

Classic Poetry Series

Ken Bolton
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Ken Bolton(1949 -)

Ken Bolton (born 1949) is an Australian poet and art critic.

Bolton was born in Sydney and studied fine arts at the University of Sydney, where he also tutored. In the late 70s he edited the poetry magazine *Magic Sam* and began the small press *Sea Cruise Books* with Anna Couani. His first book of poems, *Four Poems*, was published in 1977. In 1982 he moved to Adelaide to work at the Experimental Art Foundation.

He has since edited the literary magazine *Otis Rush* and collaborated with poet John Jenkins on a number of books of poetry. His *Selected Poems* was published by Penguin in 1992 and he edited Brandl & Schlesinger's *Homage to John Forbes*. His criticism has appeared in *Photofile*, *Art and Text*, *Art Monthly* and *Art & Australia* among other periodicals; and Wakefield Press has published his monograph on the contemporary sculptor Michelle Nikou.

His latest collection (*At The Flash & At The Baci*, 2006) has been described as "prov[ing] to us that Ken Bolton is a prime example of a poet breaking new ground in Australian poetry."

phrase, that I guess
 comes to mind
 as I recall

what little I know
 of the American artist —
 19th century? or

very early 20th?
 I visualize small
 emblematic paintings

typically
 with a dark image
 centered — briefly

silhouetted —
 against a dark background —
 a sort of horse-&-rider

against a storm? (The image
 my mind remembers
 may even be

some late sketch by Moreau
 — you know: the late,
 atypical unfinished

heavily impasto
 fragments that
 art historians love to suggest

the Fauves might have seen —
 miles from the
 stillness, & detail,

of Oedipus & the Sphinx
 say — or “in most ways”
 Anyway this is miles

from Ryder. And I am
 briefly sure

it is Ryder I can imagine

& the Moreau too — his
horse & rider

in reds & blues

lemon yellow, the American's
black & deeply

varnished colours — browns —

against a discoloured
white, or cream

& a larger dark ground.

Tho who knows?

Ryder

is not really our business

a reverberation of US
culture: local news

like CNN, the

American breakfast program
we get at night. What a

hopeless analogy. Ryder is better.

Moreau —

well, I like to bear in mind
his presence

along with Manet &
that revolution. Tho

give me Manet

any day, if I had
to choose. Tho, um, you don't.

I like the portrait

— full face, almost filling
the frame — of Moreau

in a bowler hat

high collar, & tie, narrow
moustache — very
1900s modern

by Roualt (pupil
& friend) that is
slightly 'cubist':

the one eye furthest from us
— it is three-quarter on — & that
whole plane, of cheek

& wide wide forehead,
swells out, flattens,
just slightly.

It seems an irony
of history —
or perhaps the irony

was Roualt's. It was
mine too eventually
(though less originally)

when I did a copy
of it . . .
that I liked

& seem to have lost now
Misplaced. I haven't seen it
for a while

(I could do it
again.) I take the rest
of the tea

& toss it on the
pot-plant, beneath the goldfish.

The plant had dried out.

The fish wake slightly
 & begin to move —
 at this angle

a few vague red shapes,
 a diaphanous white,
 in a tank that looks

dark

Ken Bolton

(the Kirkman Guide To The Bars Of Europe, Their Music, Their Service, Views Etcetera

Tony Kirkman—What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in Europe?

Me—I'm going, I'm going. Next week.

Tony Kirkman—Tell us about the bars!

for Barbara & Tony

The Kirkman Guide
to the bars of Europe
begins in that city so
very much at Europe's centre—
though like the perfect bar,
where foot traffic is permitted
but not the noise of cars—not
too vertiginously at the
absolute centre
of the working world, not
London, Paris or Berlin—
which, though not like bars,
host many bars themselves—
but Rome. And where better
than the raffish, the louche,
the frankly insouciant Bar
San Callisto?

Nowhere, that's where! Dubious,
but confident, seedy but nonchalant,
the Bar San Callisto
issues its challenge.

What to have there? A Strega. And,
yes, we could consider the bars of Europe
thus: the best drinks
& where to have them? A Cynar
in The Ghetto Bar of Trieste, a whiskey sour
in Prague's amusing Lucerna Cafe,

an ouzo at Madrid's Chicote,
or the Bar Cock. A retsina—
but you can only get those in Greece...
Or Australia. Australia
is not Europe. Is Greece? We're thinking
'continental' Europe. Old World charm.
But if Prague, & London, Edinburgh,
Cork & Dublin—why not Greece? A toast,
on Ithaka—or is it Hydra?—
to the Johnstons!

The Callisto is not the bar for everyone.
Is it too rickety & ephemeral? Can
a celebrity sit there? No. The
San Callisto refuses the look extended,
say, by Harry's Bar, once, The Bar Americain—
for your Hemingway, your Robbie Williams,
for your Nick Cave, your Adam Cullen—
too real for one generic type, not
real enough for the other. Existential.
The San Callisto has no 'amplifying' effect
for the personality that might require it—
Ashley Crawford? Robert Gray?

#

Ah, a sunny morning at the Bar San Callisto!

#

Outside the Bar San Callisto in the early evening
chill.

A moment ago it was dusk, people drifted
from the square, hurrying home. Now, an hour
or so later, those out for dinner,
or a drink at a bar, throng the square—
& stare, some of them, at you.
Ripped. None of them comes
to the San Callisto, so stern its charm.
You drink on alone while inside a vocal
cohort of drunks shout & laugh, bathed
in its light. Better for you to sit tight—
tight in one sense & tight in the other—
&, because of this, plan your next move
with caution. Another inch of Strega

could be incapacitating
& you should get home. Deep breaths
(the advice of John Jenkins)
seem both refreshing, in the cool,
& giddy-making. The voyage will be
a test & an adventure. Another afternoon
at the San Callisto.

I have to laugh.

Laurie at the San Callisto? But no Internet,
no jukebox! Pam?
Pam would find its sham quality
'de trop'. Gig? Too self conscious—
fearing to appear 'taken in'. Peter B. on the other
hand,
likes it, I know. And I can see him there—
see him only in 'my mind's eye'—
but he 'resembles' there
the same Peter we see everywhere,
even in Melbourne—so my
mind's eye's view is accurate.
He wears a hat or maybe a beret
& reads the film criticism, say,
of Manny Farber—as you would
at the San Callisto. John Tranter,
another major poet, sits quite near,
oblivious, having a Campari Soda, a good drink
to have at the Callisto. "Tranter!" says Lyn T,
who has just entered, & looms in the doorway,
"So this is where you are! What a dump!" Peter Bakowski
frowns.

David Kennedy, dressed a little like
Richard Harris in *This Sporting Life*,
though benign, benign, sits in
the San Callisto. What does he read?
Who knows? Perhaps he is marking
essays. But no—he would not bring work
to the San Callisto. I might.
I do. But then, I'm the kind of loon
who makes life work. I buy David
another beer, a Guinness, not the 'usual thing'

at the Bar San Callisto, but he is
my English friend & I want him in character.

Orson Welles. I see the Harry Lime figure.
Authentic? In-authentic? Neither.
It was not the point. That is
the Bar San Callisto's attitude. Is
the Bar San Callisto authentic? Are you
kidding? Is it not? Sure it isn't. It is
the Bar San Callisto—just as you left it.
I think the Welles figure was Alan Wearne.
I have been astral travelling. It is
the Bar San Callisto—"just as you left it".
Someone has swept. So the butt-ends
are not embarrassingly in the way, the 'offing'.
It is itself almost detritus. If Italy
would only clean up its act it would be gone!
Is that fair to say? It may be true.
Berlin has no San Callisto. A San Callisto in Britain
would be fashionable for fifteen minutes.
Then people would move on. Used up. In Paris
it would become dowdy, or sad,
& upgrade & succeed at being something else,
the bar Borgelt or Bougogne or something suggestive
of new cars & insurance. The Bar San Callisto—
the real one, in Rome, exists. Is it 'a Gilligan
among bars'? No, Steve Kelen. No, its clientele objects
(some, apparently, care), It is not sappy. So who, what?
Watteau's Gilles, Stan Laurel? No. Yes. I don't know.
Could you repeat the question?

