

Ivor Indyk | *The Awkward Grace of John Forbes*

John Forbes was fond of quoting the New York poet Frank O'Hara on the question of poetic style — “As for measure and other technical apparatus, that’s just common sense: if you’re going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you.”

Sydney is not New York; nor is Australia the most powerful nation on earth. We miss the appearance of ease, the confidence in articulation, the assurance that all things count, even the most ordinary, which a powerful culture confers on its poets. What we have in abundance is irony, springing from a deep sense of limitation, and intractability.

So when Forbes, in ‘To the Bobbydazzlers,’ addressed the American poets from Sydney, thankful for the relaxed style they had offered him, it was not entirely without a sense of complication — “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!” Nothing could be more characteristic of Forbes than that the horizon should get in the way (it does after all), and that this obstacle should be immediately overcome in a shift of perspective (“I see stars instead”), which combines pain (“knocked out”) with a sense of election — “I salute their luminous hum!” That is Forbes’s style, pratfall and



John Forbes, c. 1990. (Photo courtesy of Len Forbes.)

recovery, awkwardness and grace. It didn't make everyone want to go to bed with him. His poems are full of unrequited love. And it didn't guarantee him a public role as a poet. At the time of his death in January 1988, at the early age of forty seven, he must have felt more deeply than many do, because he felt it so much more personally, as poverty and loneliness and lack of recognition, the hard times on which poetry has fallen in this country.

There is something about awkwardness, about the process by which one comes to terms with an intractable medium, that strikes others, at first, as deeply unintelligible. Perhaps this is a defence that has been built into us, since awkwardness dramatises the resistance, the threatening nature, of what we like to think familiar and prefer to take for granted. So Forbes got criticised for his 'difficulty', the opposite of 'style', which as everybody knows is confident and elegant and empowering.

In part this had to do with the material out of which he chose to make his poems. Frocks and frigidaires, Alka Seltzer and soya sauce, lollies, bin liners, suntan lotion, television, venetian blinds, Spakfilla, toffee apples, the rumpus room, lamb and two veg — the stuff of suburban Australian life, though not, usually, of its poetry. Forbes brandishes these elements like a preacher who has found his vocation in a fallen word, reminding you of their poetic unworthiness even as he discovers in them the possibility of significance.

I remember being particularly struck by Forbes's comparison, in 'Egyptian Reggae', of Lucretius' atomic view of the world to Virgil's, "that things are, deep down, made of tears / unless your brain is damaged / like an airline bag full of bottles / whacked against a bus". The image, which won't be found in Virgil or Lucretius, recalls a time when plastic overnight bags sold or given away by airlines were ubiquitous in

Australia, a sign that you were fortunate enough to have been elsewhere. Whacking a bag against the side of a bus is an old schoolboy trick, the kind that comes from deep boredom. On a more personal note, if the bottles contained alcohol, or cough mixture, they're probably not just an analogy for the poet's damaged brain, but the cause of the damage in the first place. There is a complex of emotions invoked by the airline bag simile — nostalgia, regret, bitterness, self-recrimination, anger — which redeems it from banality, even as the sense of banality from which these emotions have sprung is given its full due.

It's like the beginning of 'Ode / Goodbye Memory' — "Goodbye memory & you my distances / calling love me across the vast golf course / to the greens whose flags no wind will ever ruffle" — with its combination of longing and its mockery of the very idea of longing, the suburban bathos of it. Or the way Forbes presents the idea of adolescent romance, undercut by the thought of complication, "like a maze of joists beneath the dancehall / white ants have eaten away", in 'Ubi nihil valet': here the simile pitches directly into the sexually-charged world of teenage dances, in which parental responsibility can call loudly and shockingly, like a floor collapsing — and into the settled suburban world which follows it, that of domestic bliss, ever-threatened by the secret activity of termites. The analogue in each case is unexpected, and carries that unexpectedness, that initial sense of unworthiness, into the larger context of meaning the poet weaves from it.

