

Chapter Two

Luminous Substrate: The Poetry of John Forbes

John Forbes has published four major collections of poetry since 1976. He has not been as outspoken as John Tranter, although in recent years he has been active as a critic and reviewer, and while his writings in that mode have been much less polemical than Tranter's, they might also be read as reflections of his poetics. Forbes is something of a poet's poet, and his poetry is appreciated in some unlikely quarters: Gray and Lehmann note in *The Younger Australian Poets* that Les Murray disliked "all the 'generation of '68', except for certain modes in John Forbes's work" (14).

Murray's appreciation is unexpected given Forbes's resolutely anti-humanist stance, but it indicates something of the range of styles and modes that Forbes commands. He writes with an energy and wit that have drawn praise, although some critics have dismissed his poetry as flippant. His four volumes represent a concentrated body of work, which exhibits fewer radical changes and re-inventions than does that of John Tranter.

Although his first collection of poetry was not published until 1976, Forbes had by then been publishing verse in magazines for a number of years, sometimes with spectacular results. His short poem "The Venice Letters" received an honourable mention in the 1971 Poetry Society of Australia Award, and "Four Heads / & how to do Them" collected the award in 1972. Forbes was also awarded the Arthur Macquarie Travelling Fellowship in the art and practice of poetry in 1975, and the Southerly Young Writers Award in 1976. Of the poets who were included in *The New Australian Poetry*, only Charles Buckmaster was younger than Forbes

Tropical Skiing (1976)

After those early successes, *Tropical Skiing* appeared in Angus and Robertson's first *Poets of the Month* Series. Tim Thorne in *New Poetry* approached the collection with some caution, noting that

Although his selection here is uneven, it is obvious that he is prepared to work hard at constructing a poetic, to be original in a serious and deep way. Obvious too, is the intelligence informing his work. (60)

David Malouf was much more enthusiastic, hailing *Tropical Skiing* as "the finest first collection of the past two years":

Tropical Skiing ought to have been out earlier. Its best poems, "Four Heads & how to do Them", "Topothesia", "To the Bobbydazzlers", as well as the brilliant title poem, go back to 1972-73. But their collection here confirms the impression that Forbes is the most elegant and inventive poet to have appeared in the seventies, the one who moves with the most agility and wit in a contemporary world of his own making, the

one who has set among the landmarks of our verse a half-dozen poems that already seem entirely at home there, as if the landscape had been waiting to receive them. It is a considerable achievement for a poet who is still under thirty. (31)

Movement with "agility and wit in a contemporary world of his own making" is evident in the first poem of the collection, "Salute":

Each tree stands alone in stillness
 But the jungle is a day's march and fingers
 Hide Nazi radar stations coding my story –
 Gunned down he bleeds poetry escapes to
 the brilliant air –
 'The hero's skill is keen no fox could
 Sniff our fragile eggs aren't China his
 Eye draws touch his thoughts perhaps
 A green cat will spring, he affects the
 Je est un autre of a James Dean movie...
 Aahh!

Apes swing in deserted cities bribed the
 Negroes tumble on a string, as all benign
 My accent blurs thick German curses –
 The Ghost that Walks is walking. Damned drums! (*Tropical Skiing* 75)

"Salute" is aptly titled, in that it acts both as an energetic welcome to the volume and as an introduction to Forbes's poetry, a dual role Forbes re-emphasised when he placed "Salute" in the same position in his *New and Selected Poems* (1992). This dual role is not, however, simply a function of "Salute"'s being the first poem in the book: it is possible to identify in the poem what amounts to a summation of Forbes's poetic aims and strategies.

It is instructive and appropriate that "Salute" should begin with a quotation. Few poets would open their first collection with an act of abdication, but that is what Forbes does here. The poem begins with someone else's words, words with which the poem appears to take issue, to judge by the second line, where the poem begins to assert its own authority by questioning the opening statement. "Salute" displays the influence of the New York School, especially Frank O'Hara, in the way that it both borrows from and embraces popular culture, and these elements trigger other resonances lying dormant in its title: a "salute" can be a gesture of respect and celebration, and this one acknowledges comic books and Pop Art as suitable concerns for poetry. This in turn activates the colloquial, ironic connotation of "salute", as the poem gives a two-fingered salute to the literary tradition that views poetry as the opposite of, or even as an antidote to, "mass culture."