But having bought it—did I buy this?—Kennedy may have
bought it, or Tranter. I see that they are gone. A Cynar,
or a three inch yellow Strega—where will you
sit, inside or out? That is the problem, not such a
bad problem. Where will you sit in the San Callisto,
time passing differently in each of these two realities,
inside & out, where? It would be good to sit
with Ava Gardner, outside, or Johnny Depp. But inside:
it would be terrible. It is always terrible to sit
inside—a hell interminable—& which every minute
calls for all your attention—

the sort of thing, probably, Sartre hated, though it puts you on your mettle. Are you tough enough for the San Callisto? You look at the photo someone has pasted up, of Howlin' Wolf hunched forward, boxing gloves raised & full of menace— or the neighboring photo of Muhammad Ali fronting Howlin' Wolf's band—plainly someone has made a switch—& the existential threat, the challenge, is terrific.

I remember someone—crazy Robert Hughes?—characterized the bar Van Gogh drank in as a place where "a man could go mad". The Bar San Callisto? Yes, it is maddening. (Women will note It is always "a man"!)

Something has occurred to me, that has occurred to me before—days, minutes ago?—it reminds me slightly of the fly-paper, the hopeless futility of it. An each-way bet. Did it catch flies, attached there, hanging, from the fan of the San Callisto? The futility—death, death, death! Some have died, stuck to the shellac. Some haven't, slowly spinning, in the wind from the fan, where Howlin' Wolf, Muhammed Ali, Joe Louis challenge one & the table needed something additional shoved under one leg to make it balance—a bit of ear would do it—& the bicycle racing team or soccer team from 1974, combative, implacable, somehow raise the ante & an old woman comes in, sits down opposite, in black & moments later you are outside the San Callisto & stumbling from it, a foreigner, & it is good to be a foreigner—to use Hemingway's formulation—abashed, unnecessary, challenged—like someone in Fiesta—but Australian, because that is how you do things, as if the spirit were an eye & the Callisto a burnt stick poked in it—but the spirit is better than this & you have learned something.

(Learned not to come back to the San Callisto till you can claim, plausibly, to have forgotten what took place here. So maybe not tomorrow.)

A bloated, inebriate Russel Crowe, an etherized,
botoxed Nicole Kidman. Emma Balfour. At the
San Callisto? Maybe. Emma, buy Nicole a toasted
sandwich. I might buy Ava one—or Anna
Banens-Kenneally: she looked real at the San Callisto.
I see her outside. Now. Hey, Frontein!

Does this guide mean to say
the San Callisto Bar is the only bar in Italy?
No, in Lecce, for example,
in the square, a number of pleasant
watering-holes abide & beckon. Further North,
in Trieste, the Ghetto Bar is a nice place to be,
pleasantly situated & drawing
a very nice crowd of friendly people.
One night I sank quite a number
of rather large Cynars there—
a curious drink to order at all
at that hour, perhaps, & in quantity, from
an Italian point of view. But
the Ghetto crowd were amused.

Cynar might constitute a sort of test case.
In Split the waiter refused
to acknowledge that he knew it—
“We have no Cynar—whatever that is!”—
though one’s finger found it on the menu—
the same menu the waiter continued to put out
on all the tables. You can buy Cynar
at the Bar San Callisto.

In Berlin one longs to stand
proud & tough & worldly, like Beckmann
in his famous self-portrait, or slump,
debauched & frowzy, like Fassbinder—
which requires no suit or bow-tie, there is
that to be said for it—and drink good wine,
or whiskey. Berlin has come a long way, since
Laforgue’s time. He would hardly recognise it.
(He would find it much improved,
though disconcertingly modernized.)

(By the same token, he would hardly recognize Paris, either.) I look out the door of the Alt Berlin, paradoxically a Negroni in my hand.

The Negroni is not such a great drink—
but it was mentioned often in the books of my youth,
that I read to develop sophistication,
so I try it. No, I cannot see the point.
A cowboy walks past, in modern Berlin—
the sort of outlandishness
Laforgue would deplore—would have—and I am
almost with him, on that, except
Dennis Hopper, in *The American Friend*, dressed that way,
a film set in Germany—
& in the modern era—pace Laforgue, & in fact
who knows how Laforgue is dressed 'these days'?—
you can do this thing. This guy has.
I see with surprise, but not quite surprise,
it is Richard & Suzie.
Suzie is dressed strikingly—but 'normally'—& says,
"All this way, to Europe, to drink Negronis?"
Richard says, "Let me buy you another!
Or are you switching?" Noting my discomfort.
We place our orders. It is great to be in Berlin,
at Munz Strasse's Alt Berlin, with them,
myself again, not Max Beckmann.

#

On August Strasse is the Hackbarth,
for hanging out after openings, also
The Ballhaus Mitte, formerly of old
East Berlin, lovely front garden, with benches,
& upstairs an old & faded ballroom, with ornate mirrors
whose reflective powers are nil
into which you may peer, glass in hand,
& wonder where your soul has left for, & will it
'return', will you be Audie Murphy when it does,
or Giorgio di Chirico, Zazu Pitts or Stendhal? John
Meillon?
Can mirrors do that,
or only with enough Jameson's

famous Irish whiskey? Each glass is like the last but tells you something different.

On Berlin's Karl Marx Allee is
Cafe Moskau. It caters to those
with a special nostalgia for the 'East'.
I have none—though I recently purchased
this pack of Sprachloss cigarettes. 'Speechless'
the name translates as, which I love
for its suggestion of emphysema,
the Trabant of cigarettes. I don't smoke
but I like the packet—like the
Ardath of my youth. Hip & expensive—
but if you can't resist the idea
of drinking in a former Czech or
East German travel agent's—
further down Karl Marx Allee is the CSA Bar.
What should you have? Stolychnaya, perhaps.
Or a Mickey Finn. Ha ha, the Cold War & its
Maxwell Smart ways.

Paris!—speaking of spies—a prosecco
or a Ricard at Le Varenne,
on Rue de Varenne,
where Harry Mathews lives.
A common sight—Mathews
drinking with his cryptic friend,
Georges Perec.

In Budapest, where I went in 1992:
I don't remember the name of the bar.
It was in a small cellar. The tables
were in vaulted stone arches. And it
was full of Hungarian intellectuals
in heated discussion. You can tell them from
Australian intellectuals by their tall
foreheads, but you can't tell them
this way from other Hungarians—
they all have the tall foreheads,
the rather fine features, the clear skin:
think chess, madness, manic depression.
I will have what they're having.

In Lisbon's Pavilhao Chines, on Rua Dom Pedro V,
the bar is full of curiosities—tin soldiers,
model trains, hats, model planes. The effect,
'paradoxically', is to force you upon yourself—
which is why I go to bars anyway
(Hullo, who are you? It's me you fool,
I've come back to claim you,
or to touch base at any rate—
haven't you had enough?)—
at Pavilhao Chines
there is the sudden urge
to dust, to order a drink,
sweep all the stuff into a sack
& clear off, before the drink comes.
Then you breathe out, you drink the drink
& go somewhere—the Mirador de Graca or Casa do Alentejo,
which are pretty, frankly,
& where you can have fun
& scuttle home, even late at night,
without too much hissing from the lecherous men
if you've become a woman, as maybe I have become
with all this drinking—Imogene Coca, Madeline Kahn,
Sarah Crowest, Thelma Todd. Vinho Verde
did this? Anyway, to quote my friend Dave Glazbrook,
"There's a little Audie Murphy
in every girl", & I check my knuckle-dusters
are in my purse, order
another wine, cast a final look
over the gardens, palm trees, moorish arches, the lemon
& olive trees that my heart loves so much,
toss back my drink & make my way out.
I push the waiter hard in the back
as I pass—now why did I do that—
he pulled my pigtails in another life? I start to run
as I hear the crash & cry of surprise,
back to my apartment in Mouraria
in lovely Lisbon. What a night!

The waiter, actually, looked like
Tony Kirkman! Kirkman, you got me into this,
asking for an account of the bars of Europe.

But was it Tony?

In Newcastle, England, there's the Bodega.
A grand old losers' club. I was talking to a trust-fund
Scandinavian artist there one night,
when who should walk in
but Suzie Treister. I bought her an Australian
white wine & we got along famously—me, Suzie, & Sven,
if that was his name. He had blonde hair & clear skin
& wore a polo-neck jumper.
His eyes were pale, & staring in them I could see
an horizon line, of snow, with little wolves
running from left to right. Then I realized
it was the reflection of the greyhound racing
on the bar's tv
& as Sven wasn't saying much I went outside with the Treister.

