

from Prime Wollongong, butter butter

(unpublished as a collection)

Prime Wollongong, butter butter

The paddle-boat would always mutter
on all its runs around Balmain,
'Prime Wollongong, butter butter',

So *William IV* was said to utter
from Erskine Street, and back again.
The paddle-boat would always mutter

because the wheels, designed to sputter
water, as well gave this refrain:
'Prime Wollongong, butter butter':

the children chant the steamer's stutter,
from Bald Rock wharf, to Morts Dock crane.
The paddle-boat would always mutter,

no quiet caique, no windless cutter
could echo so in this domain:
'Prime Wollongong, butter butter'.

Now bridges bridge, and vehicles clutter;
few travellers can now explain
the paddle-boat that used to mutter
'Prime Wollongong, butter butter'.

Lola Montez horse-whips an editor, and is herself whipped in return

She whipped him hard about the face:
this editor must now desist:
her 'spider dance' was no disgrace,

her entertainment for this place,
for Ballarat, would not be missed.
She whipped him hard about the face,

caught by surprise, and by her pace,
she lashed this prudish journalist:
her 'spider dance' was no disgrace.

He turned, he reached, and now gave chase,
he raised his whip, he flexed his wrist;
she whipped him hard about the face,

he whipped her hard, watched her grimace,
he tried to punch: the crowd then hissed;
her 'spider dance' was no disgrace.

The pub gave Lola pride of place
and threw out the misogynist;
she'd whipped him hard about the face,
her 'spider dance' was no disgrace.

from Australian things, 1990

1 Good things*

A start is a good thing, because it can begin a search for what is best. And, since settlement, there've been many 'best' opinions: some say Port Jackson from a yacht tacking to morning, or Sydney from the air in an afternoon of late shadow, water and bridges; others the Derwent, even Hobart, or the walk up Frenchman's Cap. Still others say a field of wheat, with sun and sufficient rain, or a quarry, large and rich in minerals, but I say it is the one you love because you don't then think of endings. All else is either setting or support, which, respectively, we hope will be near our birthplace, and commensurate. Everybody knows this, but can never find the pencil needed to write it down.

3 Things supposedly pleasant and which are

Overseas with sense, Australia with senses. Travel in love and hitchhiking when cars will stop on a thumb. Then, Mataranka with stars, July in the Wenlock, koalas in The Grampians, or morning with eggs in Brachina Gorge: anywhere closer to myself. Arriving home weeks away, I find my house as an old coat forgotten for years, something to dust off and try on. Outside, the afternoon light makes even my little backyard glow, so that I can't imagine wanting to live anywhere else. Unpacking, I think I take more pleasure in simple things and that this may be a sign of age. As a younger man, I might have called this 'productivity' and I'd call it wisdom if I didn't have some years left to live.

4 Things supposedly pleasant but which generally are not

Close-hauled and tacking south off Cape Tribulation,
head reaching waves for the space between two fingers
in an afternoon moving rapidly north. Seagulls dressed,
like bureaucrats, to look good on the day, preening bellies,
protecting backsides: annotating files in case the wind changes.
'Your father's never happy unless he's miserable,'
said my mother, scratching some poverty. A room
in Canberra full of expensive objects d'art,
but nowhere to place my hat; the dinner table with tacking,
but no spinnakers, allowed. Undecanted shiraz
with more sedimentation than a tailings dump. Thick, crystal
wine glasses. Such a host's smile. Watching anything
go round, or down, in circles or rhomboids, however powered.
The enormous amount of ignorance it takes to be rich.

5 Things about which something should be done

Adjectives and arts administrators, building societies
in C-sharp major, no carrot cake at interval,
ditto that don't repeat, echidnas that ebb on the bitumen,
the False Swamp-Rat, gaberdine gardens with
pencil pines, handshakes like wet beetroot,
idolatrous dogs, jet-lagged luggage,
kerugma on the buses, stale lamingtons at Yass Junction,
Mach numbers larger than me, nouns without mercy,
cats that live in octaves, music that can't be pedalled,
questions never asked of those who got away with it,
ragtime with cornflakes, sheep dip wine jokes, Turkish Delight
made by Greeks, urban renewal without end, vernal women,
Weltschmerz in Magpie Lane, X-rays of lost limbs, Y-axes
that won't support my arguments; zippers that won't bite.

from Ruminations, 2008

I – Love as Song

25

Thus have I heard: that every practised artist
searches, in his art, for what is missing.