On one level, the poem plays with the experience of reading a Phantom comic, and on this occasion Forbes himself plays the part of a "Phantom comic." The Phantom, a long running comic named after its crime-fighting protagonist, appears in both strip and book form and is usually set in a fictional Africa. The line "... fingers / Hide Nazi radar stations coding my story" might well allude to the comic book, since the Phantom has fought Nazis on a number of occasions, but the phrase "coding my story" gives pause. Likewise, when "[a]pes

swing in deserted cities” the poem goes beyond the Phantom to convey much darker intimations “as all benign / My accent blurs thick German curses”. For all of its humour and pop-culture imagery, the poem is well aware not only of the way in which it might be appropriated into the service of dangerous ideologies, but also of the way in which it must carry something of those dangers in itself, since its language can never be value-free. “Salute” resists such appropriations by disrupting reductive interpretations.

The fluidity of the lines is one of the poem’s most important features. A kind of sliding syntax that Forbes often employs gives rise to myriad ambiguities in lines such as “The hero’s skill is keen no fox could / Sniff our fragile eggs aren’t China his / Eye draws touch his thoughts perhaps / A green cat will spring”. Individual elements make sense, but in the complete unit the phrases create a kind of interference, competing for attention and tending to drown each other out. With no help from punctuation, a reader is forced to insert caesurae to find the sense, but the lines are designed in such a way as to resist the attempt. The poem cannot simply be reduced to a message; it subverts such an intention. Instead of the form being nothing more than a servant of content, Forbes inverts the dialectic and privileges the form, although this does not result in total meaninglessness.

What is left is a structure devoid of traditional, communicable meaning but filled with resonating traces. The poem-within-a-poem returns to coherence and threatens to resolve itself into meaning as the hero “affects the / *Je est un autre* of a James Dean movie,” but this yoking together of Rimbaud and James Dean, broadly analogous mythic figures, is cut short by the hero’s dying gasp, “Aahh!”, as the tragi-comic, pop-cliché ending deflates the myth of life cut short even as the poem re-enacts the event that gave rise to the myth. An active deflation of mythologies is one of Forbes’s recurrent concerns throughout his poetry.

The final line amalgamates two phrases familiar to readers of Phantom comics. Because the role of Phantom is assumed in secret by the eldest son of each generation of the one family, a Phantom has been able to keep the peace in the “Deep Woods” for hundreds of years. As a result, he is thought to be immortal, and is known as “The Ghost Who Walks”. The first part of the last line, “The Ghost that Walks is walking”, evokes both the mysterious ordering presence of the Phantom moving through his domain and the mysterious ordering presence of the “poet” moving through the poem. But the line misquotes the common appellation, “The Ghost Who Walks,” altering “who” to “that”, opening the possibility that the line may have a non-human referent. The change ignores the alliterative potential of the correct phrase, and it emphasises that, just as the Phantom is not a person but a fiction, so too is the “poet.” By misquoting the line, “Salute” conveys a certain unconcern for the comic book, signalling that the poem does not take its materials too seriously. This creates an ironic distance that prevents those materials from becoming a new kind of “approved poetic subject matter”.

The final exclamation implies a different voice, since the characters in The Phantom who curse the drums tend to be evildoers who hear the “Jungle Telegraph” but cannot understand its messages. They would never say “The Ghost that Walks is walking.” The collision between the two parts of the final line continues the poem’s efforts to keep itself free of any coherent subject. In the poem, the phrase “Damned drums!” alludes both to the rhythm of the lines and their hermetic nature. This generates a wry smile in that the curse comes as

the poem, and so the drumming, finishes. The cry echoes in the silence that follows the poem. Of course, one need only turn the page for the percussion to start again.