In London there is The French House in Dean St., Soho
& the Coach & Horses, in Greek Street, nearby.
Down Lamb's Conduit Lane there's a nice pub
& a nice Italian restaurant. In fact, London
is full of bars that are nice places to drink, though none,
sadly, is the San Callisto.

In Dublin—though do the Irish still drink?
I mean 'any more'? Did they ever?
Are you kidding? Does Derek Moon?
Like a fish! But where? All over town!
Here & in Belfast. He is a man-of-the-world,
an international drinker—he actually does
look a little like Max Beckmann in his photographs—
perhaps
he should be writing this!

I can't—
or can I?—see him at the Bar San Callisto.

Ken Bolton

Double Troubles

' . . . this dog's life . . . '

Verlaine

&

'We must observe the amenities
even if we are going nuts.'

'we hear, misinterpret, then depart'

-

Manhire

exult , exultant

'Friend or foe,' says the cook

in this establishment

he is

a 'joker'

an establishment I had my lunch in today
or, anyway, coffee

Now,
big swigs of resin

the joint kicks in -
there goes my handwriting

I look at the drawing again

Archie Shepp, Lou Reed, Fats Waller

'Some Day My Thoughts Will Come'

time to do another version?

it is a shitty

drawing

The Towle quote

'August and then December will close the century

O air of your dreams descending on my day off'

now why is that□

so great?

Well it is

has something of the feel
of this drawing I'm copying

(I

copy)

I attempt to

replicate

distracted slightly as

Anna fights with Cath about not wanting
her hair trimmed

tho she agreed

moments before

I expect I am

taking her still

to WINSTON COIFFURE,

Winston Avenue□

in about 15 minutes□

photography poetry & jazz

- this poem's 'ambit claim'

I've been spelling□
use it

'minuscule' wrongly for ages - luckily I never

'leaves the tenor drifting like smoke over the
rhythm section'

Greil Marcus□

for me it doesn't□

th

o I'm glad he wrote that way about it

a song I love

is more esteemed
(is 'esteemed more')

Later, I sing□

'Downhearted' for a moment,□

the Australian Crawl song

Why

were they

so intellectually unrespectable?

Because I

liked them?

Gabe gets up

&

goes

banging about the house -

too

tired to chew,

he says,

of some crusts

he carries in his hand

to the bin

5 a.m.

At six he goes out

to

go rowing

no doubt waking John

the corrugated iron

gate

drags explosively. He peddles off

into the dawn

a good kid

Cath sleeps

I

hope, in our

front room

I sit up

awake

'& ready to squabble'

to quote the poem

at any rate 'awake',

make

tea for Gabe,

make

small conversation, in

hushed

tones,

finish Anna's homework

endless variations

on 3 times tables

they all come back!
 joke.□ & read the wonderful Dinah Ha
 wken poem,
 Writing Home
 Tom might ring
 tonight
 Cath's brother
 & come over
 he & John□ separately□
 are here for the Festival (Writers Week)
 'together separately'
 - well that is
 how it is 'in these
 divided times' (which I think is a line of John's
 more or less -
 overpunctuated by me)
 in the
 bathroom I look at a
 spider on the wall, little balls of dust, gathered where the wall
 meets the floor
 walls &
 floors -
 & where they meet
 I remember a
 wall in Redfern
 ceilings & walls bits of rooms I have stared at
 in the houses I've lived : a series of them
 very clear memories, stored, & never recalled
 the birthmark on the back of the hand
 small & pale & barely noticeable that I love
 almost independently of who it is on I forgot
 I knew it I must once have stared at it
 so often from out of time where the hand meets
 the wrist as we buy a bottle for old times' sake
 our hands together on the counter & I see it

I did a drawing of the room in Redfern

A mistake : no one visited there
Sal did & Dad (Sal
moved in!)

memories like these of bits of rooms like passages from
Virginia Woolf - the reflections bouncing steadily &
always in that one place, tho that 'one place'
varies from room to room, the hairline crack
in the ceiling, the characteristic noise - of traffic
going past

where another friend

went mad. ,disturbingly,

I moved
soon after.

He would□
steal mixed nuts

break in□

from a big jar I had.

I didn't□ notice.□
Weeks before I had told him
'to go easy on them'

He was□ sane then□
He frightened Sal

strangers to each other

when she met him in the kitchen -

no one was home,□ he backed silently out the room□
out the back &□ out to the alley.□

She thought she saw him
once or twice more

near the house.

Clearly he had been.

I didn't guess it was Larry

Weeks later he was in□ the bin.□
His girlfriend called.

another article by McKenzie Wark in the papers
to the tune basically of

'Tomorrow belongs
to my Department'

It probably does, too.

belongs to me

Nothing

I'm just having
'Double Trouble'

Having, really, a good time

more or less sane

together again with John

with Cath

& getting□

tomorrow

a haircut myself!□ 'Julie,' I rang,□
'I'm looking pretty unkempt.'

Her answering machine.

She rang back.

I make□ an appointment□
put 'the Banana' on my bike

& peddle down -

to WINSTON COIFFUREMENT

Double Trouble I say,
as we come
thru the hairdresser's door

ride back, get vegetables on the way - dinner
for the household

Cath, John, Gabe, & me,

Anna -

maybe Tom ☐ if he ke

eps his appointment

Ken Bolton

Good Friday At The Eaf

weekends here

are the best: beautiful, quiet
I sit in Caron's & my chair
the one we share, at the desk
between our desks, the shutters
letting in light
all is white, the shadows
diffuse — multisourced —
light coming from many directions
I'm beginning to die myself I see
because mostly I sense I cannot see
too well — & have almost a headache. Julie
types way across the space on the computer
the rustle of language that quiet rattle,
Michael came in, adjusted some
of the new equipment, & left — dressed for
tennis. Julie is dressed
differently too —
tight pants. Only I am dressed
the same —
but I am dying. And it is
Good Friday. Big deal, it will
take a while
I make tea, get paper,
start this

Ken Bolton

Hindley Street Today, With A View Of Michael Grimm

What to do

when the day's heavy heart,

settled,

rises then — for some quality of the light — □
& you your own mug

raise up □
to see it,

register it

bing!

the way counter staff

would

gain change □ the old days, □

but not any more — □
& not 'today', today

being now

(& in this 'day & age') —

Those old-

time cash registers

having gone before the electric typewriter, even, disappeared □

— tho

I never □

had one

of those. □

Why, □

pause,

& reflect, & look down the street

where Michael Grimm might come

— & with any luck holding

in his hand the tape you requested
sed to deliver

& he was plea

notionally. The 'notionally'
ean "Never"

Notionally might well m

Have you got it? Well

give it here!

Maybe he does. On it several versions of Bauhaus:
"Bela

Lugosi's Dead".

It's too bright & clear
in Hindley Street —

for him to be about,

the Count.

Yet, the waitress says —

"Yeah, I frighten a lot of

people,"

says jokingly

tho without much effort

as

she clears the table

where I sit today

outside

to a patron whom she'd startled

— & actually, tho she's

pretty

enough

her makeup's vaguely 'Goth'.

I find her interesting

as I look up today

& down the street

looking for it to confirm my intimation

expanded heart

With a view of, say, seraphic Michael Grimm

my tape

on which

Bela Lugosi's dead

studio version & 'live'.

He's dead

& Dion

& so is Bing.

Bob Hope lives on, I think,

tho barely

but I'm alive — Michael & Julie & Chris —

& those dead-heads from

Department

they've moved in

& now they find us 'more alive' —

we laugh
'good naturedly',

at that,

the street is

cleaner, too

since they arrived

a reason why
the light strikes things better now

&, if this coffee haint improved

my mood has

as I think, Yep of Michael,

The Grimster —
will he have

done it yet?

Too soon.

"Too Soon"

— the Nirvana story

it usually is too soon, I guess
osi might have thought

even Lug

One more day, a week!

I think, "not yet"

I've got the 'Hindley Street' template out & operating again, the details falling in
— 'signed up' for the long ride,

Tho less some days than others

but

just this minute I'm up for it.

The street looks grey &

white

& muted

benign — or tired — or

more forgiving

Is that just the lack of traffic?

