-bird, mobilised. how
it seeks by clinging / on the outside of the river, to
keep / clear of the grasping middle, note / now,
hearing it sing

“soon gone, all birds;
“not recognised until by recollection,
“then mummified in words.”

2.

which having heard,
the wind & the river / conferred;
& the water & weather,
coming together,
said

“moon-grown / overhead, the birds
“blown motionless above the blue-green sea, are
“by sight, seen latticed through the words

“in flight. the grass-grown birds,
“blown motionless above the blue-green sea, are
“clustered / like a moon that waits for words.”

3.

watch the moon that flings dumb birds
across the sky at night
foster recollection,

& the green grass carry the song the birds sing
brightly / underneath the moon, as thoughts, blown
room.grown into recollection, can

while the intertwining strands
grasp / tightly their connexion,
& the moon glows singly, like silence from a pair of hands.

4.

now the solitary moon-bird's
sudden sea-prone wings
skim the grasp ing middle of the river as it sings

“alone / the stalks of sea-grass hang / parted by quiet, as
“water & weather (bow the wind & the river, coming together, sang)
 were parted by sound, echoing moon-blown on the foam-damp
 ground,
“shaking recollection/ like a sound shakes idle hands.

“aground in silence where the sands / pass
“back & forth, erasing mountains, can
“the moon / sow back the night, to find protection?

“its black inside the white
“afterglow of night / entails detection;
“but planted, would it germinate, expand?

5.

“intimations glimmer / wave-like on the day-bright sand,
 play back / & forth, across the line from / recollection to
 projection.
“restive in the middle of the river, I look for swarms of birds
 writing words down / on the line projected onto recollection
 as if from verse (which is a woman) onto man;
“& grasping, I design. words pass, responsively to mountains, just / as
 to the night-wind, is the intertwining sea-grass.

“words / turn, will the planted moon-bloom grow, seeded with / the
mountain-grass?
“if birds still fly / above the water; if the stone-cold sand
turns warm, & the thicket flowers into speech,
“then, renewed, the clustered night will reach the sky in all directions,

6.

“& be / blown back
“to wait with
“the cricket,

“who slogs, welcoming the black
“face of moon, responsive with new laughter
“in the word-blown thicket,—
“—if the moon-warmed sand will bloom;
“if the bloom-boned bird, singing in the room
“will plant the moon-stoned sound,
“& if it be / blown back,
“singing like the moon sings, to the cricket,
“waiting;)

then the bird-blown thicket
“will have flowered like a plan

(if, blown back,

“singing comes the sea-bird.”

Thread

next,

‘in the seventh generation, cease
the orderly arrangement of your songs’

the words

remind us not to be in love with corpses,

carried in the whirlpool like a dance,
a spell where numbers of the other swimmers change
of (disappear in language) words to follow from word to word
although the stretch is trackless where the numbers were
already caught, cut, to fit impossible
equations, & construct a world toward which
to learn to face / to lift a face
toward call it a river for flowing
riverlike speech

a voice, or, watch, a play of voices

because it is not death that language loves,
but common waking after sleep;

as thought, as a breath, like a sail

takes the wind seaward,

out from edges of the world

(with human speech so rare a thing

we have to make it up). inventing an order, or finding
in foam, even in steam, mostly in ice, crystal, in skeletons, order;
in ice, skeletons

or take a whole mountain, most
is under water, but takes its name from what sticks up

& icebergs as they melt: neither like a man
who almost not thinking floats
in shallows, at midday the warm body
buoyant, or as if sinking, not knowing

that someone has straightened the bedclothes, falling asleep,

; nor not :

, where a skeleton in ice remains if it does,
where a missing child's inside a closet would have kept on turning,

'But it was only a movie, dear.'

'Everything,' said Thales. He knew.

& next to know love as unconditioned reflex of the chaos that is
there,

which is neither order nor disorder,"

thus the thread of the water until it comes to

"neither heat nor cold, but their dissolution
call compassion.

1.

because it wasn't sugar
but (a word I've found again) surprise;
& again the need to begin
in words that leave no extra taste against the

silence

is a word for meeting,
to make a horn out of gold & think of kind kings
clearing the mud of that
river, those
clouds

(what
if a man gets his knowledge from nowhere else
can he give as a name to his own

mind, or

never dissolved, by water,
drift on the river's stone bottom
like shreds of raw silk
 seeming to waken.
(because this water is not still)
the sheet-glass surface is quietly shaken
& breaks into ripples, as gulls rise
into the rooms of the hungry children
to watch the tall water close over their heads.

2.

well, old honey, back to the hard sound.
(what's keeping you?)

