

Peter Yates

Selected Poems



Peter Yates

November 30, 1909 [York, Ontario, Canada] –

February, 1976 [Buffalo, New York]

Yates is best known as a music critic and supported of the experimental arts in Los Angeles (his name appears frequently in the biography of Harry Partch, for example, whom he helped, and he was something of a go-between for Schoenberg and Stravinsky). He wrote poetry his entire life, and though always well-crafted, he published infrequently. A beautiful edition, *The Garden Prospect: Selected Poems*, was published by Jargon Press in 1980.

A Smaller Poem Book. Los Angeles: Anderson & Ritchie: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1946.

The Garden Prospect: Selected Poems. Charlotte: The Jargon Society, 1980.

Being Among Friends Tamed Strangers

Being among friends tamed strangers not
ungratefully warrants a belief in
if they weren't we would try to persuade them

What they are we have been and loving
cherish in them being not well founded
presuming to borrow of their needing

Make in ourselves the moral we expended
like a child wakening to the dreamed toy it hasn't
out of the love and luminous gratitude sleeping

What not to expect is wisdom enemy of bright-eyed
innocence in being needless
sleeping or waking without need of gift or hope

To the very inward curving upon itself
stilled as no night rode with no sword no wooden horse

For the Birth of a Third Child

Thanks, friend, the child is well,
Strong of a strong line, mother and father him:
Let the history that shapes in him make history.

Thanks, friend, for pain and prayer,
That have made and will direct him as you will:
And let him too have portion in pain and prayer.

Do not take him: make him: for in him the future,
Asleep before struggle, leads him against our goodness.

Son, break, make and cherish, but do not fear:
This mad world maddens many of countenance;
The fleshed round shrivels in despair;

And many that would be, many that are great hide from it:
Cruelty is their first tomb; they perish out of use.
Here is my soil, dig it; water, drink it; breathe my air.

Why Should You, Artist, Why Should You Not Dare

Why should you, artist, why should you not dare
The final agony: you are not wanted!
Bear it in the elevation of the mind;
And, if you cannot, with the spirit . . .

Rig a technique, rig out a new technique
For reason—reason is dead, the intuitive
Daylight dims in the carved halls. Rig a spirit
For a reason, like a scaffolding, or a fresh light will . . .

Why, aren't you paid for it! What gulden guild,
Artist, pays you for a living? Rig a new technique.
The invincible, the invincible will—decorator—
Out of old furnishings set us up a discreet order.

And the living will remain with Blake, Bach, Angelo,
Beethoven, saints and prophets who dared that men should live.

A Twelve-Tone Statement Of Popular Opinion In Regard To Arnold Schoenberg And His Music

If it were not for that, we could love you
Like anything, anything it were; if not
For that we like, love you.
We're for it; we could love you

Like anything, not that, if love
Were like—if for that
Could anything: it, not you, we love not.
Anything, we're for it: you like it if that

We love not like that.
If anything could, you were for it: we
Could love you for that.
Not anything like it! We were, if anything.
That you love we could like it,
If for anything, that you like, love, love.

The Snake

it is the little beautiful unseen snake which kills,
the bright asp and the coral; it is the little snake
coiled in the sun's heart, and the little coiling snake
about the ankle, where the flesh heats the wrapped coils:
teeth sink in warm flesh; then the flesh fails
and light feet trip; it is the sucking asp of the full breast, that snake,
that little dangling in the bosom chill, that sharp-toothed snake:
it is the little brilliant snake in the head which kills:

legless and spinal, ornamental worm,
in hope's color deceiving, camouflage of the sun,
you wriggling fear and calm, envenomed cone—

Pharaoh and death's bone:

FEAR, foul when most gorged and when most gorged undone:
crawling terror, maw with jagged gape,
pliant copious belly, eye, unlidded ache,
jointed in parody of bestial form

freezing the ape:

the poisonous fear I cannot flee, you snake!

Be Near Me Now, The Hour's Change Grows Strange

Be near me now. The hour's change grows strange.
Each evening prefaces a haunted morning.
Each moment history ends. Thus history ends.

And yesterday is piled against the sun:
Even today darkness, darkness is begun;
Tomorrow yields no plan.

Tomorrow is.
Against this certain all false premises
Are true, and worth's a pocketful of pennies.

Be near: the day's, the night's act will not change.
Love having been will win: you and I know it.
We have planted a good seed: this soil will grow it.

Sweet and ripe will be the fruit,
And frustrated is the weed;
our hope love nourishes
 Life that will endure love's need.

from The Garden Prospect

THE CAST EYE AT HISTORY

Can it be that in another century and place
there was calm, order, method?

O rapidly the rose
is twining up the trellis

That a great queen between unsatisfactory
remorses diligently managed, that a king
was not an ass? I fear we clothe them more kindly
than their courtiers, who saw the body undressed.

O the queens who slept with kings, what did they know
of political economy; and the kings who slipped from queens,
what could they know
of equalitarian humanity?

The pitiless philosophers philosophized
by the stream of the moment, solitary and more strait
than rulers, product of the three ways meeting
of less regally bedded but more aristocratic genes.
Is it there that thought and therefore tragedy begins?

O a dude descending a staircase
or a prize beef-bull at stud ...

What do you know! What do you know?

I commend me to my ancestors, I commend me
to my great-grandchildren and strangers,
and to theirs and relatives by marriage,
a bourgeois society of cousins.

I commend me to be examined by those shrubby moralists,
historians, biographers, myth-makers.

Here I deplore and categorize their inventions.

Nomad garrulities chute, spitting and rumbling, past my hedges.

These days preserve nobody i nobody preserves letters.

Documents, the pride of centuries, now have a term.

File me in the dead file, among the unappealed decisions.

Letter to the Poet Thomas McGrath, After His Coming to My House For a Short Visit in the Evening

You came into the garden while I was reading at the harpsichord.
From the slope below the house
you heard plainly the old-fashioned tinkling pluck
of the quills, like painted breaking glass.
The darkening pine tree bough lay on the window.
Descending and climbing the steep rock paths,
you enquiring .of flowers and she answering for them,
we three came together in the overlooking room
where we sat talking of poetry and criticism.
Neither the full cup nor the overturned cup fell between us,
nor persuading, nor explaining.
When the early evening ended we had agreed to exchange poems.

This Morning No Moon

For Melissa

This morning no moon.
Beyond my glass screens
night and day, sun and shadow
divide the colored city.
The lazy branches of the great pine
separate me from distance.
In this design of depth, accident
of nature overlaying roofs of man,
beauty comes as one sees
and before thinking.

Poetry, Hell!...

Poetry, hell! like a disease
this making poems for no one to want,
perverted prayer, prophecy, ethic of invective—
like a disease. It's hell!

If word won't live, no one can want it:
you—nor you! Must shape through its shafts like weed
the uncommon common. Everything anybody can do,
that's nothing anybody needs, or needs to do.

Frost on the rime. Poetry! a disease
you learn: cant if it isn't.
Poetry! any talent critic
can posy an edged guilt from an epic of Merlin—
Needle for a sword, Pennyfeather!—
in a cat's-cradle, doves' feet thudding in the woof.

Yet one incanted virgin pinned to Amherst
upon a cloud of unknowing heard the ghosts
of sermons singing hymns, and the iambic
gave gold. She will not be analyzed.

Epitaph for Lorine Niedecker

Poems like fieldstones,
not carved but graveled
and weathered to their shape.