One of the best known and most anthologised poems from *Tropical Skiing* is “T.V.” If the imperative opening of “T.V.” is taken at face value, it seems to offer further evidence of the poet’s lack of interest in content:

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

(*Tropical Skiing* 78)

Although “T.V.” is by no means a relaxed poem, its more rational syntax contrasts with the frantic collage or mosaic technique of “Salute.” Jennifer Strauss notes that after the poem has

slid, via simile, into the evocation of a television documentary, it then moves to bizarre narrative about the anthropologist maker of the film.... If we expect some kind of resolution about containment (casings) or the way in which things escape from containment from this poem, we are denied it. It looks an extremely compact utterance, and tempts us to describe it as a single sentence, but in fact it comes in as if in mid-conversation and refuses us the closure of a full stop at the end. (47-8)

Strauss captures the deceptive nature of “T.V.”’s apparent simplicity, but her reading hurries over the poem’s unconventional employment of simile, a feature which is crucial in this and many of Forbes’s later poems.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English defines simile as a “reference to thing or person with explicit comparison to it of what is being discussed, as illustration or ornament”. Traditionally, simile privileges the first term in the structure, that which “is being discussed,” using the second to develop an insight into the nature of the first. The conventional application of simile implicitly attempts to limit the play of language by allowing the second element to approximate more closely to a definition or knowledge of the first element. The Forbesian approach to simile reverses this hierarchy to privilege the second term, thus opening up the poem by allowing it to exploit the play of language, and frustrating the expectations that similes invite from a reader. Forbes’s approach to simile is broadly analogous to his approach to poetry. Poetry has traditionally been thought of as the second term of a simile that has the real as its first element. Forbes reverses this hierarchy, privileging the second term over the first.

As “T.V.” moves to explore the new areas that it opens around the “pools where the animals come”, the rapid shift of scene gains momentum from the structure of the lines. The opening can be read as an end stopped line, but thereafter the poem rushes on, translating this impatience into motion, as enjambment after enjambment creates a pressure that forces us forward into what Strauss describes as “bizarre narrative about the anthropologist maker of the film”. Yet while the narrative touches on Doctor Mathews, it does not seem to be “about” the anthropologist. Indeed, both the anthropologist and the native hunter seem to be on the periphery of the poem’s concerns. This indifference to the “human” is expressed in the epithet for the Doctor, who is simply “unlucky,” and in the poem’s evidently greater concern for the film and camera, found “intact save for a faint, / green mould on its hand-made leather casing.”

The decentring of the human characters in “T.V.” is one of the more literal expressions of a critique of humanism that can be identified in Forbes’s poetry. The dispersal of subjectivity that was observed in “Salute” is another tactic employed in this critique, and if a similar dispersal is less noticeable in “T.V”, one reason is that the poem has no human subject at all. The “me” in the first line is nothing more than a rhetorical strategy to connote an exchange between the poem and its reader. “T.V.” works to proclaim itself as pure text, a poem of process or act of language rather than an attempt at expression. The only certainties that can be derived from the poem are its technical characteristics, the ways in which it operates. Any attempt to identify the figure of “the poet”, much less the figure of John Forbes, is doomed to failure.

As Martin Duwell remarks in *Scriptsi*, one of the strengths of *Tropical Skiing* is “the sheer range of utterly different achieved poems” (258). The differences between “Salute,” “T.V.,” and the final poem in the collection, “Topothesia,” illustrate part of that range. In *A Possible Contemporary Poetry*, Forbes said of “Topothesia,” “I had no idea what that poem was about, what I was trying to do was write a poem as good as Ashbery’s ‘Clepsydra’” (81). Whether or not he succeeded, Forbes has used “Topothesia” as the model for a number of poems. The poem begins with the proposition:

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. (Tropical Skiing 96)

These lines could serve as a description of the modus operandi of another of Forbes’s early masterpieces, “Four Heads / & how to do Them” (81-7), but it is their stately elegance that is of interest here. “Topothesia” moves with a calm that is vastly different from the nervy staccato of “Salute” or the headlong rush of “T.V.”:

For to merely blink our eyes thinking this disclaimer
 has the problem staring us in the face once more
 like the hint of a mirror in an alpine lake, a
 riddle for ever unless everything is indeed beautiful
 in its own kind of way – for us here in the national park
 and in the distant farms and villages as well,
 as if an opinion poll had been left out for months

in the weather and elsewhere thousands of separate
people were breathing.

The longer, prosy lines and serious conversational tone create an expectation of rationality that is continually frustrated by the teasingly elusive, occasionally surreal content. Structurally, the poem mimics some sort of philosophical argument, moving through “For... like... unless” to the final “for... as if...,” but “Topothesia” resists any resolution into meaning.

