

# Long Paddock

**KEN BOLTON**

Rae Desmond Jones, *BlowOut*

Woodford, NSW, Island Press, 2009  
72pp, ISBN 9780909771768, RRP \$20 pbk

This is the first book in many, many years from Rae Desmond Jones. So many that one could not even apply the term, "eagerly awaited". But now that *Blow Out* is published there will be many who will be very interested to see what it is like.

Rae Desmond Jones was a biggish figure, and a popular one, within the Sydney poetry scene in the 1970s, unaffiliated with any particular faction. Despite – *surely not because of* – a history that included publishing a nuttily scurrilous poetry magazine called *Your Friendly Fascist*, in the 80s Jones went into politics, rising to Mayor in inner Western Sydney. A literary career – a number of critically successful volumes of poetry, published by Makar and UQP, a first novel, *The Lemon Tree*, with A&R, a book of short stories, more – was allowed to languish.

Well, evidently, Jones kept his hand in. *Blow Out* is continuous with his previous work, but it seems to me, somehow, better. Its particular strength is poems that have a quick documentary registration of detail and which affect a neutrality towards and a distance from their subject. These capture inner city Sydney of the last few years very tellingly and in a way that few can.

Take the poem "Witness":

The light truck with steel boxes  
    On its back bumps over the line,  
Then the fruit barrow rips across the path  
    & a steel pole bends as the lights  
Change to green & that yellow sports car  
    Bananas (I hear it crack).

Inside the car an old song whines.

A baby reaches from his pram  
    For an apple rolling along the path  
While his mother stares at the oil sneaking  
    Along the gutter toward the three people  
In line at the Westpac ATM.

*Your burning me up insi-i-ide*  
    Croons the crushed pod of yellow.

Tentative pedestrians move closer  
As a police car slides into the kerb  
& a young policewoman looks at the driver's head  
Pressed into the wheel,  
Diamonds drip down his dreadlocks.

The policewoman leans in to press a button,  
Then the street goes quiet

Rae Desmond Jones was always able to do this – but he did it less often and usually bent it more obviously to a narrative purpose and an argument. Here the documentary effect is more pure – and it gathers from poem to poem. The detail is great and is delivered with great economy. And the camera's-eye that drinks this in is mobile: we both see and “are”, at different points within the poem, the child, the mother, the curious pedestrians. We see what the policewoman sees (brought in close to note the diamonds in the driver's hair) and see her, too, at a distance, from the street's point of view, as she arrives, as she leans in.

Here is “A brick & sandstone YMCA”:

A brick & sandstone YMCA  
Embossed 1907 squats  
Between three long knives  
Of polished steel & glass  
& shrugs the ancient dust  
From her dowdy shoulders

Further down Pitt St  
A jackhammer drills  
Behind a modest skirt  
Of pipes & fibro as  
Sydney's old tank stream pauses  
Its sweet unstoppable flow

I walk on past the sushi bars  
& doner kebab stands,  
Breathing the richness  
Of commerce & power,  
Wheeling & dealing;

The pimp with acne scars,  
A policeman with his sagging gut,  
A thin girl with dead blonde hair  
& needle scabs along her arms.

Meaning passes through me  
& whispers then moves softly on.

Above my head a monorail car  
Slides pneumatically  
Into the future  
Gripping a single greasy rail

Again, there is detail. It is offered here as a little tired, expected, but is made, by the poem's pacing and ordering of successive pictures, to rise in intensity. The end, then, is a bleak epiphany: a kind of sign, a truth moving away from the protagonist's now upraised head. The height of the last view – something up above the street, is telling here. One is forced (imaginatively) into an attitude that resembles or mimics respect as we identify with the subject's point of view. In the place of the sublime, though, is the monorail. It is a bathetic vision, but not milked for that effect. The poems have all Rae Jones's usual vocabulary – "steel & glass" opposed to the "dowdy", the burning smell, acne scars, sagging gut, all are familiar. "Meaning passes through me / & whispers then moves softly on" – the shiveryness of "whispers" and "softly", the "passing through" one, are exactly typical of his work, of any period. Jones's aesthetic and his fixations have not changed. There are a good many poems in *Blow Out* of just this type. More than enough to justify the book.