Temporary. And the lull between the late

breakfasters

& the early-lunch crowd, the time

given

the waitress to talk

the old men

at their tables, plotting

— plotting nothing —

the Tech teachers at elevenses, me,

& fucking

Michael Grimm

nut

Horizon

'As a people we are now called Australians because a vast & lonely land
has touched us with her differences'

- George Ivan Smith, 1953 preface to *For The Term Of His Natural Life*

'it's noble to refuse to be added up or divided'

- Frank O'Hara

'In this dawn as in the first
it's the Homeric rose, its scent
that leads on'

- Frank O'Hara, *Ode to Willem de Kooning*

'Beyond the sunrise
where the black begins' -
& the lights of the city, we
imagine, twinkle or blaze . . .

the horizon line here
a curve of butter yellow,
slightly oxidized - lined,
at its rim, by olive-green 'natives' -
hides a city that if I am
facing the right way
must be doing its afternoon trade
relaxed this last few days after December 25th
but ready nonetheless for the big push
at night, the raid on
fun desire release -
selling mostly coffee, wine,
Michael / rolls a joint has one
then rolls several others children
contemplate navels - the girls their own

with quiet pride, the boys the girls'
with longing puzzling as it is strong
Mary paints her nails, reads, Cuban music
playing. What of Margaret, of Crab? they do
those things normative in a utopia
a cork is popped, Marg plays
fado, the soulful music of Portugal
or Crab practises on sax
reads some politics, some mayhem, reads
the poems I gave him. I
try to seize upon that greatness
which is available to me
if it is available at all
(am I facing the right way?)
thru art.

The view is
quintessentially Australian, which is its
problem - for me - tho not classical
& in its particulars
is information (where the classic typically presents
only sign). The essays of
Meaghan are to hand which might
stiffen my resolve or form it: not to be
inimitably weak & picturesque myself
but standing forth a subject not a spectacle.
There are daisies nearby & a shin-high wall
of loose but flat-laid shale or slate twelve feet
beyond - a standard country wire fence; the
field of grass; on the horizon a distinct
curve of hill three hundred yards away, a
water tank nestles in to the furthest reach
of the olive 'natives' -
can I dropp the scare marks from
that word now, hasn't it
done enough? &
I rest their case
 'for now
a long history slinks
over the sill',

& with it history's ironies, reversals
sarcasms so de rigueur. I never wanted to be postcolonial
or colonial just modern which is
the joke on me - but who wants to be a category?
Many would be right - it will do me to be interested - &
one accepts the truth like a tired disguise handed out
for the party - is this me? - & joins the crowd
as the brave must always ascend, always the musts:
the Eiffel tower, the flight over London, the café
table - in Rundle Street or rue de la Rocquette
where Lorraine lived & we stayed tho for me, today,
this hill is my focus, the clouds - (for I must ascend) -
are beautiful & white & echoing fluidly the hills'
shape, the splotches of green that mottle the yellow
& remind of 'Minor Moderns of South Australia'
a line I join of precursors - Horace Trennery,
Dorritt Black - pondering a relation
to the minor English, Europe, the
universal - & its status as 'the wrong question'
which strolls now & then into a field
& sits down like a forgotten rock
while 'we' walk on
to an horizon line, that's beautiful, keen,
precarious, & doesn't tug - not 'rose', but
serene, & melancholy, & joyous, all at the same time, a kind
of benediction that says, I'm free & I'm gratuitous
why not feel better? & since you do you do
return: into that inanimate world of voices cross-
questioning you, no longer like your father, a man
in an open necked shirt eating an icecream (& just,
perhaps, 'going for a walk'), but in a shirt I bought in Melbourne
made by migrant Vietnamese late at night, yet in which
I feel Australian, whatever that is
- a point mapped by shifting co-ordinates
you momentarily 'keep your eye on' or don't being
yourself or a moving target (do the hills you climb as
no one count? The hostess explains,
As we leave administered life
there is a slight discomfort - the tug of
gravity on re-entry returns, you may
feel tired. Where, the open neck shirted men, women in
thongs & sandals, ask is our shimmering ideal? If O'Hara

had such timing John his last move suggests he blew it
Tho exits are notoriously hard to make. 'I live above a
dyke bar & I'm happy' - I might too for all I know.
Am I? Occasionally, occasionally very. The female
of the tiny blue jay or 'wren' appears, bouncing,
across the grass outside then some of the 'men'
move across my field of view from left to right . . .

Ken Bolton

Maybe For You

Now a sackbutt, reader, is a violin,
& I tell you this, & you nod
having suspected as much -
one type of reader does -

or you don't, being another, a second kind of reader, & having
known all along -

& wonder

Why do I tell you this? Will violins be my thing in this, this poem?

Or you grimace

- snarl -

a third response, knowing a sackbutt is not a violin,

or - more liberally - mutter "For you, bud" - as in

Maybe for you -

& wait,

to see what will be made of it.

Let us leave the first reader -

who is lost, was lost before maybe, & is no wiser now -

& the second reader seems somehow hostile,

& the third - my type of guy, my type of girl - Third type of Reader,
I am lost too!

All those readers - what to do - but watch them

stroll away,

the third reader strolls, the first wanders sadly,

disconsolate not to know what a sackbutt

is -

& nor do I, though I was never concerned

to know particularly -

yet this

... seems somehow 'at my door', 'down to me',

whatever the phrase.

And the second reader

seems,

furiously, ALMOST ABOUT TO TELL ME WHICH,

but thinks better of it, & - 'furiously' - makes off around the corner -

then

reappears.

No, it is John Jenkins, fellow poet -

a little put out at this sudden loss of readers.

John fixes Reader One with his gaze

& addresses him, politely, Are you,

perchance, a 'reader of books'?

How inviting - flattering - I see the reader pause - Reader Three, even,

look on thoughtfully -

as John begins, knowing, I am sure, the true nature of a sackbutt -

unlikely though to begin just there.

Baroque, but not remote, that is John, thoughtful

but not abstruse, except as a game

- in which he would not risk

to humiliate the reader, piss off

Reader Two with deliberate misinformation,

abuse the nimble mind of Reader Three.

(Reader Two I can do without -

personally - though I am very much

that same kind of reader, am maybe unwilling, merely, to accept their blame -

Reader Two's "fury", remember? -

It was just a poem.

But "just a poem", that's the very attitude ... etcetera.

I hear Graeme Rowleds' voice, warming to its task - "We've lost

Reader One, injured, hurt,

not willing to trust, easily, another poet, not willing to trust

their own real needs -

for verse,

poems with a proper subject & striking, original imagery;

Reader Two

was plainly better informed, & not to be trifled with; and Reader Three is here”

- has she or he come

back? -

“to see if you will tell them what a sackbutt is.”

I thought they knew.

“If this is the same poem I was in just a moment ago,” says Reader Three, “it was you who said I knew, not me. (I take it I am Reader Three?)”

I hate sarcasm. Rowleds was bad enough.

In this scenario (sketchy, admittedly)
we seem to be standing near a table
covered with paper cups,
in each or most of which are deposited
coffee granules, tea-bags - & an urn is steaming -

this is a conference -

though the overall scenario ... sketchy, as we said before -
a scenario “fictional” would not so much describe as explain ... the scenario

is discontinuous. But getting less discontinuous, you’ll admit.
For instance an ordinary suburban street constitutes the corner
Reader Two disappeared around - nearly
knocking into John, who reappeared, a seeming poetic second wind,
coming the other way, & nobbling Reader One,
who, when imagined walking away, stumbles almost ‘blindly’
beside a river or an empty public space - the less frequented
entrance to a park or garden, say - & in

slightly more autumnal weather.

Weird -

three alternative backgrounds.

Anyway!

Reader One tends to appear (mostly)

in middle distance, small, & shrinking further. Tall trees

loom overhead, emotive green shapes, poplars bend near him - her - them

- this reader.

In another scenario - one I had not even dreamed about -
they will be disconsolate, distraught,
their shame or dissatisfaction causing a loving partner
(& something of a reader 'themselves')

- male or female, straight or gay -
bi in fact -

though this is 'known'
- let's nail something down -
only to their mother ...)

causing them to spend a troubling night
('them' - perhaps both of them - but not Mom)
consoling the evident - i.e., evidently dispiriting - grief or anxiety
that assails their partner (unfortunate Reader One), in such a way
that they feel

(desperately)

'shaken'

in their belief in their own sexual efficacy -

Am I unattractive? am I worthless? -

& suspect even more alarmingly
that their partner may themselves be bi-sexual,
& to have recently discovered it,

& to wish now

- or soon, tomorrow - to change their lives together -
based hitherto on one person's not knowing, & on the other person's secret.