The Dictionary of Literary-Rhetorical Conventions of the English Renaissance notes that the scholar Henry Peacham defines topographia as “an evident and true description of a place,” and topothesia as the description of a fictive place; “the fained description of a place, that is, when the Orator describeth a place, and yet no such place” (217). Forbes uses these connotations to again privilege the poem over the real, exploring the “fictive place” that “Topothesia” creates, a more complex and beautiful place than that evoked by the poem’s occasional references to geographical features. “Topothesia” moves with a slow music, its elegant cadences sustaining the poem as its philosophical propositions “blur and merge” like “blame” or a “typing error.”

Very different rhythms run through “Ode to Tropical Skiing”, which displays both Forbes’s mastery of tone and the sheer energy that his poems are capable of generating. It is a sprawling piece, with irregular line lengths and stanzas, that revels in the possibilities of poetry. The refrain offers a typically effusive summary of the poem: “it’s a total fucking gas”. The second stanza romps through a set of images suggested by an ice cream:

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 ashtray he/she you & it
are a total fucking gas

(*Tropical Skiing* 89)

As the poem leaps to embrace the connotations of each new object, the stanza is drawn together by the refrain, which focuses the energy and points back to the title, providing a reminder that, despite its unusual form, this is an ode, while the expletive signals both the urgency and the amplitude of the feeling. Although the poem makes use of the first person pronoun, the poem is not dependent on this “I” as an ordering subject, and remains free of the constraints that such a subject imposes. The pronoun modifies the tone, providing an immediacy that accentuates the happy racket.

In his introduction to *The New Australian Poetry*, John Tranter remarked:

Whatever else John Forbes may have intended his poem to do, it is at least certain that

transformed into profound meaning by their positions in the text -- indeed, it is crucial that something of that absurdity remains -- but what results is a triumph of tone, as the energy generated by the collage electrifies the poem, lighting it up like a neon sign flashing a paean of praise. The poem creates a kind of manic, exuberant unity in what appears initially to be complete chaos, a unity that does not impose order but which is itself animated by the chaos. The celebratory energy of poems like "Rose Selavy" has led to a view of Forbes's work that, while it appears to appreciate the poetry, actually trivialises it. Several critics have read Forbes as a vitalist, a reading Catalano has traced to Thomas Shapcott's review of *Stalin's Holidays* in *The Age*:

Stalin's Holidays is a key manifesto of the New Vitalists, make no mistake about it... The old vitalist qualities are here, though of course transformed some 40 or 50 years on: a surface of cheeky, busy bravado; a deliberate refusal to be "serious"; much use of gaudy, colourful effects for their own sake -- it is a poetry full of outrageous similes "like a trashy hair-do in the surf". It is a "now" poetry, concerned with the moment, the process of discovering the floating world of the moment... it puts everything on the surface to discover how much we -- our society -- is surface. (30)

Although Shapcott describes a poetry that sounds familiar, Catalano remains wary of this assessment of Forbes's work, and his doubts seem to be well founded. Catalano suggests that Forbes's consideration of "O'Hara and his apparent hedonism" (112) in his 1983 article on O'Hara's "In Memory of My Feelings" offers a useful insight into Forbes's own poetry. Forbes wrote:

O'Hara is not championing a simplistic idea of the "physical" as an adequate identity, in which our cultural identity is an accretion to, or a perversion of, a perfect state of nature. Rather he is championing his right to create his own cultural identity by changing the primacy of received identity... He sees the source of poetry... as the act of creating his own identity (and) as a counter pressure to that identity his received culture would have him accept. Such a poetry cannot conform to any pre-conceived image of its occasion... (217-8)

Forbes's own work clearly exerts "a counter pressure to that identity his received culture would have him accept." Clearly, as far as Catalano is concerned, to class Forbes as a vitalist is to reduce him, to sidestep or deny the intellectual and philosophical ramifications of his poetry. It seems unlikely that this is accidental: the image of the larrikin-savant out for a fun time can be turned to advantage by conservative forces trying to repel an anti-humanist, post-structuralist poet who seeks to question established orthodoxies.