So, sculptors look in marble for their subject
and only stop their chipping when they find it;

painters, light to flood our memory
long after we've stopped looking at their work;
composers, any words that melody
can take with it in flight above a rhythm,

and poets, passion and concrete images
that capture or seduce imagination.
You're searching now; I see you nod your head
for what I've found about you and yourself.

37

If grass is more than green and seems a joy,
if leaves caress the air from drunken trees,
if birds in song are all in major keys
regardless of the tunes species employ;
if clouds appear to move and to your need
for rain on crops, or sun-defining day,
if people passing smile as one and say
how well you look and you respond 'indeed',
you are in love. This always welcome news
will be a shock if not revealed before,
in which case you will be the last to know.
Your course is clear: you cannot help but choose
to tell her and confess why you are sure.
And quote me, if you like. Say I said so.

60

My name is known to those who know themselves
and arts of elegant simplicity.

My main ambition is not to need ambition
beyond the nodding smile which buys my book.

69

She said she's never been to a poetry reading.
I thought: 'she's frightened to learn about herself.'
Then I discovered that she didn't love her husband;
indeed, had never loved him, or he her.

So now I know why she and many others,
don't read poetry, or go to readings:
who wants to be reminded they're not in love?
And who, in love, would want to do anything else?

73

It can be found. Just look around these streets;
the signs are there and you are literate.
Are people walking in positive directions?
Are birds in flight for something other than food?

Do old songs haunt your coffee in cafés?
Do your eyes wander, regardless of where you put them?
If you're in love, or even merely looking,
possibility inheres in everything.

II – Singer and Song

7

She could be young, or older aging less.
The song, begun as need to meet and meeting,
and the terrifying joys of declaration,
sings things consumed even as they are augmented.

from Collected Sonnets, 2010

(and other, unpublished sonnets)

1 Books

She reads me without opening my books;
my strategy is obvious – I know it.
Without my works, am I worth second looks?
I lean upon my profile as a poet.
Well proven, from an ancient poet's laws:
'Please give yourself, material for me,
and I'll write poems worthy of their cause.'
(What girl's averse to immortality?)
Smart women think. And thinking, likely feel.
And feeling for Australians, live or dead,
admire (then love) the poet who makes real
the lives of those from whom we have been bred.
 Thus, shamelessly I draw upon the ages
 to generate a friendship through my pages.

2 Fifty-three

To see the world in just one woman's face
is something only lovers understand;
describing half the joys of her embrace
impossible, however rhymed or scanned.
So I'll say nothing of brown hair which falls
past light brown eyes, Australian-freckled skin;
or of her voice, this urgency which calls,
or interrupts an incandescent grin.
A sickness of the eyes disturbs my sight;
I cannot comprehend how beauty's whirled
through everything I look at, day and night:
how universal goodness fills the world.
 Unfit for some exertion though I be,
 my heart still leaps and I am fifty-three!

3 Rugs

The rug is on the grass beside the lake
in Canberra in March when autumn days
deciduous with trees and sunshine make
a lunch outdoors ideal for such buffets.
Mine are assorted sandwiches and drinks,
the plates and serviettes with which they're served;
I'm interested in what and how she thinks,
and where she's been and what she has observed.
Hers is the layer cake and information
that my new friend is happy to provide
about herself, her work and contemplation
upon the views on which we both preside.
And folding up the rug our fingers clutch
we both avoid (and thus do more than) touch.

4 Pain as pleasure

It happens in a book and late at night
in fiction far away or long ago,
in summer on a beach in blinding light,
or winter in a troika on the snow:
a word or phrase some character has said
reminds me of how much we are apart,
so that, despite the book, she's in my head,
and shafts of pleasure stab me in the heart.
This is the quarrel that I have with love:
that pleasure's deemed synonymous with pain;
instead of working with me, hand-in-glove,
joy is inflicted on me till I'm slain.
I won't deny the passion to my mind;
I only wish love's dealings were more kind.