

Classic Poetry Series

John Forbes

- 21 poems -

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John Forbes (1 September 1950 - 23 January 1998)

John Forbes was an Australian poet.

Forbes was born in Melbourne, Australia, but during his childhood his family lived in northern Queensland, Malaya and New Guinea. He went to Sydney University and his circle of friends included the poets Robert Adamson, Martin Johnston, and John Tranter. It was at this time that the work of the American poets Ted Berrigan, John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara made a strong and lasting impression on him.

He returned to live in Melbourne in the late 1980s, where he became the poetry editor of *Scripsi*. His friends around this time included the poets Gig Ryan, Laurie Duggan and Alan Wearne.

Forbes died in Melbourne of a heart attack, aged 47.

Works:

Collected Poems, 1970-1998; 2001, Brandl & Schlesinger, ISBN 1-876040-27-0.

Damaged Glamour; 1998, Brandl & Schlesinger, ISBN 1-876040-10-6.

New and Selected Poems; 1992, Angus & Robertson, ISBN 0-207-16951-9.

The Stunned Mullet; 1988, Hale & Iremonger.

Stalin's Holidays; 1981, Transit Poetry.

Drugs; 1979, Black Lamb Press.

On the Beach; 1977, Sea Cruise Books.

Tropical Skiing; 1976, Angus & Robertson.

Admonition

Be still, my beating heart, & you, body
Don't go banging into that tree—
The one the girl turned into, back
When the gods were like they are
In the Collected Poems of A.D. Hope.
& arms stop waving and legs don't dance
As if an invisible band was playing
A Fitzroy version of 'Picture This'.
Consider instead this cool Melbourne
Morning & the iconic self it suggests;
The laundromat, the review you haven't
Written yet, or choosing 5 dead certs
For an all-up bet (& when they win
You blow the lot on bills and rent!)
That's Grace enough this mild autumn day, so
Like I say, Oh palpitations, go away!

John Forbes

After The Bombs We Invent The Future

Let's paint the ideal supper on the back of
our heads where the poem is a type of hole
rope tricks and grit allow you to descend—

we hope the earth has a centre, a fruity niche
safe from the spiked shoes of the mob; when
you cross to the pub
millions of hopeful athletes knock you over.

Can you feel their lurid needs, now that
the speed of light's become obsolete, now
the plankton is arising towards the oven?

Where did you get that hat, Tarzan? Like miners
caught in a war of time capsules we quail
before your green fedora, your dreams.

Their glycerine slowly covers Mt Everest
& without peaks, how will the survivors
invent a language? Oral hygiene be with us now & defend!

So polish your neglect of tennis, for soon
even casual knacks will yellow with nostalgia,
like the bandwagon of heaven's favourites

or nicknaming your emotions. Otherwise invest
in dilemmas: the better you forget the days of jam
the more relics will surprise you.

Still, after the Age of The Opposable Thumb there'll
be a lot to discover—will dolphins enjoy bingo?
Were the great comic operas written in perfect order?

John Forbes

Antipodean Heads

I wish we could be nicer
like the Americans

instead we are caught
halfway between

a European sense of style
you can always be at home in

& the Aborigines' knack
of passing the time—they know

that nothing matters too much
between now & forever, unlike

the industrious American
who looks around & sees

that Fate applies her chisel
to his own particular face

so when he stares back at Her
he's warm & essential

not reaching for a quip or a flagon
because he knows these things
are part of what he is

the way a mountain
is carved with the heads
of his Presidents

& we are left to wonder
what shape another 200 years

will leave Ayers Rock in.

John Forbes

Anzac Day

A certain cast to their features marked
the English going into battle, & then, that

glint in the Frenchman's eye meant 'Folks
clear the room!' The Turks knew death

would take them to a paradise of sex
Islam reserves for its warrior dead

& the Scots had their music. The Germans
worshipped the State & Death, so for them

the Maximschlacht was almost a sacrament.
Recruiting posters made the Irish soldier

look like a saint on a holy card, soppy & pious,
the way the Yanks go on about their dead.