"Stalin's Holidays" gives us Forbes's post-structural, deconstructive poetic in action:

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.
Juniper berries bloom in the heat. My heart!
'Bottoms up, Comrade.' The nicotine-stained
fingers of our latest defector shake as they
reach for Sholokhov's Lenin -- the veranda is
littered with copies -- no, commies, the ones

in comics like 'Battle Action' or 'Sgt Fury & His Howling Commandos'. Does form follow function? Well, after lunch we hear a speech. It's Stephen Fitzgerald back from 'Red' China. Then, you hear a postie whistle. I hear without understanding two members of Wolverhampton Wanderers pissed out of their brains, trying to talk Russian. Try reading your telegram – 'mes vacances sont finies: Stalin'. But we don't speak French or play soccer in Australia, our vocabulary and games are lazier by far. Back in the USSR, we don't know how lucky we are.

(*Stalin's Holidays* 35)

As Martin Duwell has observed, the poem opens "not with a phrase but with the alphabet itself, the origin of all phrases" (260), but Duwell does not point out that the line has a further cultural resonance: it is the sentence typists use to test their keyboards, that is, to confirm that the alphabet is available to them. Thus the line affirms the potential still available to poetry.

As the poem progresses, Forbes again draws comic books into literary service. The play on the aural similarity between "copies" and "commies" exposes the politically motivated constructions of Cold War propaganda, and the poem's deconstructive energy is emphasised by its marking of "'Red' China." The apparently ingenuous "Does form follow function?" is answered with a merciless pun, but that does not withdraw the question.

"Stalin's Holidays" finally turns its focus onto itself by appropriating a line from The Beatles' "Back in the USSR", which is itself a parody of jingoistic American rock and roll songs such as Chuck Berry's "Back in the USA" and The Beach Boys' "California Girls". As the poem announces that "Back / in the USSR, we don't know how lucky we are," the irony defeats any impulse to replace the discredited "Reds Under the Bed" constructions with their opposites. But the elusive "we" sets up other resonances, creating ambiguous links between the USSR and Australia, and suggesting that just as "the USSR" is known only as a series of constructions posing as truths, any knowledge of Australia is similarly comprised of fictions. In his next collection Forbes turns his attention and his deconstructive wit towards some of these Australian myths.

The Stunned Mullet and Other Poems (1988)

In many ways *The Stunned Mullet and Other Poems* continues to refine the modes and techniques that were established in *Tropical Skiing* and *Stalin's Holidays*. A poem such as "The Promissory Note" is built on the same model as "Topothesia," while "Death, an Ode" can trace its lineage back through "Ode/Goodbye Memory" and "Rose Selavy" in *Stalin's Holidays* to the first collection's "To the Bobbydazzlers." Other poems like "Monkey's Pride," "The Poem on its Sleeve," "Colonial Aubade," "The Stunned Mullet" and "The Sublime According to Quine" also display clear linkages with the first two collections, continuing and polishing already proven modes.

Television is full of them & inside
 their beauty you can act: Paul Keating's

bottom lip trembles then recovers,
 like the exchange rate under pressure

buoyed up as the words come out –
 elegant apostle of necessity, meaning

what rich Americans want, his world is
 like a poem, completing that utopia

no philosopher could argue with, where
 what seems, is & what your words describe

you know exists, under a few millimetres
 of invisible cosmetic, bathed

in a milky white fluorescent glow. (*The Stunned Mullet* 10)

Writing in *Overland* in 1988, Kevin Hart commented that:

When a poem begins “I want to believe the beautiful lies”, we know, full well, that we're dealing with someone who values the aesthetic over the moral and the religious, yet someone who wants to believe those ‘lies’, those powerful systems of representation within which we live and die. No critique of religion or humanism, however acute and searching, can suspend the everyday longings and problems of being human. (95)

Hart seems to be suggesting that Forbes has become disillusioned with his anti-humanist project and has come to a dead end from which he can only gaze nostalgically at “the moral and religious.” A useful comparison can be made between Hart's observations and these, from Lawrence Bourke:

Forbes knows the strongest myths have an aesthetic attraction, they are “beautiful lies”; and enable action: “inside their beauty you can act”... The important thing is to recognise their provisional status and question their use and relevance... In what is a typical procedure of enfolding the various mirrors of media and message within his own poem, Forbes points up the impossibility of disentangling reality from representation and the importance of being able to avoid confusing the latter with the former. The people who take representation for reality are open to economic and political manipulation, and the poets who encourage the confusion abet the exploitation. (*Poetry Australia* 39)

As Bourke points out, “Watching the Treasurer” does not encourage belief in “those beautiful lies / the past spreads out like a feast.” Television may well be “full of them”, which in turn allows “you” to “act”, but the claim is not as simple as it first appears. The fourth line not

only suggests being allowed to act in the sense of being allowed to do things, since the poem is after all exploring a television world, where everything is a type of “acting.” The poem implies that it is necessary to ask if it is more desirable to be allowed to act, or to be allowed to be.

