Collected Poems
John Forbes
Brandl and Schlesinger, 2002

John Forbes. The name is already a legend. (Big, scruffy bloke on a clapped out bike, wheeling his way around Carlton, trailing clouds of Sydney, making his living (!) as a poet: ‘send me your poems to look at, why don’t ya?’). He would have hated that fact, and loved it – being a legend, the consummate poets’ poet, and a regular, daggy kind of guy who could never quite get things together – and didn’t actually believe, somehow, in getting things together. “e.g. ‘Minor / poet, conspicuously dishonest’, would look funny / on a plaque screwed to a tree” (“The Age of Plastic” 137).

John Forbes’ poetry is an amalgam of innocence and sophistication. There is self-doubt, angst, self-deprecation, the loser, the mimic, the know-it-all, the druggy, assisted by humour, irony, satire; and there is the poignancy of a lyrical gift opening up so many unsayable, moving, uneasy visions:

for a moment I felt le sang des poètes
— Tonight Show version —
coursing through me, natively brilliant
& removed completely from that inertia
you cancel your career with. ("Serenade" 136)

The early poetry, 1970–1979, taken mainly from his first collection Tropical Skiing, is fascinating in its youthful virtuosity. Its mentors, Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, are worn on the sleeve, so to speak, and it’s actually refreshing to see the love and wonderfully creative mimicry of one young poet for other poets he is discovering, re-discovering and honouring. But there’s always the transformation too, from the American voices to the Australian vernacular. But how do Americans read “On the Beach: A Bicentennial Poem”? Depends on the American I suppose. And it depends on the Australian reader too. Not all literary critics love Forbes – for example the one who leapt gratefully on his poem about Iraq, because “it was one of the few of his I understood”. We are dealing here with a poet who puts language and the vagaries, puns, wisdoms, alienations, and beauty of language first. It’s language, place and self – the weird permutations and aspirations of the self in the throes of making and unmaking – which Forbes uses to form such bizarre, cryptic, beautiful and angst-making pacts with readers.

So it is first of all Sydney which places Forbes, in the position of a stunned mullet; Sydney inspected by “Alan Bond’s belly coloured airship”. The Sydney where “images don’t change / beneath a varnish that embalms disgust” (“Sydney Harbour Considered as a Matisse” 186); the Sydney of boyhood, adolescence, sex and drink and drugs, and spentness: “it becomes you / like a tinsel landscape the way false doors / wobble & bang in the traffic lights. / You are the beautiful, rigged summers / that glow with Vaseline / frenzied but safe from sweating like a movie, / a close-up of afternoons that dazzle / blue with / the fragile descent of parachutes, transistors / giggling at the silly fates” (“A Floating Life” 38). Place and self merging, refusing to disentangle themselves in words.

But it’s also Melbourne, second place, where self-administered advice amounts to: “Be a caricature, / John, and not a cartoon, if you want to lose / your nostalgia for the sensual, glaring sun!” (“Melbourne”153). These places are not the Melbourne and Sydney of the town planner, but rather the bleak, funny, transmogrifying landscapes of the self trying to outwit itself. In “Lessons for Young Poets”, under the heading “(love)”, young poets are advised to:

continually disappoint
the expectations of others,
this way you will come to hate yourself
& they will be charmed by your distress (167)

Along with love, and fulfilment, the suburbs also do not come off well. Sobriety too is something you would barely consider between bouts of language, drink, loneliness, sarcasm, disdain, surfing and illness. Female beauty is also a diversion of a major kind. Usually unattainable, usually a metaphor for unattainability. And poetry only makes
all that unattainability worse: poetry / ludicrous sex-aid greasing the statues of my mind” (“Ode/Goodbye Memory” 54). Foreign countries too are broached, wandered and similed across, always in Australian drag: “knocked out by what convinced me / Great Art” without inverted commas is / (but not because of this) I hung around / with other Australians & hit the piss” (“Europe: A Guide for Ken Searle” 119).

And the lot of it – poetic vocation, politics, the state of the nation, the self, love, poet— can be seen as “in fact a cunning mechanical contrivance, / like Bob Hawke’s hair” (“The Stunned Mullet” 124). Hope is steeped up around art, and words, but always with a tart, sideways look of disbelief, or awkwardness, or the realisation of futility. This is the poet of the “casual eschatology” who always hoped for more:

I think I should write
more detailed poems about trees, or
tracts of reasonably clean water, maybe
the exact delineation of a marble layer cake
underneath a doily on the porch, not because
I can do it well
but more as a general anti-dust routine
where you wipe the grime off your hand
& kiss it etcetera etcetera, as if one day
all this sort of stuff won’t make you laugh,
that once you thought
its day-to-day terror would equal change (“Self-portrait with cake” 135)

And there you have it, really: the wit, the innocence wryly recalled, the craft. And the longing. What you’re left with are a thousand reasons to laugh, and hope. But in what exactly? Perhaps change was too much to expect, though Forbes did change the language. And he enriched lives, through his steely, awkward pyrotechnicality of self-making. He had, after all the demurrings, a will to be the ageless poet in an age of jet planes, satellites, transitory relationships and failures, where:

dead by stellar
allure or a lack of oxygen might follow,

unless this prayer can save me, the way
damaged glamour seeks out its opposite number

& we move together, draped in the planet’s
tingling aurora, thanks to our huge,
electric shoes. (“Satellite of Love” 191)

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