More aggressively still, like a preacher in a suburban church, or a philosopher bent on speaking the language of the people, Forbes often pursues an argument through his colloquial similes, or uses them to demonstrate a proposition, so that the dross of everyday life is suddenly informed with the voice of reason. Typically, he begins with an assertion or statement of

fact — “Where nothing is valued nothing is desired”, “Frank O’Hara never went skating”, “Each day bears the imprint of the one that went before”, “Flexed suddenly the muscles of the stomach / can make the joints in the back of the neck / go ‘crack’” — which, however improbable as a starting point, then inaugurates a train of thought, leading through a succession of qualifications, exemplifications, rhetorical questions and rejected alternatives to a conclusion:

Boosting the hula hoop, fates
are gala ridden but aware the
best detectives swallow dice.

Who aims at a bunch of lakes?
A tree carved to a pencil the
breeze steadies like a degree?

It trembles but delivers.

(‘Blonde & Aussie’)

In ‘Event Horizon’ an argument about art wends its way through record covers, a morning suit and sensible shoes, beer, a season ticket, television, a betting-slip and a box of Kleenex. A sequence of logical connectives holds the heterogeneous elements in place, “but”, “so now”, “all this”, “and”, “like”, “although”, “as if”, “because” and so on. As the images insistently draw on common aspects of the Australian suburban experience so, with equal insistence, the logical connections asserted between them suggest an inherent rationality, as if this recalcitrant material could be a vehicle for belief, or faith. (In Forbes’s hands, the simile is not so much a poetic as a logical device: what “like” habitually announces is a fresh piece of ev-

Forbes' culture suspicion
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The Awkward Grace of John Forbes | 91

dence, another telling example. It might seem disjunctive — “like a piece of elaborate crockery / the boy dropped bringing from the storage shed” — but the simile is only taking you to another part of the culture. Since the culture is a hotch-potch the shift is likely to be surprising: but there is also this assurance, that with enough agility on the part of the poet — and the reader — an answer will always be at hand.)

It is worth considering the difference between what Les Murray makes of his vernacular icons, like shorts and louveres and telegraph poles and broad beans and cows, and the way Forbes handles his suburban material. Murray, the *de facto* poet laureate, treats his sacred Australian objects as if they were replete with values, spoken and unspoken, the kind of values which define a folk, a people, a whole way of life. But Forbes was part of a generation which grew up suspicious of given values, *especially* the unspoken ones, as the concretions of ideology and social convention. The more natural the object, from this sceptical point of view, the more likely it is to be the agent of social determination, since it is the habit of the social to present itself as natural. The more manufactured the object, on the other hand, the more shiny or practical or technologically advanced it is, the deeper the fall into the clutches of capitalism or consumerism. As for the individual — socially constituted, regulated, surveyed, determined in its relation to the Other — the individual is the most ideological site of all.

The antidote to this spectre of determination, which lurks even in the most spontaneous gestures, is a heightened self-consciousness in one’s dealings with the world. Where Murray dedicates his celebrations of the vernacular and the ordinary to the glory of god, Forbes’s deity is Doubt, “luminous substrate / our views are just a veneer on”:

We stand to be corrected & sit down unassuaged
 because of you. You keep us modest
 like the stones I used to shift around as a kid
 assuming they needed a change of view. That
 was the closest I got to playing God,
 as if each brick had a message wrapped around it
 or, vice versa, the world was a fake parcel
 with each layer of tissue
 gauzy, ornate & gorgeous, keeping us from you.

Moreover, since nothing can be taken for granted, since doubt is virtually an intellectual obligation, the fluency of thought and action is suspended, interrogated, or turned back upon itself, in what appears to be a deliberate and mannered awkwardness. In the academy they called this reflexivity 'theory', and in most hands it was awkwardness without grace. As a poet, Forbes had an antagonistic relationship to 'theory', but he shared its basic point of view, as 'Topothesia' demonstrates:

How we see things determines how we act and even
 who 'we' are, as the fragile temper of our acts
 breaks like a bubble from the drowning mouth and into
 the air, shaping these identities to begin with.
 For as their escape traces like a machine the pattern of
 our doubts on to the future, it's obvious something's
 got to give and keeping the sun over our right shoulder
 so the shadow of the past is always in our minds
 doesn't solve the dilemma but merely divides our needs
 further from our pronouns so that our whole being
 ends up with this double aspect, and hence the idea of
 time—our best, because most subtle, delusion about
 the meaning of these incessant apologies....