The poem contextualises “the beautiful lies” by observing that they are spread out by “the past,” and in the process echoes Mark Twain’s wry assessment of Australian history:

Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer, and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies. And all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises, and adventures, and incongruities; but they are all true, they all happened.
(Torre 189-90)

Ironically, the “beautiful lies” of Australian history are still “novelties” for Americans to amuse themselves with, as Paul Keating’s “words come out...meaning / what rich Americans want.”

Paul Keating may be presented as an “elegant apostle of necessity”, but a word like “necessity” is one of those sites that Forbes has been examining for many years. This is a television necessity, and television is made of beautiful lies. This in turn points to problems in Kevin Hart’s reading of the poem. A “critique of religion or humanism” may not be able to “suspend the everyday longings and problems of being human”, but for many, religion and humanism also fail to achieve that suspension. Forbes’s earlier poems showed the inescapable dependence of meaning on context. The elegant and comparatively simple form of “Watching the Treasurer” may create a false sense of security, but Forbes still demands and deserves our full attention. The poem has already pointed to the historical evidence against the “beautiful lies”. They allow action inside the television, but for those who exist outside it, the time may be long overdue to find something else to believe.

The Stunned Mullet was received with surprise in some quarters for another feature that had never before been prominent in Forbes’s poetry, the consistent use of the first person pronoun. Poems like “Lullaby”, “Going North” and “Antipodean Heads” do not exhibit the pronominal slides that Forbes employs so often and, ironically, this creates a certain amount of confusion. Gary Catalano speculates that in *The Stunned Mullet* Forbes

subverts the poetic identity he fashioned for himself in *Tropical Skiing* and *Stalin’s Holidays*. Indeed, the frequency with which its poems employ such constructions as “I wish” and “I want” indicates that he may be evolving into some sort of expressionist. At the very least, Forbes now writes out of his own feelings. (113)

Of course, writing “out of his own feelings” does not mean that Forbes has suddenly started writing confessional poetry, and in any case, the poetic links to previous volumes ensure that the subversion of his “poetic identity” is not complete.

Yet Stephanie Trigg saw in *The Stunned Mullet* “a kind of nostalgia... for a simpler past, a simpler self, a simpler Australia” (28), and poems like “Lullaby” are largely responsible for this perception. “Lullaby” begins:

The sun tries to go down &
the moon floats near my elbow.

I wish I lived where the night
falls suddenly & the stars

look like bits of paint
scraped off a window....

(*The Stunned Mullet* 12)

These images do indeed create an atmosphere of nostalgia, but this nostalgia does not seem to be for, or to evoke, a simpler situation. Trigg's reading of the book falls into the same trap that snared Shapcott in his assessment of *Stalin's Holidays*. The weary, plaintive tone of "I wish I lived" is accentuated by the pathetic image of the stars looking "like bits of paint / scraped off a window." But the poem immediately moves to deflate this mood:

Instead

I sleep in the bed of a Great Man,
myself, too tired to cover up

the balanced odalisque of feeling
crashed out beside me

on the cushions in the back
of a revving panel van....

The sharp irony of the capitalised "Great Man, / myself" punctures the poem's opening and modifies its effect, so that what seemed nostalgic now appears almost self-pitying. Indeed, rather than positing a simpler form of subjectivity, "Lullaby" might be seen as an attack on the extremes of ego to which such a formulation ultimately leads. The voice notes that it is "too tired to cover up / the balanced odalisque of feeling" that is "crashed out beside me." The phrase "balanced odalisque" is puzzling at first, but it plays on the confusion that arises from a homophonic deception. An odalisque is a female slave or concubine, but the structure of the line, especially the choice of adjective, encourages the misreading "obelisk." In either case, the ramifications of the phrase are unmistakable, pointing to an ego running wild, and they sharpen the edge that was unsheathed by the use of "Great Man." The end of the poem pushes the point home. The voice says "I hope / I don't wake up this alert, or as black / as you paint my childish heart." The final couplet reveals that "I sleep" should have been read literally and suggests that "Lullaby" is some sort of somnambulistic meditation. This makes the first person constructions more problematic since they now take on dream status, and the poem destabilises the notion of an autonomous self even more by acknowledging the possibility that "I" could wake up "as black / as *you* paint my childish heart" (emphasis added).