So Reader One evidently has real concerns -
whichever one of the two Reader One is -

& it hardly matters

for my purposes, or yours if you're following me -

because you're a skilled reader, with 'time on your hands'. ((Hullo. This is
my lunch
hour.)) Scenario One, the opening line, was a lecture, I think. One looked up as if
to a TV screen placed high, in a pub or cafeteria, to see -
a 'talking head'!

(Not my head. Not my voice.

Not the head of Rowleds) -

The head of the Literature Board!

In fact, the head of the head of the Literature Board!

That fool!

in a quiz show, rabbitting on, about a musical instrument. Reader Two seems to be a contestant, tense & peevish -

maybe this is usual with Reader Two - in a mustard shade of cardigan, or twinset, finger on the buzzer, the sort of person you hate

for knowing the answer to the Question, faintly overheard, will be ... "sackbutt".

And it is.

If so,

'it would help to know the question'.

Ken Bolton

Poem ('The Ice In My Glass')

the ice in my glass goes crink!

as it adjusts to the tequila — keying in
that sophistication — the feel of it — I associate
with these tall buildings — a bit of the
skyline of New York I envisage,
important to me for many years —

or if they weren't, the buildings stood
for the idea of importance, New York —
an imaginary number filling out
an order — of which the others were a part:
the finite Melbourne, Sydney, Glebe —
& Fitzroy & Bega. Did I think about it?

But it became less important — & then, almost by accident,

I visited, & saw it — specific, real —
& loveable, surely — if less impressive than the
rarely summoned abstraction. Strange —
& terrible — to think of it threatened,
New Yorkers frightened — as the city's image
draws retaliation upon it. Clink, the ice again, settling.

My New York — the notional one — the city of poets,
of art. I met one poet there — 'perfect' —
urbane, bohemian a little, worldly, smart,
immensely intelligent. (The art, there, was in galleries
& historical — great, but not like the poet.) My
second time I met rich people — the sort the terrorists

think of: people congratulating themselves on
the world & their ownership of it — talking deals, leverage,
new fields, salaries & investment. We were on a penthouse roof
near the UN building, looking out over the water
(towards New Jersey? — somewhere) for
the fireworks of July the 4th. The same UN building

as in James Schuyler's poem, that moves slightly — in
the wind, the light — or has that building been torn down & gone

& this is a new one?

The New York I like —
personalized, romantic — about which I know a great deal,
detail — things that have happened there, what one poet said
to another (at Gem Spa, at the Morgan Library), the

books they read, thoughts they had: unreal again —
a fabled, picturesque locality, of thirty years ago.
A little like the Sydney I now visit, which I left
in the 80s & in fact hardly know — can scarce reconcile
with the site of my former life there: where X said A to Y,
where 'L' lay (or sat) & wrote 'Sleeping in the Dining Room',

or 'A' began, "Saussure! Saussure!" — where I lived, round the corner
behind the Max Factor Building. I didn't meet the rich —
tho Sydney has them — resembling New York's probably
& voting just as vociferously
to support war on the Afghans.

Frank O'Hara, a hero of mine — a one-time hero, a hero still —

mixed with the rich a little. But as was said in his defence once

recently, he never owned more than two suits. He was not of them.
I don't like the Sydney rich — for wishing to be interchangeable
with their New York counterparts. Which is as I fancy them.
Tho as it said on the Max Factor building below the name —
"Sydney London Paris Rome New York" — & I aspired
in my own way, too.

Funny, all the papers have pointed out
the Auden poem, "1939", has been much quoted —
& some Yeats? Would Rome or Berlin — Paris even —
have sent minds to poetry? It is the enormity of the act —
New York as symbol — & as never attacked before.
I wonder if it is a new era? You'll read about it elsewhere —
not here. If it is. I might look up that Schuyler poem, "Funny

the UN building moved / & in all the years / I've
lived here" or something — or find the O'Hara one
in which he stays up late trying to select his poems
thinking, good or bad, he did it at least. Wrote them.

Now

I've found out what I think. Very little.

As I might have guessed. An event moving 'under the skin'

away from words — & become attitude.

Events

will be bigger than me. Having ideas about them being almost irrelevant. Though I 'have' them: none helpful or resolvable: that the New York I liked, even then, came at a price, that today does, & that I don't pay it.

The free ride you complain about — would you get off?

As usual the exchange rate dominates the news again

— a cargo cult

The dues you pay are servitude — so you can hate yourself, or wonder merely at the duration of the ride

Ken Bolton

Some Thinking

Does all art aspire to the condition
of music? — While someone

is always prepared to say so I put on
a tape, a CD, instead of writing

or put it on to write to.
As far as the art gets.

A tape rolls quietly — “Light Blue”,
“Soul Eyes” — to which I’ve done

a lot of reading, a lot
of pottering about, a few drawings —

& to which I’ve ‘cleaned house’ —

& a lot of writing — or of ‘trying to write’,
which comes to the same thing. Mal Waldron

wrote both these tunes.

I first heard of him
in the poem for Billie Holiday — “The Day

Lady Died”, with the great last lines
where she whispers to him across the keyboard —

“& everyone & I stopped breathing.”
The great thing

about the line is the uncertainty: is it “everyone
& I stopped breathing”? or that Holiday whispers the song

“to Mal Waldron & everyone” — & it is then O’Hara
“stopped breathing”?

It makes for a pause, a hesitation, a number of them —
that evokes the magic & tension

of her timing. And there's Frank, leaning there
- near the door to the toilets? The 'john',

which always suggests the hard American 50s —
& ensures I think of him in a white shirt & narrow tie,

suited. Already the texture of life is disappearing
- exactly how it felt, to be in those suits, in that time, at a nightclub

how anxious or not, how preoccupied & with what —
how people held themselves — is gone. Well,

it survives somehow, unverifiably, hard to quantify,
in poetry ... we still have the music, films —

but films lie. Cassavetes suggests the era to me —
was he 'the type' of the hipster — cool, up tight, hip, witty?

suited, a drinker, free, & maybe more exploratory —
within limits more circumscribed than now?

Or do we always see ourselves as more free —
& get it wrong? Did he

& O'Hara meet ever?
Different worlds.

The thing I was going to say about nightclubs
was that maybe how people feel & act in them

never changes. (I heard some magical things
at Lark & Tina's, for example. I've been as tense

as anyone, at the Cargo Club — & wore suits there.)
But night clubs themselves might've changed — with the music:

amplified is different? the fashion for recorded
dance music, or for dee-jays, might have altered them.

On tape one of the moments I like best is the voice —
a little shakey, a little spaced — Jim Carroll's by repute,

asking for tuinols, in the space between songs, at a great
Patti Smith gig. Or Velvet Underground —

they're both on that tape. There's some great
& wonderfully casual, relaxed things said, over the music

at a late 50s date that features Miles Davis
guesting with local hero Jimmy Forrest: a type of music, & experience,

continuous with the live recordings of Charlie Parker —
the same carefree ambience & same reason to pay attention

whereas Patti's music gets to you pretty much
whether you listen or not. You don't have to choose of course.

"Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine"
is always great to hear said. This track,

the badly named "Soul Eyes" (how can you not roll it
into one word?), is not live but so sad & so unhurried

it makes time, development, almost its subject. John
Coltrane. Well within his limits — as

somehow imagined — & great the way conservative paintings
by great artists often are — a Gauguin still-life

that looks as though it wants to be Manet, or Fantin-Latour.

Ken Bolton

Tiepolo

In the 14, 15th &
16th centuries it was
all happening in Italy
artistically tho by the 17th
other countries had joined in.
By the 18th
Italy was definitely off the pace.
Still, I happen to think Tiepolo
was a major artist
tho employed mostly
by palace owners
to fill space -
before the invention in our own time
of the smoke machine
that so readily solved this problem -
for disco proprietors, rave
parties etcetera. In the last week of
third year old Bernard
pulled out all the stops
in the lecture on Tiepolo. I was there.
Not alone, but almost.
(Others were at home, preparing
for exams, finishing
last, overdue essays.) Like Professor Smith's
lecture that no one heard
Tiepolo was designed
not to be looked at.
Like the smoke the machine
pumps out: billowing cloud
... some armour ... flesh &
garments - the suggestion of
excitement - that no one buys -
least of all
the lonely type,
who can't dance
& stands, staring into
a corner
at a trick of the light.
Tiepolo's Three Angels Appearing

To Abraham in the Venice Accademia
is like that. He is the dud guy
bottom left - kneeling, dirty feet,
beard. The angels, thin limbed,
glamorous, surf up
on their rubber dinghy of cloud -
& look down incuriously -
except to remark, perhaps,
the dirt - & vouchsafe a glimpse of
beauty - a limb dangled
Abe's way, silhouetted against cloud.
As if to say,
You can go home now,
Abe, patron-at-disco, better not
to wait for more.
You've been catered for -
it costs a lot,
but they've got everything here.
Here today, gone tomorrow.