This concern with social determination, and how one might escape from its clutches, surfaces often in Forbes's poetry. It is the subject of the much discussed poem 'TV', which begins with the theoretical injunction "don't bother telling me about the programs / describe what your set is like", on the grounds that what you experience is thoroughly determined by the framework within which you experience it. Immediately, though, the television set recalls an African scene, "its strip of white stillness like / beach sand at pools where the animals come / down to drink", and hunters stalk the animals, watched over by an anthropologist with a camera. The argument cuts two ways. On the one hand, the movement from an event to the framework in which it occurs only serves to recall other events, and other frameworks: the television set itself becomes a program, which has its own frame in turn, there's no escape from the loop of determination. On the other hand, it's important to make the leap from the event to its context, since only by doing so can one understand how its value has been determined (in the case of the African scene by the colonial gaze of the anthropologist).

Here the understanding gained is cast in political terms. In 'Love's Body' it is given a transcendental turn:

Certain kinds of knowledge leave the field of
 all possible experience, apparently to enlarge
 the sphere of our judgements beyond the limits
 of experience, by means of concepts to which
 experience—even after we've made up our minds
 on its blaze of nothing—can never supply
 any corresponding objects. So our desire for its
 freedom just makes breathing harder and the
 effort to get there curves up to the asymptote
 of all our energy still available for thinking....

And so the argument continues, in Forbes's habitually discursive fashion, revelling in its own paradoxes, espousing a freedom from determination it knows cannot exist, comparing the yearning for this freedom to the take-off of a plane bound for Europe, the expatriate's panacea — and the inevitable failure to achieve it to bubble-gum, blown into such a big bubble, it explodes all over the poet's face.

For Murray the realm of significance is not in itself problematic: the real difficulty is in knowing when to stop the elaboration. For Forbes, however, where the grounds of significance have constantly to be negotiated, and the objects themselves, intractable to start with, are to be regarded with suspicion as commodities or stereotypes, the poem becomes an awkward kind of dance, a leaping and a twisting, a juggling and a reaching. It can look clumsy — “those shaggy repertoires / that let you move / from gesture to posture & back again / like Dick Van Dyke / not falling over the furniture” — but the clumsiness is an essential ingredient, drawing attention to the antics of the poet himself, whose near-falls and triumphs dramatise the complexities under which he has to operate.

In a way Forbes's great creation *is* the poet whose awkwardness he charts in his poems. An essentially comic figure, he is like a Quixote or a Yorick in his combination of idealism and disappointment. Unlikely as it may seem, given the self-consciousness that is his starting point, this figure has an innocent side, a belief in spontaneity and delight, though he knows they always have their price. In his earlier poetry especially, Forbes was able to sound really joyful notes by racing across the landscapes of contemporary pleasure, taking the best of what was on offer without waiting around to pay the bill. ‘Ode to Tropical Sking’ accumulates the synthetic ideals of paradise with such rapidity that it seems to conflate time and space, just like pastoral used to do:

After breakfast in the Philippines
I take a bath

& it's a total fucking gas

Enjoy that 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 ashtrays he/she you & it
are a total fucking gas

Like pastoral the effect of the accumulation is overwhelming: Forbes might have been singing the pleasures of goat's cheese and ripe plums, like Theocritus, except that, unlike Theocritus, he has to go very fast in order to be at rest. There's a similar effect in ‘Rose Selavy’: “Even the windscreen wipers on their electric stage swivel / for Julie, even the Enos bubbling in its glass. // More precise than a stocking, / Julie lounges at the pool / she moves like a heatwave in December. It's the year slipping by / it's the strange coast of Mozambique I've never seen — / no it's Julie / buying a blazer.”

It's the poetic equivalent of skating on thin ice, or as O'Hara would have it, going “on your nerve”, though in typical fashion Forbes has a keen sense of the dangers lurking beneath, distance, incomprehension, lack of control, violence, “and in the dark beauties of drugs on the pension, Julie / a crazed spanner in the intricate works of death!” You could fall in at any moment — which is why, in ‘Ode / Goodbye Memory’ after throwing overboard all the complexities that

stand in the way of the good life, poetry foremost amongst them, Forbes imagines, not travelling at speed, but lying on the sand:

So goodbye words

& goodbye writing, more

ambivalent than a two-brained dinosaur & just as doomed!