Forbes's experiments with a more personal tone represent a change in the angle of his attack rather than evidence that he is sounding the retreat from his critique of humanism. The

belief that the appearance of “I” in *The Stunned Mullet* must signal a return to the unified self, a movement towards confessional poetry, or a nostalgia for simplicity does not seem to be justified by the poems. In his article on O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings,” Forbes repeatedly refers to the importance of Rimbaud’s insight into the nature of the self, *Je est un autre* (205,209,214). The ramifications of this concept, that “I is another,” must always be kept in mind when approaching Forbes’s work.

As the poems examined here indicate, the hedonism of Forbes’s early work is less evident in *The Stunned Mullet*. Forbes told Catherine Kenneally in *Otis Rush* that the poems “in *Stunned Mullet* are more miserable” (93), but the description seems to misrepresent the collection. The absence of the manic exuberance of *Tropical Skiing* and *Stalin’s Holidays* does not leave behind a chronicle of depression, but poems that are more willing to signal seriousness of intent.

New and Selected Poems (1992)

Unlike Tranter, Forbes did not substantially revise any of his early poems for his *New and Selected Poems* (1992). He seems by comparison to be much more comfortable with his early work: fourteen of the eighteen poems in *Tropical Skiing* reappear in the *New and Selected Poems*, as do twenty-six out of thirty-two from *Stalin’s Holidays* and twenty-five out of twenty-nine from *The Stunned Mullet*. However, as Martin Duwell pointed out in *Scripts*, “John Forbes’ *New and Selected Poems* is not a large book: at one hundred and twelve pages it represents about six poems a year since the early seventies” (257). The book actually has one hundred and eleven pages of poetry, but Duwell’s point is taken. Given that his output has been so small, Forbes’s generosity in making his selections might be seen as a matter of necessity rather than choice, but Forbes has an uncompromising approach to poetry. He rarely publishes a weak poem, and there are very few to be found among the “New Poems”.

Although most reviewers made use of the opportunity afforded by the volume to reassess Forbes’s career, and so paid less attention to the new poems, Lawrence Bourke commented in *Voices* that:

The 16 new poems ...bring more clearly into focus what was present earlier but overshadowed by the playfulness, that is, a sense of guilt, anxiety over time passing, a sense of kin loyalties, and of personal values and integrity. The old spirit of play is still present, but now it is being qualified. (106)

Bourke also notes that in reading the selected poems with the new, it is possible to observe a concern with nostalgia, memory and the past that “deepens throughout Forbes’ output” (106). For Bourke, this generates two effects:

The first is an awareness of time passing, of loss and death. Along with this is a sense of sorrow and disillusionment... The second effect is an increasing refusal to dismiss self-identity as just a product of discourse. The poems increasingly reveal a consistent will, a persistent set of preoccupations, someone with a personal past, and an idiosyncratic style, an individual talent, that is, John Forbes. (106)

While much of what Bourke says sounds quite reasonable, the leap of faith he makes from “a persistent set of preoccupations” to “John Forbes” seems untenable. It could be argued that Forbes has never seen “self-identity as just a product of discourse.” Instead, Forbes has recognised that discourse plays an inescapable part in the construction of the self and has chosen to challenge the received identity that other discourses, notably humanism, have attempted to inscribe on him as a poet. As those who see him as a vitalist have realised, Forbes has always recognised the physical body as a site of the self. “Ode/’Goodbye Memory” from *Stalin’s Holidays* (36) demonstrates this recognition, even as it illustrates his awareness of the need to create his own discourse. Bourke’s reading of the new poems seems ultimately naive, in that they tend to complicate the “I” more than the poems written in the first person in *The Stunned Mullet*. “My Twin” and “Melbourne” posit complex conceptions of self-identity, while the subject in the self-explanatory “Tranteresque” is quite obviously “a product of discourse.”

