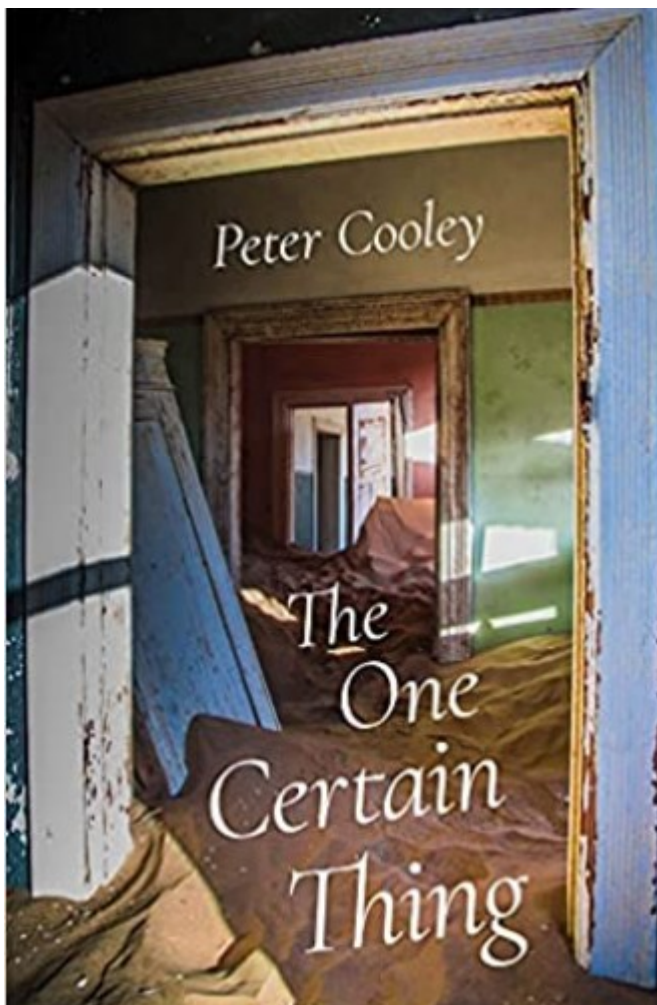


Elegies for Jacki

Poet Peter Cooley logs the year following his wife's death with courage and brutal honesty.

by [Jeannine Marie Pitas](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The One Certain Thing

By Peter Cooley

Carnegie Mellon University Press

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Death has a way of taking most of us by surprise, even when we know it is coming.

The One Certain Thing is a collection of elegies written by Peter Cooley for Jacki, his wife of more than 52 years, who died in 2018 at age 73. Poignant and lyrical, with moments of unexpected humor, this book explores the complexity of grief, a process that, contrary to popular belief, does not occur in five neatly defined stages but is instead messy and multifaceted.

The first poem, “Widower,” reveals the poetic speaker’s initial shock at his wife’s death (“I’m not a ‘widower,’ / I was ‘widowed’”) as well as his sense of helplessness:

how else can I sing with the birds
except to get up before first light again,
to lay my words along, beside, inside
the song that breaks me up, assembles me.

Neurologists have discovered that when we suffer the loss of a beloved companion or any other major life change, our brain has to adapt its physical configuration for us to be able to survive. This is part of the heartbreak we feel. Cooley’s poems log the year following his wife’s death with courage and brutal honesty.

Some of the most striking motifs that recur throughout the book are those that have to do with the daily realities of keeping house. From the cover design—which shows a wrecked home interior that is perhaps about to be rebuilt—to the images in the poems, the poetic speaker’s domestic life becomes the locus of his grief. He takes comfort in doing laundry, he struggles to give away his wife’s clothes, he walks through “the furniture’s furniture / which is our past, the rooms of grief, / grief’s curtains you sewed and grief’s rugs you bought.”

The speaker’s sorrow appears to hit its greatest depths in the middle of the book. But it is also at this point that he begins to take tender comfort in his wife’s memory:

You keep me passing through the immovables.

You, a touch grazing my arm—both of us have put here.
We pretend you’re still alive. Both of us together, lying.

Remember you said once you would go to the end
of the earth for me? Is that where we are now?

Many people know humor to be a component of grieving, perhaps as a defense against the pain and a way of transcending it. William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* achieves this dark comedy brilliantly. In a less sardonic way, Cooley also seizes the opportunity to laugh when he can. In a poem entitled "This Didn't Happen, It Could Happen," Cooley refers to Raymond Carver's short story "Neighbors," in which a male character puts on women's clothes. Addressing the reader, the speaker imagines doing this with his wife's clothes:

I loved her in the Valentine-red blouse
I bought her, black underwear so skimpy
it was hardly there for me to peel off,
see-through fishnet. I loved her in the teal blue blouse
of her own purchase. I could have donned them all.
I could say I allowed this house, the widower's
to take in my full display. Would I embarrass you?

Christians profess that death is not the end of the story. But Cooley makes it clear that there is no joyous resurrection without the pain of the cross. "Our cross," the poetic speaker recalls,

we bought together at the convent's Christmas bazaar,
our cross holds up these words you've brought to me.
Hanging it back up in the repainted room,

after the fumigation and new blue,
I chipped the paint, the plaster. The cross—
it waits for me to finish singing this. The cross—

the cross is still not finished with us yet.

And yet, there is hope in these poems too. In a poem titled "Visitation: the Eighth Sacrament," Cooley notes how "dawn throws down its crowns, the blinding luminous, / shaping the fractured world into unbrokenness."

At the 2019 Catholic Imagination Conference, poet Dana Gioia remarked that there are few poems written about the “long, good marriage.” In addition to being an elegiac response to death, *The One Certain Thing* is also an ode to lasting conjugal love. Cooley’s devotion to his wife is revealed to be deep, without lapsing into sentimentality.

Perhaps one flaw is that because he often addresses the absent wife as “you,” the speaker is limited in how much he can describe her to the reader. In these short lyric poems, she does not always come alive as a character. The focus is on the emotional state of the lover rather than an evocation of the beloved.

Nevertheless, Cooley brilliantly and poignantly captures the day-to-day reality of domestic gestures of affection, from an Advent calendar that she made for him to robust sexual intimacy to the nurturing of children into adulthood. The speaker also suggests that his wife was a principal factor in influencing his religious conversion at the age of 30.

It is somewhat surprising to me that, even today, we do not frequently see a full-length collection of poems by a male poet dedicated completely and fully to the topic of conjugal love and mourning the death of a spouse. *The One Certain Thing* describes a beautiful marriage characterized by lasting love. This collection is a powerful tribute—not necessarily to a particular person but to the conjugal bond itself, a bond built and sustained by 52 years of daily small acts of care and devotion.