Not so the Australians, unamused, unimpressed
they went over the top like men clocking on,

in this first full-scale industrial war.
Which is why Anzac Day continues to move us,

& grow, despite attempts to make it
a media event (left to them we'd attend

'The Foxtel Dawn Service'). But The March is
proof we got at least one thing right, informal,

straggling & more cheerful than not, it's
like a huge works or 8 Hour Day picnic—

if we still had works, or unions, that is.

John Forbes

Ars Poetic

I wanna be sedated
The Ramones

Raving against the space
where the poem sounds
like a revolving door that
makes the noise a car makes
bumping into the dole—
that's the target. And don't
forget President Kennedy
travelling on the SS France
things are more like
they are now than they have
ever been before,
clear somehow, like
physical fitness. You
celebrate your indifference
with a packet of lollies
or a Ton-Ton Macoute
haircut. It's almost
pure debauchery, as prayer
is for example: your heart
is full of hatreds more
intricate than fractures
in shatter-proof glass.
Put a brick through
a real-estate agent's window
and it bounces back
and cuts you. That's what
I mean about targets. Or
you can read Mayakovsky / he's
a sort of Communist Bruce Dawe

John Forbes

Death, An Ode

Death, you're more successful than America,
even if we don't choose to join you, we do.
I've just become aware of this conscription
where no one's marble doesn't come up;
no use carving your name on a tree, exchanging vows
or not treading on the cracks for luck
where there's no statistical anomalies at all
& you know not the day nor the hour, or even if you do
timor mortis conturbat me. No doubt we'd
think this in a plunging jet & the black box recorder
would note each individual, unavailing scream
but what gets me is how compulsory it is—
'he never was a joiner' they wrote on his tomb.
At least bingeing becomes heroic & I can see
why the Victorians
so loved drawn out death-bed scenes:
huddled before our beautiful century, they knew
what first night nerves were all about.

John Forbes

Event Horizon

The Greeks invented the dust cover only to paint it / but we think of art as an alibi & see through it. So now what's around us is no longer just what's beyond the pencil—charm is the property of pretending this isn't the case. Shall I borrow a morning suit from my uncle? What is it that makes shoes sensible? All this gets sprayed with beer or goes on a walking tour. Others abandon the pretence that will swallow them whole & organise a season ticket for their lost appreciation that returns to bother them like the ghost on a bad TV. But once gone their betting-slip accuracy withers to an unstable hunch in the morning: 'All that we truly admire won't crack if left out in the sun, although such art will trap us even more than its consumers—as if their attention was our only idea of light & we were like a piece of tissue snatched from a box of Kleenex. Thanks to this no space remains for us to project ourselves into & we are on the outside, forever & here more beautiful than any illusion or act of love perfect because not breathing on a Greek vase.

John Forbes

Four Heads & How To Do Them

The Classical Head

Nature in her wisdom has formed the human head
so it stands at the very top of the body.

The head—or let us say the face—divides into 3,
the seats of wisdom, beauty & goodness respectively.

The eyebrows form a circle around the eyes, as
the semicircles of the ears are the size of the

open mouth & the mouth is one eye length from
the nose, itself the length of the lip & at the top

the nose is as wide as one eye. From the nose
to the ear is the length of the middle finger

and the chin is $2\frac{1}{2}$ times as thick as the finger.
The open hand in turn is as large as the face.

A man is ten faces tall & assuming one leaves out
the head the genitals mark his centre exactly.

The Romantic Head

The Romantic head begins with the hands cupped
under the chin the little fingers resting on the nose
& the thumbs curling up the jaw line towards the ears.

The lips are ripe but pressed together as the eyes
are closed or narrowed, gazing in the direction of
the little fingers. The face as a whole exists to gesture.

The nose while beautiful is like the neck, ignored,
being merely a prop for the brow that is usually
well developed & creased in thought—consider the lines

'the wrinkled sea beneath him crawls' locating the centre
of the Romantic head above the hairline & between the ears;
so the artist must see shapes the normal eye is blind to.

This is achieved at the top of the cranium where the skull
opens to the air, zooms & merges with its own aura.
Here the whole diurnal round passes through. In this way

the dissolution the quivering chin & supported jaw seemed
to fear, as the head longed for, takes place. The head, at
last one with the world, dissolves. The artist changes genre.

The Symbolist Head

Love Poem

Spent tracer flecks Baghdad's
bright video game sky

as I curl up with the war
in lieu of you, whose letter

lets me know my poems show
how unhappy I can be. Perhaps.