Which doesn't solve your problem.
Ciao!

Ken Bolton

Untimely Meditations

Looking back,
on my recent past,
on my present -
that is continuous
and heads, on my right,
if the left is the past,
into the future -
with none of the aplomb
if that is the word,
with none of the confidence
of Samuel Johnson,
with none of the elan of Frank O'Hara,
with only a guilty and apprehensive grin
because in part
I belong to that school that says
if you see a leg pull it
I begin this tour of my attitudes
and my attitudes
to the attitudes of others -
the Big Issues as they affected me,

or, even,
as they failed to get my notice,
got my notice belatedly, got
only my notice
and as I reacted to them
and to the reactions of others.

And some weren't all that big
but anyway . . .

Viz -

modernism, the Australian landscape,
our identity, post modernism, various
poetic movements -

and I do it . . .

to be interesting,

efficacious and liked -

though to be liked

one must be slightly scandalous

and a little charming (Can I do it?)

And because I was asked.

And I hear somebody remark

What's so important

about YOUR attitudes?
somebody who hoped I would not just
state my own
but take this opportunity
to be an expert
responsibly talking
in the voice of reason and platitude
- enunciating views
that are not my own?
Is that responsible?
Then talk naturally!
Though theory has taught us
there is no such thing
that even prose
is rhetoric, is untransparent -
though it is mostly prose
it has taught us that in.
Theory sees my point -
though I'm sure it doesn't like it.
Meaghan Morris told me once
she 'couldn't read' poetry -

because of the short lines

and all the wasted white paper :

I told her

I couldn't watch films -

unless they were on TV

with lots of ads - or video,

so one could talk

and yell with all one's friends,

and think.

It seemed an equally

small-minded answer.

Though true!

Though in my case

it is a preference,

in hers an inability.

I don't think of my ideas

as Truth, though I hope

some of them are accurate,

perspicacious, interesting -

freighted a little

with insight, why not?

But I 'offer' them -

regard them, report them -

as historical themselves,

as determined:

some opinions . . . that make

a history of opinions,

and of equivocations, lapses,

what else?

To be truthful, moments when I

'had a rest'

looked elsewhere,

grew distracted, con-

fused, came thundering back,

my mind having woken

with another opinion.

Here goes.

In the mid 70s

I became aware

of an irritating irregular din,

becoming quite insistent

- things beginning with 'I'

appropriately.

It was Les Murray

Les told us

'Where's

the beef?'

as if poems were a sandwich

and his

had dinkum verities

and content, while ours were that relativistic nonsense

you learn at unis,

not very sustaining.

This was 'The City and the Country' theme.

Les assured us the Country was

'more Australian'.

It was different. I could see that.

So I could see how it

might be 'better'.

- Well, actually, I couldn't,

but I could see

that someone might say it.

Though, really, I wished they wouldn't.

At the same time there was around
another faction.

I hear them shout -

as though it were today -

'WE'RE for feeling!'

& 'The brain's a bad guy!'

- not quite their diction,

but their base position.

(And for a while,

women, for example,

were only allowed

to write of feelings

- or got accused

of

'not writing from female experience.'

The best ignored this -

and those days

are gone, except

poets who stamp their feet,

get cranky, report on

the 'dark side',

seem always to feel

- not just truculent -

but more authentic.

I can't see it.

Did I say 'Diction'?

The New Romantics

were for Belief

and Feeling.

They believed in Myth

and wrote of myths they didn't believe in.

Or am I giving them too much credit?

I see myself,

a New Romantic -

'foot in the stirrups I mount

the heavily gilded saddle -

of the white horse -

the steaming white horse -

of my imagination

- and set forth -

the characteristic

pose

of the New Romantic.

Characteristically

I set forth,

in the middle of my life,

lost in a dark wood,

at my kitchen table -

where I might as well be playing

Dungeons & Dragons

for all the good

I will do anybody -

when the Angel addresses me -

and I am caused

to lift my helmet's visor,

and my head,

and gape awfully -

and in admiration.

(She is really beautiful

- she, too, is dressed in costume -

and I can tell she likes me

- this is a visitation -

and speaks

as though to someone taller,
and a good four feet behind me -
and her lips move.
Yet I seem not to understand,
till seconds afterwards
It is a little like TV,
where the subtitles arrive (late)
and linger, pointedly -
and she fades
(like TV also)
and I am plunged,
or I set forth, and the woods grow darker . . .)
which is like Romantic Poetry.
Which is the point!
You see, I am like those guys -
Shelley, and Byron
and the others, Keats
and Wordsworth
(is he okay?) -
I wonder if the Bottle Shop's still open -
I'm beginning something major.

What it turns out to be
is, the vindication
of my lack of Doubt,
and punishment for almost doubting,
but basically my vindication.

(Doubt is anathema to me.)'

'Doubt' for New Romantics

was inappropriate

to Poetry's 'calling' :

(Lots of people have never liked it.)

better to mount

and ride one's charger

into an imagined realm -

of capitalized Abstract Nouns,

gods and goddesses,

and Angels

and phoney revelations -

about the pitfalls one's soul had met,

and denounced

in moments of duende.

Robert Adamson did this.

But he was only kidding.

But there I am,

doubting again.

Now he just goes fishing.

(Still, never know what you'll find

just gutting a fish -

scales in your hair,

blood on your hands,

the eye of the old fish

catches yours,

and you look in : Dark Night

of the Soul again,

a renewal of faith!

- in one's spouse, the River, the

tides of life.

It's possible.

It's inevitable, seemingly.

I must go fishing.) And I am reminded -

as I was reminded then -

of the criticism,

given in the artist's time,

of Gustave Moreau

whose heroes all wore breastplates, and helmets -

the heroines in diaphanous silk -

to dance, or go maundering -

while Baudelaire would have

top hats, business suit and briefcase -

the Heroism of Modern Day Life!

(Which makes me think of Tranter. Always does.

I guess it is his franchise.)

(It now consists of a pool, a few

hosties

- drunk, eating pills, spewing -

and a lesbian - a word John depends upon

to ginger things up - what else? yachts,

cars, an overseas reference, the mention

of some disappointment, a wry twist

at the end - Marcus Aurelius in

shirt and shorts, somewhat suburban - as if

Mr Boswell from Happy Days was actually an

alcoholic - which, as John would point out,

he was! is! How surprising.

John's idea of modernity has always been
a little like the Pop artists' - an iconography
tied to a particular period, always
ten or so years ago - the sit-com soap
version of reality, of bad designer shirts
(and airhostesses - yes, I know - drinks,
the repertoire . . .)

While in real life

Bob drove an Alfa,

I always imagined Les Murray

on a tractor

or pushing a one-furrow plough -

or seated

(this is more likely)

like an enormous bad fairy

behind the people

in a picture by Millet, The Gleaners -

tormenting them with his poetry.

He used to 'intimate' -

is that too light a word - he was more Australian

(relatively)

than the rest of us

and went on a lot -

about his Celtic blood, and

a disappearing Australia.

This was his Mystic Wing of the Country Party phase

- an interest in guns, and

'the blood of men'.

Multiculturalism, but, had become

the Next Big Thing:

So he called his book Ethnic Radio -

but in a last ditch move

has taken God as an imaginary

friend -

imaginary, in-

visible, but none higher

and (and here again, it is

relative) He only likes him.

I ignored them -

Les and Adamson -

twin stars.

In their different ways

as tiresome as each other.

Opera Bouffe.

Though you could see then

which was likely

to become established.

One was marketable

as a kind of Truth

about the wider world.

Bob, on the other hand,

might be accepted

as truly a poet,

if not a poet of truth,

for believing things

sillier than anyone sane believed.

(Each is an embarrassment.)

