

## **My favourite book**

Miguel Cullen

My favourite book is *Poems 1959–2009* by Frederick Seidel (2009). The first poem in the book is called 'Boys' and deals with racism in the United States. I'd like to say that as a white South American I'm writing from a position of white privilege. The poem could be offensive to Black people. In my reading, the poem shows Seidel channelling his milieu's racism, whilst subtly moving the poem – like a deft removal man handling a grandfather clock – to a place where the entire power structure of his moneyed Southern family is both subverted and put in its place.

*Picong*, a word used in Patrick French's biography of V. S. Naipaul, can be usefully applied to Seidel's work, never so aptly as in this poem. It is a localised, Trinidadian word meaning a mischievous, pugnacious, rebarbative humour (in speech or writing), that delights in its recipient's shock.

This poem begins as a looking back through the eyes of a white establishment consciousness as we slowly gather it from a youthful boy's narrative – his 'jolt of joy' hearing his impeccably mannered father call an old black man 'boy' – but by the end we are graced with the viewpoint of a Black woman of the city who, casually, speaks of the redeeming justice of God, and with the authority of someone closer to God than any rich man.

It begins,

Sixty years after, I can still see their smiles,  
White with Negro teeth, and big with good,  
When one or the other brought my father's Cadillac out  
For us at the Gatesworth Garage.  
RG and MC were the godhead,  
The older brothers I dreamed I had.  
I didn't notice they were colored,  
Because older boys capable of being kind  
To a younger boy are God.  
It is absolutely odd  
To be able to be with God.  
I can almost see their faces, but can't quite.  
I remember how blazingly graceful they were,  
And that they offered to get me a girl so I could meet God.

There is questionable language from the beginning, then, and a sort of inherited one, actually, as if he were reciting a story to his father (Seidel's was a St Louis coal baron), a hymn-sheet prejudice which is then denied by youthful plain-sightedness for the divine in the human ('I didn't notice they were colored'). Then, we perceive this scion look disapprovingly at the decisions of his fathers – 'I remember a young man, whose name I have forgotten, / Who was exceedingly neat, / Always wearing a white shirt, / Always standing there jet-black in our living room. / How had this been allowed to happen? Who doesn't hate a goody-goody young Christian? / My father and uncle underwrote the boy's education. / '

As well as the prejudice in the language, we see the dark side to this philanthropy. The Christian, we hear, is 'exemplary, an exemplar./ But justice was far away, very far. / Justice was really an ashtray to display / the lynched carcass of a stubbed-out cigar.' With this shocking image, its dehumanised cigar-human, its vision of philanthropy showing off, and exerting its white-supremacist hegemony, we see a prime example of the way Seidel exposes and yet relieves us of feeling, at first hand, the visceral cruelty of the world and the way things really, bloodily, work in the gut (well, some people's). It's not beautiful, but further on we could see how Seidel gives the creaky edifice of power the slip and leaves us with a smile on our faces.

The equivocal tone of Seidel towards his father is apparent throughout, the father seems to be a gentleman, suavely navigating his inherited empire (it was Seidel's grandfather who was the self-made man); he's seen as sleek, opaque, (read, unloving) in his son's eyes.

His son loves him for his power, and the premise is that he yearns for him to exercise it, show himself as an alpha, throw off the gentleman-coal-baron *filis* shackles. In fact, he has the Freudian wish to see his father *lose* his effete power. Here we go: 'In labour relations with various unions, / For example, he apparently had no peer. It wasn't so much that he was generous, / I gather, but rather that he was fair. / So it was a jolt, a jolt of joy, To hear him cut the shit / And call a black man Boy. / The white-haired old Negro was a shoeshine boy. / One of the sovereign experiences of my life was my joy / Hearing my father in a fury call the man Boy. / '

And here are the final lines, within which a sort of equivalence, and a revenge, occur, in the form of a soft Southern spirituality: justice is humbly meted out. 'RG, the younger brother, was my hero who was my friend. / I

remember our playing / Catch in the rain for hours on a rainy weekend. / It  
is a question / Of when, not a question of whether, / The glory of the Lord  
shall be revealed / And all flesh shall cease altogether. / A black woman  
came up to my father. / All the colored people in this city know who you  
are. / God sent you to us. Thank god for your daddy, boy. // '

The soft crescendo acts as a razing of the earth down to equality, and the  
beauty is of the spoken voice of that woman, who sees it through the might  
of her God, who will come again to judge.

She sees Seidel senior as natural and as akin to a wind-break of ancestral  
trees – a link in a chain that is god-given, that he has not earned, that is his  
duty, denuding him of any pride, just one of the weak, another one of the  
'Boys'.

## **Miguel Cullen**

Culturally, Miguel Cullen is a Kelper (Falklander) evacuee, nourished in  
London by cocoa butter liniment.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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