I think you want it too much too
somewhere as it is between the thorough
lawfulness of beehives, & on the other hand
this spiderweb that only seems to be a figure in a plane
is central: an extension of the sense of touch.

but think of the spider as in its own web trapped
(if any circumstance escapes yr notice
I am sure to be there to show you

nothing is going to happen
in this waste of sand, yr desert of
lapwings, or
flights of accidental
birds that cast such shadows toward the ground upon which
this is yr life, neither
here nor there,
this is yr life, neither
birds that cast such shadows toward the ground upon which
flights of accidental

lapwings, or
in this waste of sand, yr desert of
nothing is going to happen.

this matter, yr

everyday life. because yes
those forces were dangerous,
& this trap that we wd like to call a poem, then,
is not: the balance is yet to be struck
toward which, trapped in this web,

which is not a figure in a plane. look again. begin to see it
as a tunnel.

3.

or say that it is not love
but a secret that opens toward waking
forms out of words escaping into the morning
that force us to go looking after.

are you not hearing out of another
room of the house such laughter as if
we were children, making a game of the law

& this action, a going, a
doing, a making
to come into being
is a game, a dance, is
Lila
(the play where the law stays, is fast)

is the hard part you missed
is the stone that you wished such light out of water through clouds.

Flowerpot Sutra

“One day Buddha was about to preach a sermon. He lifted up a golden lotus flower and without saying a word showed it to the assembled monks. Among them only Mahakasyapa understood. He looked at Buddha and smiled.”

—Sokei-An, in *Cat's Yawn*

BEGINNING

to begin. to begin
now. to live.

to begin to move.

not in the direction of moving,
not in the direction of being-moved.

in the direction of moving-&-being-moved.

in the direction of not-moving-&-not-being-moved.

out. & in.

are there things to do?
there are things to be done.
there is nothing to be done. Oh
see this flower. &
smile

for this, is a way.
it cannot be spoken.
what can be spoken
are places.
to pass.

before.
it.

before the way that is the end of going about.
while being shown
the flower.
while showing oneself
the flower.
before seeing. it.
until. it.
the smile.

until the then when
I shall see that now
was also that then.

&smile.

this I know having read
it in books,
to begin.

MIDDLE PART

1.

“on!” cry the teachers, “on to the shore!
over the river’s the opposite shore!
you’ve been there before!
before!
before! and! what!
was the face that you wore there before?”

the teachers lean on their staffs, & implore
you to answer & tell them the face that you wore
on the opposite shore, before.
their voices, words unwobbling

in the vibrant air,
do not, particularly, care
if anyone is there
to listen.

in them, is nothing that they mean
but do not know they mean:
what one thinks they mean, they mean,
& more. &, so long as there is / more,
the voices will implore
& get misunderstood.

but / I

do not know
any / buddhas:

I take my unlaidd evenings' ends
to the dialectic houses of my friends,
& grow,

slow by the magic
of that connatural human love
which, like the speechless very texture
of perception, is a fact
but no one's recreation,

humanly articulate.

our voices, weaving words
between us in the solid air,
show our pain, that we must care
lest no one, or, again
lest someone, should be there

to listen;

in them, is everything we mean
& do not know we mean
& do not wish to mean
and know we must not mean:

&, there are times
when all these possibilities of meaning
these devious things, nowhere

completely recorded,
unquiet me, & wake
me to the urgent human terror
that always flutters, gently
in the bottoms of my brain:
when, if people tried to talk to me,
all the words they said would whistle & make echoes
in my head, & all their different meanings threaten me
like weapons, & change the crooning terror
to a paralysing keen: SOMETHING
SOMETHING
SOMETHING
is
GOING
GOING
GOING
to
HAPPEN.
HAPPEN.
HAPPEN.

& I. do. not. move.

not move: lest at the furthest limits
of a world turned inside out
I find unthinkable a captive, crouching & entrapped,
furtive in brainpan's / unguessable crevice,
immobilised penitent, frantic but passive,
powerless witness / at window to world
that wobbles & wavers / as runaway golden
accomplishment-body / whirls
in a frenzy
the self,
all nude / & out of its role
gulping for air in ultimate corner;
panting, & not in control.

but, consider /
turn, in ultimate corner turn

& gaze at the wall:
is not, after all,
this, in a sense,
what always
is so?

for to plain noetic intellection
there are in fact no actors: only acts;
& what we name our selves
are nonexistent / strangers
in the mansions of what process we consist in,
nowhere palpable in marrow, bone, or flesh or skin;
undiscovered when we sit or stand or walk about or sleep;
and in our thought, when once we stop to think, we find
no thinker, only thoughts.

O, we
who are / as children / to the very children
are in fact like houses, whose enormous wings
are haunted by a boogeyman.

2.

there is a question
to discuss.
its proper answer is,
to show it answerless:
not knowing what the question is
(it never was)
not hearing what the answer was
(speechless like a blanket, &
it always is)
to cut / our large & vague discomfort into parts
(which cannot be)
& worry at the parts like dogs at meatless bones,
for marrow long dried out.