& goodbye to you, poetry

ludicrous sex-aid greasing the statues of my mind

Hello the yellow beach & the beauty

that closes a book. Hello the suntanned skin

& underneath that skin, the body.

This is Forbes's vision of paradise, and its location is close to home, the beaches of Sydney, or the tropics of his childhood. Given the part played by awkwardness in his aesthetic, it is easy to see how the naked suntanned body could function for him as an ideal of grace. "Your body like a fluent exact name / no longer taking no for an answer", is how he puts it in 'A Snowman in Miranda', a poem full of banging and smashing and spilling and division. The union of name and body, the sense of fluency and ease, the sun, the water — it is remarkable how often the passage from clumsiness to grace occurs in Forbes's poetry, though it is not always assured, and it happens less and less as time goes on. (Yet it is still there towards the end of the posthumous collection *Damaged Glamour*, in the very late poem 'lassu in cielo', in the glimpse it offers of Sydney as a remembered paradise, "lantana & sandstone, bits / of Harbour out the window / & the light intense & blue". The glimpse is all the more poignant because in this poem Forbes imagines himself as already in the company of the dead, discussing garlic with the deceased poets Martin Johnston and David Campbell.)

In fact for Forbes the sense of relaxation or ease was fundamental to what he saw as *the Australian style*. In 'Stalin's Holidays' it is presented as having a laid-back or lazy quality, which won't accept the trammels of ideology, or rule-making of any kind, and which will resist to the end the oppressive menace of authority, represented in the poem by the telegram, "mes vacances sont finies: Stalin". In 'Antipodean Heads', which is a deliberate attempt to define an Australian style, it is placed "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".

Sometimes the state of grace is presented as a floating in water or a dancing in air. Forbes liked the effortlessness of floating or gliding in water, partly because, as he put it in 'Ulbi nihil valet', "the moral universe of the fish / has no place for the airtight container" — it provides an alternative to the ideological medium in which humans normally move, and which invariably trips them up. "(T)he / best of all possible / poems relaxes asleep / in the tropical surf", he wrote. This relaxed ideal has its ironic counterpart in the image Forbes offers in 'The Stunned Mullet', of the poet as a fish, with "lips bruised blue // from the impact of the shore".

Forbes's poet is, of course, perpetually in danger of being bruised. Presenting himself as the victim of circumstance, he responds by being its scourge. Alongside the streak of innocence in Forbes's comedy, there goes a strong current of scorn, a shifting between private injury and public spectacle, the one acting as an indictment of the other. Scorn, too, is a kind of grace, the revenge of the awkward on the easy — especially those with the money to pay for ease, or with the indifference necessary to enjoy it. Indifferent lovers are a special target. In 'Missing Persons' Forbes fires off one consumer image after another at the hapless offender:

in the next life I am Ike
 & you Tina Turner, vibrating
 between box speakers on a shelf.
 next to me is a water-ball
 with snow falling on Sydney Harbour
 why not invent
 a roll of 20s & 50s held together
 by a white elastic band? You know
 nothing can keep us apart.

This generalising tendency, moving outwards through the poetic use of public materials from the sense of personal hurt to a larger social indictment, takes in the enemies of innocence and the despoilers of paradise, property developers and financiers, politicians and power-brokers, traders and terrorists. In 'Love Poem', where the title suggests a personal communion, but the content is determinedly political, the rejected lover-poet comforts himself by imagining that the Gulf War has been performed solely for his benefit. More expansive still, there's the sardonic ending of 'Death, An Ode', a poem in which the personal fear of death works through a series of public analogues, and then turns suddenly on an image which takes on nothing less than the twentieth century, "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."

