

PETER CULLEY / The Inland Empire

for George Stanley

The weak solder
of Solidarity—Zonko's
"Hang the Sock-reds!!"
in his best Queens in Victoria
under the gaze of Victoria
who looks like Mary Tod
or a bomb-wielding Avignon pope,
under the gaze of the rank & file
who can't wait for Jack Munro
to come in out of the snow
to get them off the hook
& back to Nanaimo.

*"when the poets start
it's time to leave"*

A farewell
no less permanent
for its awkwardness
& accompanying banners:
the year of living vicariously
in the unbearable light of being.

The island highway
is the tinnitus
of the landscape,
fifty words for wet snow
five words over wetter snow
breaking a stick

off another stick
on my breastbone
then banging
the lichen loose
a layer of something
is the thing itself
slurry under slush
under steel toe cow catcher
but it's not the North
not the dog of the North.

This snowball smells like fish
& down the same railroad cut
which carries the ascending whine
& keening rumble of traffic sometimes
bacon, smokes, coffee, acetone
pigshit, cowshit, frying chicken
(if less of the burger onion
startup combo casserole smell
than in years since)
weed, the horse-farm's
goat & always greenwood smoke
at the bottom of the bowl.

Yellowed Penguin pages
ordinary leaves of Donald Allen
failing transmissions from off-island
subject to frequency modulation
& infant theft, the last
ethered sunlight of Grade 11
a slice of lemon pound cake

from which the rind
had been removed.
Morse code
from a coffin.

Idea of North
Protestant North
no California lemons
bareknuckle bonhomie
pubs heated by sweat & breath
& pickled egg farts
terrycloth tonsure
cards 'til daybreak
a winter without hugs or drugs
hockey fights & hockey kisses
the rolling greyscale
of a cheap TV
into which the test pattern
has been burned—
conditional recognition
not so much a poet
as one *marked off*

as that injured aldermanic raven
walking bent through the snow &
toward the fence
with an entitled eye
to the point of death.

•

This snowball smells like expired aspirin
with diesel upchucked copperhead breath—
but then what?

I wish Captain Beefheart
had played more clarinet,
the terrible headaches I would get
after parties from being at
them too long, through orange streets
to the 7-11—plume of vapour heat
in the cold Adanac back room
digitally added with optical zoom—
On Lok tap running closed tight
walking through a big stripe
across Victoria & Hastings a big red stripe
oh it's bad in this kind of thing
when the opera lady starts to sing
& it goes all sepia, an ocarina
hand a sandstone screen,
a quarter inch of pink snow
cast iron stumps where though
they'd taken railings away for the war
Dad said we still paid & paid
getting it back in the form of blades
& Starfighters, well into the decade.

Lend-lease. The price of peace.
People that had figured out,
ways to make money, to tout.
To spiv. Cut your hand on his
wing collar, you could.

A moustache behind, a hood
a brothel creeper, a secret weeper.
A solid ten per cent
his demob suit rent.

Thus from the stage of the Commodore
the Captain turned & said

Read Wyndham Lewis
Apes of God! Apes of God!

meaning, I guess, that even
the over-egged & overdrawn
grotesque dreadnoughts
blundering bitterly through
the baking heyday pages
of the Torquemada modernism
I'm glad I missed
are more interesting
than *you* assholes—
I'm going to go home & paint!

But the Commodore bathroom
is everywhere, they only
pretend to stamp your hand
a pot flung into your face
half-amusingly
forever—never
a good town for crowds

they just up & leave you lonely
rather than bringing
the audience home
rather than just going home.

•

It's never quite clear
what they're up to
the men who live
on wires & shelves.

A shitstorm of data
a shark that walks on land
the amount of snow don't matter
to the phone in your hand.

Mahler's 1st
Jimmy Caan crossing Roebling's bridge
in a Cadillac to deliver
leaves to the Harlem River.

Bird shadow in the big holly
lost in the dust on the shade
forced air feathered melancholy
fluffs the scratch the branch made.

The men who live on wires & shelves
are mute even to themselves.

•

Tough to do
the working class
in wide screen:
the interiors
don't quite add up,
tables bump lumpy chairs bump
bumpy walls & let's face it
this potato-textured
distressed distress
is something you
don't want to see
in letterbox HD—
not meth-breather tubing
with a regional twang,
expository dentistry
soaked in tang—
all except maybe
the pearl of the litter
the squirrel-skinner
with secret pluck
& historical luck.

Tough to look though Joni
from both sides now
the imprinting's all frayed
the head's dragged up & round about
like busted bell bottoms in
a cube of splayed &
pawsmear'd plastic
heavy on the shoulders
eyes a cellular habit

lenses chipped & bouldered
tiny fingers still working
qwerty under the awning
speech replacing gum
chews television for the eyes
metamorphic sum
like watching paint dry
or foggy molecules bead
& dance in the light
from my hat
shakes her head
on the tracks.

•

Class fenced but from the
upside only
not a compound but

an obverse hedgerow Maginot
a pinball's tilted defense,
bumpers to keep the lawn

from sliding downhill
to the holler's more collar-
based trenches & redoubts, with big dogs

& smaller sightlines
curved streams
with salmon-bearing couches

thickets with frogs & birds &
valentine skunk cabbages,
clotheslined yard beasts wired tight

behind a grow so obvious—
from perennial mossy boat & car
to plastic-sheeted dowlings pyramid

with the frig-o-seal
pie container lids tied with
orange ribbon

that everyone uses
to mark off
the marked off

tidelines of floods
both frequent &
unseasonal—

that it must be a choice
like lighting the torches
for the return of the DC-3s

laden with Spam & medicine
after the storm of the century
had swept through the valley.