3.

there is

(& there is known to be
at the turning centre / of that unmoving room
(I have talked about madness
where the urgent terrors / loom expectantly & still
(& now am talking of love
such a thing as one
(by learning & by skill
might form a magic circle of, & summon
(by going from not loving
from the populous bleak houses
of the dead & dying it,
(to loving
to its waiting incompleteness / a possible & living you
(in to being loved.

for this, the ritual act & incantation
are immanent in need,
that radically human fact,
the need we have of our completion,
whereof the art
(we do not know the needed part
must be / to recognise its signs
& then
though all its signs are shared
with something else, & one in fact
is never undecieved
perform the possibly effective act
& like a shaman. chant the act's
appropriate cantations.
for the shaman, too
depends on signs / & sets the times
for acts of magic
perhaps by noting / flight of bird
its tiny voice / that he has heard
& like us, by need;
but / the shaman has more art
the legends of his craft, that language
of the natural marks of things,

he knows
than we, who are, by need
mostly misdirected / in looking out for signs:
& while his rituals
 perplexingly effectual
astonishingly satisfy,
our ineffective ritual declines
to rote, becomes habitual gesture
of impatience & relief,
ambivalent & brief,
& we forget what was the chief
reason that we do it for.

O marrow, bone, & flesh, & skin,
let copulation be / a conjuring for intercourse,
an act, though problematical,
of sympathetic magic.

& what is problematical in love is how it spreads
its hungry & interrogating threads
all over in the body, like the brain;
how the famished questions that it asks,
 to which the amatory ritual has
 to give a semblance, or,
 the living body
of an answer, will

 unless somehow replied to
comprise themselves a mournful / incantation that at last
will summon up the shadows of a more-than-individual past
to fill the heavy air / of our unformulated need:
an obscure surly crowd that has us
prowl the reasoned streets
& tense in rented beds & howl,
or guides us
 out of individual life
forgetful to the houses of the dead.

but consider: need shows itself as a, relation

from a me that is, onto one that isn't;
& one is not / somewhere between,
but takes one's stand in the relation:

for there is
 (& there is known to be
at the whirling fulcrum / of that unbudging room
 (I have talked / at names & forms
within whose really incandescent gloom
 the objects of desire
 maintain, obscurely, their entire
existence
 (because that's all the talk there is,
that which,
 (in its measureless insistence,
brings
 back to the beginningless completion
 of one's own unthinkable not-self
all things.

ENDING

to be not in
but at the limit of
the world
 moving & being moved
 only from another point of view;
 but from one's own, neither
 moving nor being moved
leaving all particulars of motion
up to passing days, not twice, with smile,
 (what the sages teach
is easy to find hard:

to be not in
but at the limit of
the world

is not to be in any place
that can be named beforehand;
& instruction how to go
is a kind of name beforehand:

but / a voice (& nothing more
is seen
 in silences
to questions that nobody asks,
giving answers that nobody seeks
it stays, is fast,
but, when the smile
comes up like an arm out of water
& spreads out its fingers over your face;
like a hollow reed
comes, with flowering face,
follows.

Scratching

the poems that they make in hell are done with mirrors
used for traps & names like little tinkley bells for bait.
they raise up against me the ways of my destruction.
closed songs: feedback in the isolated system:
precision in inches: measurement without direction.

so you understand:

so I've given myself away:

& it's all done with mirrors. a game for shut-ins,
played in the smoky light, painful & useless,

I mean

LET ME OUT.

look, I'm going to throw my bait out with the twigs & seeds,
these are the portions the big cats reject, look

the head of a squeezey snake in moult,
sly birds in hooded cages (I could like a bird like thes
by now no more than Tobit could),
rank leaves & pickled roots from trees dug out of sumps,
statues of invented angels,
jacks-in-the-box & also jacks in the basket,
knives & other tools for mumbleypeg,
knucklebones & little rubber balls,
brassy old clappers from towers,
the bodies of the mice that ate my stash last summer
then kicked their little frames,
Irene Tavener with a bandolier of rubber ashtrays;
festoons, & paper rosettes,
with this last & stuffiest quotation, "One alone is the real, the wise
call it by many names", this means the main wheel turns
with ease on many little bearings
but the mouth of the river
devours the thread of the water/

& watch this garbage
move across the smoothness of it, shifting

A Quarrel of Minstrels

I think, as the first rain of the season falls
down soft on the street, & the silence grows thin
in the rooms of my friends, & in mine,

how the underbelly of kindness
gives in to fear like a man's skin
gives in to the shove of a shiv, so

quiet, & so quick; whose skin
gives in right away to fear, which makes love
collapse in a corner

like a partner who's poked a hot shot, or shatter
like a spinster might shatter a plate.
& it is late; & the silence is damp;

& now the silence will end,
in the rooms of my friends, & in mine.
now the talk will begin,

& the air will rush into our rooms, from outside;
& it will expand, puffed up by the heat of our separate prides,
comparing each other in speech, & rise

& grow
over our heads.

This is How the Wind Wings, Lover, On the Beach

beloved,
I cd never / be the sky
but I / cd be the weather

on top of the waves
on top of the water, lover
come dance with me, & draw
me, lover, together

and the eyes of all the other / dancers
follow us,
and the arms of all the other swimmers
swim to us