“My Twin” specifically engages with the notion of self as it has appeared throughout Forbes’s work. From its critical position, the poem recalls:

You placed your dogeared ephemeris
next to my atlas & gazeteer

and these simple ideas about position
helped to keep you
from crawling off the floor; not

that your problems didn’t have
their furry equivalent – the rabbit

in his burrow by the swamp
needs more air & the horses catch catarrh,
grazing by its soggy verge.

(*New and Selected Poems* 100-1)

Employing a simple discursive technique, the poem looks back at a pastoral mode the early poems rejected. The rather pointed imagery suggests the limitations that were perceived to be inherent in such a poetry as the poem ridicules any romantic notions of the poet taking flight. The astronomical almanac, the atlas, and the geographical index may only provide “simple ideas about position,” but these ideas allow “you,” the poetic persona, to remain firmly grounded, saved from either the crippled ascent or dangerous fall insinuated by “crawling off the floor”.

Pointing to the seriousness of intent that has always been a feature of Forbes’s work, “My Twin” offers a wry observation on one of the responses generated by the anti-religious implications of the poetry, noting how “that backhander surprised you / when you mocked Nana’s / Holy Infant of Prague.” The poem pauses briefly to meditate on the type of “religion” that might have been useful to the poetry, a religion that sounds very similar to the O’Hara pantheon of movie stars, before moving on to the present, or, at least, to the present tense:

Now the rudiments of tact
 keep you up to scratch, like a monkey
 confusing torture & reward. You know

the beach is a clinic for bathos
 and dream of creating a speckled parade

or a house built on sand
 with your own bucket & spade.

and seeing you, half-baked & emblematic
 but graceful like a sneeze,

I know why I feel
 this quiet pride in your sheen.

(*New and Selected Poems* 101)

In his review of the *New and Selected Poems*, Martin Duwell offered the observation that the self is “always a shifting and elusive entity in Forbes” (261). The final couplet seems to contradict Duwell’s statement, but again, it must be taken in the context of the poem. The temptation to identify this “I” with Forbes is intense, the more so because so much of his work has refused to offer such opportunities, but as always in Forbes, *Je est un autre*. Placed against the body of the poem, the “I” becomes highly ironic, as must any poetic embodiment of identity in a poem explicitly concerned with the construction of poetic identity.

The process of contextualisation made explicit by the publication of the *New and Selected Poems* had been going on surreptitiously in Forbes’s writing for many years. Duwell’s review notes “there is a tendency to invoke earlier Forbes poems, sometimes as allusion but sometimes to mine or even rework material” (261), but this had been noticeable well before 1992. In *The Stunned Mullet*, “Antipodean Heads” (23) triggers a memory of “Four Heads / & how to do Them” from *Tropical Skiing* (81-7), not least by mentioning Mt Rushmore, while “The Joyful Mysteries” from *Stalin’s Holidays* (45) replies to *Tropical Skiing*’s “The Sorrowful Mysteries” (91).

Duwell’s response to this phenomenon in the “New Poems,” where “Tropical Drinking” (93-4) provides an obvious echo of the past, is to remark that “it is, at the very least, good to be reminded of old friends” (261). Indeed, that appears to be exactly what is happening. The allusions to previous work tie the later poems to the concerns and issues the earlier poems explored. On a formal level, “Night Shift” (110) can trace its lineage back through “Stalin’s Holidays” and “The Sorrowful Mysteries,” while “The History of Nostalgia” (109) displays clear similarities to “Topothesia.” These various linkages suggest that the sense of a past that Bourke saw evolving across the collection is something a reader would do well to develop when approaching Forbes’s poetry.

Kevin Hart, reviewing the *New and Selected Poems* in *Overland*, remarked, “John Forbes is one of those rare poets (like Bonnefoy and Popa) whose work is marked by exacting coherence” (30). This coherence finds perhaps its ultimate expression in “Ode to Doubt,” a

poetry is often substantially different to that of *Tropical Skiing*. It is also true, however, that Forbes has always been a poet of considerable depth, and looking beneath the surface of his *New and Selected Poems* reveals the same luminous substrate upon which his poetry has always been founded.