With his power of scorn, and his mastery of the vernacular, Forbes might have been a great scourging national poet. No doubt he could have turned an ode in honour of Australia, if required. His style is Australian, no less in its awkwardness than in its relaxed ideals of grace. His second major collection, *The Stunned Mullet*, could have confirmed him in this public role. Funded by the Australian Bicentennial

Authority "to celebrate Australia's Bicentenary in 1988", the collection contains some of Forbes's best satire ("Watching the Treasurer", 'Afternoon Papers', 'Elegy 1971'), and an ambitious poetic sequence, 'On the Beach', which begins by looking like the major poem in praise of Australia's destiny the Bicentennial Authority would have been happy to own. Forbes shapes up to the task with due solemnity — "Your vocation calls / & you answer it..." — but almost immediately the poem takes a self-deprecating turn. Since Bicentennial Australia exists mainly as a marketable image, composed of "milled day-glo ephemera... flogged and true-blue", so:

your vocation looks
 more like a blurred tattoo
 or something you did for a bet
 & now regret, like a man
 walking the length of the bar on his hands
 balancing a drink on his shoe

Where the nation lacks a substantial identity, the poet who would celebrate it must appear as a fool. When, in section 5 of 'On the Beach', Forbes considers how he might have written a Bicentennial poem comparable to Tom Roberts' heroic commemoration of Federation in 'The Opening of Federal Parliament', it is only to imagine himself as a clown-like character from that painting, dressed in feathers and pantaloons, doodling "in the open-cut sesina form, / developing like a backyard vegetable bed / bordered by upturned bottles, / nostalgia for a national style".

Coal, the back yard and beer — the iconic elements are to hand, but where is the authority that would confirm the poet in his public role, or indeed give that role some meaning? In a later poem, appropriately called 'The History of Nostalgia',

Forbes lamented the fact that for poetry, and the poet, there was no larger perspective, "something that slowly expands as you grow older, / broadening out like a real view does when you climb / a spur or wedge your way up a chimney". Instead, "you're here, that's all, / another miserable subject, composed of a few jokes / & catchphrases worn smooth with repetition / but at the same time almost statuesque, like a bust / of yourself in marble or bronze". There can be few writers, poets especially, who haven't felt that a literary career in this country is like wedging your way up a chimney. Now that most publishers, and the public too in general, have given up on poetry, one can see how, when his vocation called, Forbes found it truer to paint himself as a fool, than to deck the nation out in colours it didn't deserve.

The thought of failure is very close to the surface in Forbes's poetry, and it gathers strength, dominating his later poems. Forbes thought of himself as a public poet — his frequent recourse to the ode, and his penchant for both satirical scorn and celebration, testify to this. Yet increasingly he portrays the poet, not as the bearer of a public vocation, but as an affront to the society which denies this vocation. The sense of personal failure is paraded, caricatured, enacted in bizarre balletic routines. "You are as sane / as absolutely crystal clear TV reception / can make you," Forbes declares in 'Middle Age', "as if Sisyphus / exchanged his rock for a frisbee / & had to learn / all sorts of hand signals overnight / each one meaning / a different thing had gone wrong somewhere." It's as if he were determined to act his part as poet, though the rationale for doing so was vanishing as he performed. In 'Night Shift', he has the poet performing an essential public service by banging his head against a TV set, creating "a rhythm all night dance parties are held to / out in the park / where a fenced-in generator chugs to the beat /

and all across the city / emergency operating theatres, life / support systems & the police / need you to keep having fun".

Towards the end of *The Stunned Mallet* the note of personal defeat and unhappiness becomes more insistent, but it is held from self-pity by Forbes's habitual comic transfiguration of his own awkward stance into one of public indictment. Tragically, you can see the balance breaking down in *Damaged Glamour*, in those poems where the objects of scorn seem too obvious, or the personal becomes sentimental. I think Forbes recognised this, with some horror. If the public role was lost, if all the poem did was express his personal unhappiness, he would have betrayed his own vocation:

... as if the poem
was a funhouse mirror
we go fat & goggle-eyed in,
each phrase suggesting some
distorted aspect of your face
with rubber lips repeating
high speed shaggy dog jokes
until the eyes gleam & the
voice stutters 'Thhaar's
all, fffolkks!'

John Forbes was a person of enormous dignity, and he maintained this dignity to the end, though his circumstances imposed routines on him that he must have found humiliating. I broached the idea of awkwardness with him once, but he didn't seem to find it appealing. Perhaps I didn't stress sufficiently enough that awkwardness is a style, a kind of grace, an expression of integrity.