But what they don't show, until
now, is how at ease I can be

with military technology: e.g.
matching their feu d'esprit I classify

the sounds of the Iraqi AA—the
thump of the 85 mil, the throaty

chatter of the quad ZSU 23.
Our precision guided weapons

make the horizon flash & glow
but nothing I can do makes you

want me. Instead I watch the west
do what the west does best

& know, obscurely, as I go to bed
all this is being staged for me.

John Forbes

Ode To Karl Marx

Old father of the horrible bride whose
wedding cake has finally collapsed, you
spoke the truth that doesn't set us free—
it's like a lever made of words no one's
learnt to operate. So the machine it once
connected to just accelerates & each new
rap dance video's a perfect image of this,
bodies going faster and faster, still dancing
on the spot. At the moment tho' this set up
works for me, being paid to sit and write &
smoke, thumbing through Adorno like New Idea
on a cold working day in Ballarat, where
adult unemployment is 22% & all your grand
schemata of intricate cause and effect
work out like this: take a muscle car &
wire its accelerator to the floor, take out
the brakes, the gears the steering wheel
& let it rip. The dumbest tattooed hoon
—mortal diamond hanging round the Mall—
knows what happens next. It's fun unless
you're strapped inside the car. I'm not,
but the dummies they use for testing are.

John Forbes

Ode To Tropical Skiing

After breakfast in the Philippines
I take a bath

& it's a total fucking gas

Enjoy the ice cream, Gerald,
the sun sparkling
on its white frostiness
is the closest you'll ever get to St Moritz
racing up the tiny snow fields on the side of a pill
as beside you the young girl's
mirrored goggles reflect all Switzerland
like a chocolate box at the speed of sound
& like the ashtray he/she you & it
are a total fucking gas

Asleep in
the milk bars
daylight saving annuls our tuxedo
& happy to breathe again
like a revived dance craze
we gulp fresh air, our speeches to the telephone
so various,
so beautiful—
who loves at close range
like they do thru a tube?
& when the sun polishes the wires gold then invisible
a million cheer-up telegrams
collapse in the snow
while Mandy & I have a glass of Coca-Cola
as we fly past the moon &
after the piano goes to sleep in our arms
we wake up
& it's a total fucking gas
Was that a baby

or a shirt factory?
no one can tell in this weather, for tho
the tropics are slowly drifting apart & a
vicious sludge blurs
the green banks of the river, a chalet
drifts thru the novella where I compare thee
to a surfboard lost in Peru,
flotsam like a crate of strong liquor
that addles our skins
& when they bump
it's a total fucking gas

John Forbes

you've worked that one out,
now that you've got a flag of your own.
So here's some tips for the future
i.e. the past considered as farce: be absolute & suave
& know that what they gave you when they took your land
is just a foretaste of what you'll get
now that your religious imagery looks subtle on a fabric.
Next week I'll do the convicts & how
George the Third was so much the king across the water
you had to piss yourself, standing up & drinking,
to be a secret Jacobite.

4

Speckled drongoes coo in the margins
parodying your abruptly tailored speech
& their singular point is this: the past
is like an Overseas no one's gone to
although we get a deluge of holiday snaps,
each one scrawled on to tell us what it is
(my two favourites are that blinded digger
being led off somewhere by his mates,
& my grandmother, with her mother, posed
in front of the forward gun turret
of HMAS Australia—it could be a cardboard
cut-out compared to them). But now
you are listening to the Speckled Drongo,
its myth of content brought to you
by Australian Armed Forces Radio,
broadcasting from RAAF Butterworth—
Message reads as follows: Message ends.

5

later,
& like any poet
avoiding myth & message
to fake a flashy ode, consider
what model of Australia as a nation
could match the ocean, or get your desk
to resemble a beach /
it would have to function
like Tom Roberts' Opening of the

Federal Parliament, our nation being
a sort of awkward, academic machine—
can't you see the feathers in my hat
& my gold striped pantaloons
as I jot this down
in the open-cut sestina form,
developing like a back-yard vegetable bed
bordered by upturned bottles,
nostalgia for a national style?
'Oh, my hat!' said the ADC.
'If I hold this pose much longer I'll collapse!'