Sillier than what I believe in.

Each of us perhaps

will admit to a silly belief.

Who will admit to one?

Whose job is it

to hold them, these beliefs?

Surely a poet's?

Who is that person, out there,

beyond the pale,

frothing and ranting - a poet?

As for Australia disappearing -

well, things have changed -

social justice

and democracy

seem reduced -

and invocations

of some real Australia

exclude

large portions

of the population,

citizens born here

or born elsewhere -

who don't care

what happened

on the River Kwai,

who the Queen is

or who was the guy

named after the biscuit

- or why.

*

At university I found,

in visual arts,

'the landscape tradition'.

(Thematically, here, I 'hop about'.)

I believe if I went back there,

they might still be doing it.

But it is an academic thing:

No one paints them anymore.

Which is a great solution.

Though its prominence -

as a debate at least -

is in its relation

to the 'idea' of Australia, our need

to be independent culturally,

and to resist

ideas and styles that are foreign,

not produced by authentic Australians :

We Should Paint Trees.

- Which are not ideas,
admittedly,
but the idea to paint them is,
and is only one
(which is better).

In fact it is an English, Romantic idea -
or a German one.

You see, I think, the
parallel with Les.

*

The feeling / ideas debate

has its equivalents

in conflicts between

various styles of art -

Minimalism versus Expressionism for example -

and (again) in the

'theory' versus 'getting on with it' standoff that is more recent

And Relativism versus

Responsibility -

they make a nice pair.

Internationalism,

'cultural imperialism'. . .

and ideas 'too French',

too 'American'.

'Cruel Theory'

versus 'Spirituality' -

that one

has re-surfaced -

here even, in Adelaide!

*

Everything that's happened to me

has happened in Australia.

One of the good things

is the way the cook sings Perfidia

- whistles it - over the noise of

cups and conversation at Al Frescos

- where tout le monde

rabbit on - a song I heard as a child,

on the radio.

I loved it then

and I love it now,

its inflated delicious

romanticism and cummerbunds, big hats -

trellises of roses, the moon. Clouds.

Does Les Murray know that song?

I feel sad and happy at the same time.

Is it unaustralian, that song,

because it's so moustachioed?

. . . the 'Cruel Theorists'

didn't feel

all that cruel or cold,

the Relativists

didn't feel irresponsible.

People (the too American,

too French) didn't feel it was

Australian to be dumb.

Cultural-imperialist vanguard-internationalist intellectuals

rarely seem to speak up.

Now why is that?

Yet P.P. McGuinness and Les Murray,

with the tone

of a rearguard action, dream on:

wet feminist lesbian left semioticians,

one might think,
rule the world
- or are colonizing it,
for a terrible Cloud Cuckoo Land
that threatens.

Like our landscapes
we avoid History.

Time produces it.

Laurie Duggan's New England Ode,

through its specificity,

provides antidote

to Murray's mythology

(The latter a poet

of State

and Nation,

and one with advertising :

false, hectoring, corrective,

silencing.)

I was sitting in Al Frescos one day

overcome with an abstract emotion

at the singing of Perfidia, *

people banging cups
and yabbering, when one of them
detached themselves
came over to tell me I was
'Cruel Theory' and 'not Spiritual enough'.
I don't have a Cruel Theory
in my body.
Plainly, I would have thought.
Personally I don't feel
ever
tied to these dichotomies
but somewhere in-between
or unaware of them -
except when forced to focus.
It seemed an unspiritual
thing to do,
to approach someone
and inform them
of their unspiritual status.
Unless you belong to the Inquisition.
But I focus, in these situations -

we are picking sides,
perhaps the whole population
in Al Frescos
is finishing their coffees up
in order to divide and
properly have the
slanging match
that
even now goes on,
unorganized,
as I sit here,
un-spiritual.
I estimate
what is
the best unspiritual ploy to offer,
the unspiritual 'first move'.
I wonder what
the other unspiritual people
are saying.
Some faces look grim,
some romantic - is that

how it divides up? The woman
who has told me this
resembles Madame DeFarge
as a finger puppet -
How do I look?
I feel I look
like my sister's dog, Whiskey,
after she had pulled it by the tail -
from its breakfast,
a massive bowl of milk and Ricebubbles,
so she could then watch the dog
burp enormously,
a long, long belch like a bellows,
his swollen stomach
and his ribcage
going down,
as the air was expressed. Rice-
bubbles and milk he ate
in one long, in-taken breath,
lapping and lapping.
Like the dog in Gertrude Stein.

For a second

he would seem nonplussed

and stand -

staring straight forward.

Then the burp would begin -

to my sister's jubilation.

Just similarly I burp, my eyes

watering.

Sort of unspiritual,

sort of not. And stare forward.

I am on the unspiritual team.

Have I begun well?

an own-goal?

or begun decisively?

[Pauses For Drink Of Water. Drinks it.]

In truth I never cared about these things -

or cared about them as they occurred specifically:

I worried about my own authenticity

in relation

to the great art of elsewhere

and the past. Ignoring or denying it

seemed not the way to go -
and anyway, I liked it: the fabulous clouds
of Guardi and Tiepolo, the silky greys and whites and silvers
of the skirts in a Gainsborough - like the winter skies
of Adelaide; the beautiful surfaces in the poems
of Frank O'Hara, Ted Berrigan, and later
James Schuyler - and the work of
some of my friends - which was great
in relation to that. And the client state delusion
- of connection, of place
in an unreal schemata . . . -
no objectivity I can attain has ever allowed me
out of that world's attraction. If this is 'The West'
and The West is doomed,
the problem is not with its art - and the alternatives
were no less Western,
though they had less leverage - colonialist doxa (Les Murray)
and the pretence of spiritualized emotion (out of context,
as far as I could see) (Adamson)
and in any case I did not believe them:
I was born in a city

with a cultural background that constituted me as

- that word!

or any rate, here I am -

relativist, self-doubting, glad

of whatever knowledge this threw up, though hard won

and fleeting. Which sounds 'heroic' -

so it can't be true.

(I won it in the library, admittedly,

and hanging around - as I have done

the rest of my life - watching what other people do

& reading.)

The vectors 'placed' you - inescapably -

with all your class, and cultural,

and historical specificity. Damning,

contingent, real - about as liberating and breathtaking

as it was 'final'.

Was it interesting, breathtaking - was it

final? Another sort of romanticism.

I sit in the same spot, at

the same table, at the same coffee shop

every day

and think the same thoughts.

That's the vectors.

*

I have paused so often, taken

so many of these little drinks. (Drinks glass of water.) And I

realize:

I resemble, a little, my sister's dog.

I have lapped up, indiscriminately, ideas like these: the

spectacle

as epistemes and Egos clash, and -

the expression theory of art - here I 'bring it up'.

Is this evidence? a symptom? the talking cure? -

a public self-denunciation and - Chinese-style - re-education?

Is it

autobiography?

Two

Les Murray's new book has appeared -

interestingly, in connection with the Inquisition,

under the imprint Isabella. In it

I think he talks

to the Natural World - 'things' and animals

talk to him (rabbits, rocks, plants, perhaps the air,

'The River', 'The Tree') and interestingly, I bet,

they tend to think as Les does,

their view squares with his.

Another kind of silent majority -

who you can bet

are not intellectuals, feminists, or ideologues.

#

Of course a landscape squares up pretty interestingly

if you're a formalist - and I don't want to 'preclude' anything,

but 'the landscape tradition' surely does, is nothing but that,

for a lot of happy people -

who find depiction of social relationship, social station,

social interaction,

to be uncomfortably, depressingly, political - the real world -

where they want distant hills, innocent muzak,

or the counter myths of Australianness and nation.

The empty landscape, I can't help thinking, bears

some relation to strike breaking, shooting people, the police,

legislation against assembly,

impatience and disdain.

#

Escapism.

Well, there is an element of that

in much great art

- an escape

to real sensory formal engagement -

Cezanne, say!

I don't think

the rich are capable of it. (How

unfair, to say that.

And it is unfair - tho I saw one

the other night

at the opening

- ridiculous when they are identifiable -

appearing unwilling to be soiled

by the riff raff of the rest of us, requiring

the gallery owner's attendance

- lonely, perhaps? -

to reassure her

her discriminations were not as ours -

living in a fantasy world. Well, we all do.

Different from mine.

#

Question : Why worry about

National Identity and then sell the farm?