The "scurrilous" side of Rae Jones is also present. This is much less interesting: the poems which manifest it seem to me not so much "scurrilous", or "irreverent", as facetious and puerile. Jones's comic/satiric vision has always been framed by a rigidly and cartoonishly hierarchized world – peopled by the king, the servants, the poor, by the dictator and the masses, by the pop star celebrity, by a Midas figure. There are lots of generals. And tough, fat, bad old cops. Gay guys – of course – *upset* these fat cops. They are all types. (Though the poem "Pig" has a human cop behind the glasses.) It's reminiscent of Don Martin of *Mad Magazine* fame: cops are always fat: they have dark glasses and a gut and a moustache; sexy people are always in lycra and have big buns or balls or breasts and are "outrageous": beside them others are prim and repressive. These are simple binaries and inflexible, and can lead us to wonder at the degree to which the same thinking's shortcomings might underpin the more serious poems.

As an instance, "The xmas rush":

Indicators burning the refrigeration truck  
Turns sharp at the corner where the cop  
Watches it steer through the pedestrians in  
The yellow lines loaded with parcels  
But something sticks in his throat  
When he sees the guy with the beard in a dress  
& his mates in pants so tight he could bite off  
Their cods like apples & he feels so bad  
He spits

Other ideas – apart from these hierarchies – are trivial and clichéd, usually the types themselves are the point, their conjunction evidently offering, for the poet, some satisfaction.

E.g. "It feels good when somebody hates you":

Because you occupy his head  
So there will always be some foreign frontal lobe  
That will remain forever you

When he drives his new merc though traffic  
He sees you on the footpath & when you wave  
He runs into the back of a police van

He believes in capital punishment  
Because he wants it for you

“Fame” is another such:

Being famous means that you get  
Lots of women & your picture  
Is in the newspapers &  
If you’re clever you might  
Become rich so that wherever you go  
People point at you  
& whenever you buy anything  
The shops double the price

If someone is nice to you  
It’s a because they want your money  
So you buy a big house  
With an extra big garden  
& hire a squad of goons who send away  
Photographers & the girls  
You don’t want to see anymore

It ends:

But you watch instead DVDs  
Of yourself without the sound  
Which are already out of date

This does not strike me as interesting – or as news. It is both “already out of date” as poetic news and it is a cliché, a truism: in one sense true, *of course*, but unexamined, so it has the lack of detail, the absence of any specific anchoring.

Admittedly this effect of realist synopsis, of summary, in Jones’s style, is present in those poems I’ve been lauding, too, present as the effect, simply, of a little heightening of contrasts and sharpening of profiles, a slight colour-filter effect. It is documentary with an infection of Howard Arkley.

Others treat this urban real: John Forbes occasionally (but always compressed, anguished and metaphysical), Pam Brown (but as a palimpsest through which she moves), Steve Kelen (but more ecstatic). Pi O (where the detail is intensely sharp in its capture of idiom, both for itself and as an index of much else). Yep, so it is not territory untrod. Jones’s take has its own comic-book frame kind of clarity and drama and an equivalent economy of focus and composition.

Having made these complaints, at far too great a length in proportion to Jones’s book overall, one has to acknowledge that some people do like this sort of thing – call it the Benny Hill-factor or not, but for some it delivers. And, secondly, in fact there *are* an awful lot of generals and generalissimos around today, manifestly up to no good, and the unsightly rich, as John Lydon or Samuel Johnson once said, will always be with us, battening on the wider society. Even so, Jones’s take seems not so much analytical as excited by the very fact of this hierarchy, this order: the inherent comedy of fat generals in dark glasses and braid, and so on. A literary equivalent to Adam Cullen in Australian art.

What helps to counterbalance this in *Blow Out* – along with the vignettes and reportage

of the very good “camera’s eye” poems – is the swag of controlled and moving poems on Jones’s children, on his father, mother and grandmother, and on old friends now passed.

There are good poems on the author’s parents: “My father’s first Christmas”, and, for his mother, “El Nino”. The poem for his father notes the troubling telescoping of scale between the events that book-end the life: the Kittyhawk’s flight and the Boeings of today: a large world that passed Jones senior by? that dwarfed his expectations? We’ll never know. “El Nino” makes assessments of his mother, in neutral tones, but, unable to suppress emotion, guilt, inadequacy in the face of a parent, nor to deny love and admiration, arrives at a sudden sensation of the past repossessed and lost at the same time.

“In Memoriam” recalls his early fellowship with a grandmother reviled by the rest of the family. The poems to the poet’s own children are very good.

Let me reiterate: no rust or sclerosis in Jones’s style. You could begin with *Blow Out* if you’ve never read him before – and search out the earlier titles with their more wilfully zen-Brahmin scenarios and their earlier venturings along these same lines.