6

Is this why you want to be primitive
but still an explorer,
blowing
on a conch shell in the early dawn
before the bodies scream under the keel
& the paddles flash out
to begin their fragile navigation
towards New Zealand?
Instead a bay surrounds you
like a gentle abrasive with something in it
that slowly sculpts your face—
you notice
each feature as it emerges,
empty as you imagined but expectant
with a blank, cut-up sense
of what your vocation is going to be,
glimpsed in the light
coming through the half-open shutters
in the lounge bar of the Coogee Bay Hotel
where you first dreamt up
this model of the Ocean
& watched it slide, slowly at first,
down the beach & into the surf.

John Forbes

Popular Classics

there's an end to sex
it's like the alphabet but simpler
and for you, all there is
and for you too
this gets clearer day by day
and the background music gets louder,
majestic & tender or at least
suggesting you feel that way,
as if you were strapped to a plank
that's floating out to sea—
not riding the surf but less directly mimetic,
a function of tides and currents,
not the waves—
you go where a history of flotsam sends you,
an extended metaphor covered in barnacles
and on your way to comic fame
where falling in love
becomes a theory of presence,
as if each bit of sea wrack
whitening above the high-tide line
knew what the flesh is heir to
and why
like a vague rehearsal, you were there.

John Forbes

Rocket To Rome

Read about the Goliard Poets
so long dead & so like you—

sile philomela pro tempore
surge cantilena de pectore

and think how little you deserve
the kisses of the Muse you serve,

play rock'n'roll for hours
until the neighbours cower

& the man downstairs complains
(& what a shame you can't explain

how Joey Ramone's Italian too—
the first worth listening to

since Rocco Scotellaro, or say
you're in love with someone new

who's like Italian to you—
beautiful and out of reach). Anyway,

replay Suzi is a Headbanger
or Rock, Rock, Rockaway Beach,

then get out the dictionary
& translate yourself to sleep.

John Forbes

Scottische

<i>just a souvenir
of a terrible year </i>
The Sundays

where are the bluebells
& the blank deck of cards

the children's toys
left out in the rain?

go, & sort through your words
for an explanation

why the face in the mirror
mimics pain.

grief is a house
with an open fire,

warm bed, swept floor
& up to date magazines—

you're terrific, you're great
you run in the mornings

& hurt

like the cold is proof
you can feel

but can you imagine
'Flora Macdonald Goes Surfing'?
no, me neither

& just this phrase
brings my pain to an end

by mocking you either, (& not

not when I see
how much I'm the same).

so besides goodbye
it's too cold to keep typing

& Scotland's about to play France
in the Rugby World Cup—

a match they almost
deserve to win—

& the bagpipes swirl louder

finally free & you're
from that girl who's only
—like a Platonic Ideal but lonely—
waiting for me,
from that girl in my head
so witty & pretty
& just as senti-
mentally Scots as me,
that girl you don't,
 & more's the pity,
that girl you don't
happen to be.

John Forbes

The Best Of All Possible Poems

like a dozing shark
or a very quiet limb
waiting for the lecture
to make it a star the
best of all possible
poems relaxes asleep
in the tropical surf
beginning near the
right hand corner of
the room. meanwhile
just outside my window
inter-island trade
begins: their supply
of coconuts is endless

John Forbes

To The Bobbydazzlers

American poets!
you have saved
America from
its reputation
if not its fate
& you saved me
too, in 1970
when I first
breathed freely
in Ted Berrigan's
Sonnets, escaping
the talented earache of Modern
Poetry.

Sitting

on the beach I
look towards you
but the curve
of the Pacific
gets in the way
& I see stars
instead knocked
out by your poems
American poets,
the Great Dead
are smiling
in your faces.
I salute their
luminous hum!

John Forbes

TV

dont bother telling me about the programs
describe what your set is like the casing the
curved screen its strip of white stillness like
beach sand at pools where the animals come
down to drink and a native hunter hides his
muscles, poised with a fire sharpened spear
until the sudden whirr of an anthropologist's
hidden camera sends gazelles leaping off in
their delicate slow motion caught on film
despite the impulsive killing of unlucky Doctor
Mathews whose body was found three months later
the film and the camera intact save for a faint,
green mould on its hand-made leather casing

John Forbes