- the policy of our ruling class.

ID is only useful vis a vis other nations: as resistance

to external power and values - or else it's something

someone else complains against -

the New Guinea resistance fighter, the

Asian tourist industry, Aborigines.

Do the rich stand corrected? Ever? Does

investment? I hope she bought some

bad art. She looked like Carroll Baker -

dressed 'subtly' in all white. Her bloke

the sort of bourse functionary

who might express his personality

through a sportscar. Grey pants, striped shirt.

Maybe he wore a tasteful belt -

of, say, lhama hide, or fine plaited gnu.

Do people buy

anymore to shore up, or vote for, the

National I.D.?

Or just to register their social distinction ('I think this

is cute,' 'I think this is funny,' 'See, this

is my sense of humour.')

Do people buy landscapes anymore? Mandy Martin's

I guess - but that's the Impersonal Sublime:

'I'm a tough guy - I'm Romantic.' 'Lacerating,

isn't it?' the artworks say.

(What's she ever done, to me

[aside from the paintings] ?)

National unity of a 'higher kind' is promoted

against sectional interests (except those of Wealth,

which are identified with Nation)

and the important sorts of identity -

class, gender, locale, individual -

and the contest of values, are all to be precluded -

by Authoritarian Admonishment

that says Landscape = Nation = Patriotism and that's

sacred.

Does Arvi Parbo ever have to demonstrate his patriotism?

I just wondered.

. . . Is Arvi Parbo

a great guy? Is the art-collecting

woman?

I don't know.

#

post / modernism

about which I am

'happy to be swayed'

etc

and have no heavy opinion, insight,

or contribution to make

to the debate about the exact nature

of Post Modernism

or its consequences

In writing, the divide between what my friends and I were

doing

and the others

was that they - the others - wrote of Belief

and as Celebration

or maybe despairingly

of a loss of faith
- which we bore with
equanimity. Our
skepticism and relativist's buoyancy
I think were deemed modish
(or modern) : They spoke
for Tradition
We could see how we
related -
to mostly US models in my case -
Williams, Johns, Rauschenberg, O'Hara
Berrigan and Minimalism, Robbe-Grillet -
in favour of intelligence more than touchstones
as if by touching them they might reactivate,
make, the old world live again
Tho what world?
Larkin's? that of Yeats?
(of Donald Brook & Noel Sheridan?)
or Geoffrey Hill's?
They seemed a kind of prayer
and a prayer is the dumbest thing to do

but out of touch - On the other hand, acting in
the real world,
of grants and publication, they must have been ruthless :
Murray's protestations of his innocent good faith -
guileless and plucky leader of
the Christian minority true blue genuine faction -
are hard to believe
Though meant, admittedly, for the non-literary world's
consumption.
A professional face
to the world
and the exercise of power among the family.
It seems to me our poetry deals
with a world
of incommensurable (yike!)
and interestingly unsettling developments
that their poetry merely resisted -
a projection, or shadow,
of the past.
Well, maybe we are equally
an epiphenomenon, registering

what they resist,

and you can easily be interesting in

either way.

Why don't I see them as interesting?

I liked Pessoa, for instance, or

'in principle',

I liked, well, lots of

change-mourning postures

I was not unprepared to be

amused - or moved even, maybe -

. . . .

#

What tiring opinions!

I like thinking

about the opinions of others -

and then (!)

I have almost an opinion myself -

but not quite, or only briefly,

& there is no poetry in it - or there is,

but it is in it accidentally.

Here, I have affected to have

these opinions - to see what it was like -

Most Australian painting

was boring - I knew that: I was bored

by it! - Modernism:

I figured that was what was happening:

what we were doing seemed to come out of what had gone

before

logically enough. If it's turned out to be post-

modern, then a 'rupture', a shift of episteme

passed me by. The way it felt I guess

when Mannerism

became Baroque: Ludovico went down to the

coffee shop - & ordered up;

Annibale entered & said,

'What's new?'

Said Ludovico, 'You tell me.'

*

(Postmodernism)

So much for my experience of it.

I love it as a theory.

*

What else was I talking about - notionally -

(a word of Martin's I love)

Our Notional Identity?

bad poetry? It gets written everywhere, I guess.

I've written some myself!

I regret mine - but it doesn't amount to

grand fraud like this other stuff -

(pious hope!)

though which is best ignored -

otherwise, I become agitated.

I feel I should say something totalizing about

Theory

though one can't of course (step out of it /

look down from above).

But Theory is obviously the context

in which this occurs. 'I am no theorist'

is true, & yet I'm unwilling to acknowledge

an ascendancy of theory over what I do

or recognize a divide - or a privilege, given,

to theory over poetry.

On the other hand, 'let it pass'.

I read it, of course. Poetry must make its own.

Theory

has no monopoly on theory.

Many, maybe most, who flock to poetry

pastiche the past

in their effort to evade the future. Very

modern of them (or

'perennially contemporary') I am

maybe more truly of the past

in placing any bets on poetry

for the future -

but 'it helps me feel modern!' -

the way, for a theorist, presumably, theory does.

Tho finally

this, this lecture, is mere gesture:

offering genre as an example of

'the materiality of one's practice' is rather

coarse-grained. Why a lecture,

even an ironic one,

if poetry is so flexible?

Perverse I guess.

- A modern, or a post-modern,
perversitousness?

*

And why these

'untimely meditations'?

Why now?

Because

when I look back

I see these 'events' - that were

publicly on the agenda

but not on mine.

These I can date.

But what was I talking of -

at the time? Were these thoughts resolved

& did I move on, think

something else, develop?

It seems I can't see myself

only what I was rejecting

Is it some failure, some

defeat, that they have prevailed?

But we don't expect

to easily see

our selves.

'Tiresomely one is

some sort of realist, it turns out, like everyone else' -

what else is there to talk about

but what is real - tho without,

in my case, either trying to put

my finger thru it ('take this chair,

take this table') or spin

some abstract notion about it?

Epistemology,

my nutty friend! I have always imagined

you my goal, tho I have written often, maybe -

in moments of relaxation from your rigour -

the poem as 'consolation'

(terrible thought), the poem

as entertainment. Ah well.

A look - untrained - at

how we know, a kind

of analytical wondering

Have I wondered 15 years

& never found out (20, actually)?

Then what was I wondering?

I seem to have wondered - almost as

set pieces - what was a fitting subject for poetry;

what can you say about

contemporary life - that is not too conclusive

total, an assertion of system; and

- as a proposition -

something as useful as

Aren't people wonderful ('curious',

'odd', 'interesting', 'nice')? &

a hoping my friends

are alright. And returned

again & again.

I have mostly despaired

at not having the brain

to put this together - unlike Meaghan - to think forward to

something

or have, alternatively, not believed

that such were possible - & complained at the efforts of others

(The cavilling, querulous poetry

of the postmodern - or relativistic

clearsightedness?)

In the late mid 70s David Antin's

was the usage of the term postmodern

that I first encountered - I could see

what it described: but since it seemed to stem

straightforwardly

from Modernism

I could see no sense of break - it was modernity's

selfcriticism merely. ('A shift of episteme

passed me by.') His explanation

had nothing tacked-on -

of the failure of the Encyclopedists' program,

of the Enlightenment, & shifts

in the world's economy.

(The 'hyperreal'

was not present.)

One catches up

with one's time -

& finds the past unrecognizable

& the future pretty certain, though

undoubtedly packed with surprises -

& a little out of time

in one's marching.

Ken Bolton

Untimely Meditations: notes & asides, disclaimers etc

title page The Adorno quote is from Negative Dialectics, but I quote it from Martin Jay's book Force Fields: 'I have never felt comfortable with the school's reticence about exploring its own origins, an attitude best expressed in Theodor Adorno's remark that 'a stroke of undeserved luck...' [etc].'

'Thanks for the sour persimmons etc' comes from Daffy Duck and is spoken with his heavy lisp & withering sarcasm.

#

'(Each is an embarrassment)' - Tranter was a distant eminence grise - in the seventies - somewhere across the waters, who has since come home to roost.

#

the guy named after the biscuit - Reg Anzac? - for services to aviation? he drove a taxi? invented a biscuit?

#

'You see, I think, the

parallel with Les'

The insistence on

a locus of values

represented by its picturing

& a constituency - of volk,

silent, but he

speaks for them

not Junkers, not leech-gatherers -

Australians.

Ken Bolton