

# Long Paddock

**Sam Moginie**

*Sly Mongoose* by Ken Bolton (Glebe: Puncher & Wattmann, 2011)

Readers of modern Australian poetry have been blessed by the publication of four collections of Ken Bolton's poetry in the past two years: Bolton's long poem *The Circus* (Wakefield Press: 2010), the collection *A Whistled Bit of Bop* (Vagabond; 2010), *Sly Mongoose* in 2011, and even more recently *Four Poems*, first published by Sea Cruise Books in 1977, republished by Little Esther Books in 2012. The republications of *Four Poems* should serve as a reminder that Bolton has been producing beautiful poems for more than four decades, and for this he deserves congratulations and our thanks. Bolton's poems often situate him amongst his friends, and amongst a wider poetic and artistic *coterie*, but we should not allow this to occlude his singular talent. This review is concerned with *Sly Mongoose* in particular, and it is the most motley collection of the lot – various in its poetics and exciting in its range.

The poems in *Sly Mongoose* are more-or-less arranged in alphabetical order. The last poem in the book breaks the order; but that makes it a closing number to a set, singled out as a *hit* or a *special number* (it is a tour of European bars). The matter is complicated a little more by the fact that Bolton's titles tend to morph between the contents page and the poem itself: 'Letter to Akira in Japan' starts with A, for example, taking a prominent place up the front of the book; 'Postcard from Alan Wearne' starts with W and goes towards the back; and the first poem is an up-late piece called "2.30": the numbers-before-letters rule. Bolton's alphabetical order is not a rigid system, but a flexible and easy-going principle of organisation. It also emphasises the *collective* nature of any poetry collection, and suggests we can relax as regards questions of order, sequence and cohesion.

I dwell on this feature before any other because one of my favourite poems in the book is an alphabetical remix of a poem from a previous book. “People Passing Time” first appeared in Bolton’s collection *At the Flash & At The Baci*, where it traces John Forbes *in absentia* amongst “contemporary detritus / Brilliantly lit”. Putting the lines of the poem into alphabetical order reproduces the former poem’s pathos: narrative, voice and elegy are differently retained through an ‘indexing’. The effect is uncanny, in the classical sense we associate with Freud: familiar fragments forming new clusters of sense:

contemplating  
 composed      on his bed  
 considered as a problem  
 consolation  
 Dead or dying  
 death  
 dead too  
 ‘desk furniture’  
 disfiguring the poem  
 does drawing.  
 Don’t you  
 dozing  
 eyes wide, smoking  
 fixes it  
 for Mickey Allan  
 get the idea

How poetry “does drawing” is an interesting question to think with a Bolton book at hand, drawing being one of Bolton’s art-making activities and a preoccupation for his poems. *Sly Mongoose* has drawings literally on the page; the poem “The View at Sal’s, David’s” includes two sketches you imagine are contemporary with the poem. Two views of Sydney Harbour, two sketches with poems beside. Again, it might be an odd thing to dwell upon the two pages of the book where drawing is most literally presented. But Bolton’s poetry is, more generally, about art, and has a lot to say about the relation between art and poetry. For instance, it is clear (and refreshing) that Bolton sees art and poetry as different *things*: there is no collapsing one into the other. Poems are not drawings, although they can share subjects, moods and affects. Poems have their relation to art as discursive objects: they ‘talk about’ art. ‘Art History’, to take just

one instance, is a history of art, mostly painting. The poem is longish at 19 pages, funny, modest, accurate – I often found myself thinking “*exactly!*” – and like many other poems in the book feels classic already:

The cosy, rather battered coat  
that is your art history

– the history-of-art *for you* –

fits  
not too snug but snugly,  
ah!

In it whole periods are truncated,  
take disproportionately  
less time or space  
than they need in real life

– or they happen only ‘here’ or ‘there’ –  
nothing you don’t know exists (note  
the bit of sticky tape  
that adheres to the back of your coat

– adheres to your coast, sure,  
but at the back, unseen –

or the lining

that, similarly, hangs behind.

A little ragged, but who’s to know? Others,  
that’s who – you don’t.  
An avant-gardist, you face  
resolutely forward).

Attending to the ragged lining of “what is known” is another key refrain. The more discursive poems are full of modals, maybes and gaps, and make loops of doubt back upon themselves. J. S. Harry is quoted on the back of the book suggesting Bolton works a “relativist’s sceptical, provisional territory”. True; but another effect of Bolton’s redactions and question marks is accuracy: faith in appraisal, sceptical of language, attentive to difference. “*two / parallel lives – one / of movement – & consciousness / & the eye’s attention / / the other a dream of consciousness*” we read in the ‘Odd Quartet’

The thing about this book is that it works such a variety of ground – too much ground for this review to cover comprehensively. *Sly Mongoose* is a collection of phatic language, language musical to the point of noise, fanciful, funny, and other things. I think it's the number of "set piece" poems that give this multiple effect, each of them different: poems that trace a single line of conceit, like Ken meeting Apollinaire in Paris, or poems built around exotic puns. In fact, one of the great pleasures of *Sly Mongoose* is the modulation of tone, both *between* poems and *within* them. I mentioned "2.30" above, which opens the book. The poems has a still, sleepy logic, the effect of sustained modulation of subject, a roving mind and eye not quite on the same page:

Reading in the dusk jacket I see James Schuyler  
is 67.

Restina is my drink  
sitting at my desk            2 am

the morning of the day to come  
the cool change having arrived

after temperatures of 39 and 43. I slept  
early tonight. I slept at work today –

& at work last night.  
I go there for the cool:

– It's closed: there's no work 'on' –  
& use the computer. This year

Rae will be fifty-one.  
(Alan told me.) I'll be 42.

What follows is a stream of thinking, delving into the past before opening back onto a sensory and social present-moment. It is impossible to replicate the effect here, but the sudden appearance of a "warm" body in the late-night cool of the poem is a beautiful turn:

I hear Michael come down the hall  
& out the front door.

This means he is standing, looking  
across the road – where I see

only dark, an indistinct road sign, the sense of leaves,  
& some gleam from a car. I say

“Hullo Michael,”  
in case he is there – & he comes round to my window,

naked, his body warm & brown  
holding a towel & a glass of water.

The relationship of thought to sense will not be figured or forced. In the middle of thinking about time, who should say what a sensuous interruption means? The impression created is of a late-night logic, where the brain is just tired enough (or has ‘had a few’ enough – drinks *or* coffees) to let the differences between things be. Occasionally, a little anxiety comes with. Many times, it brings the poem to *others*, the friends and poets to whom the poems address themselves. Or, it can start there and end up in a mirror world; see again, the beavers and bicycles of “Odd Quartet”.

It’s too easy to see Bolton as a kind of everyday, chatty poet, and an attentive reading of Bolton’s work will undo such an impression immediately. Better to say: Bolton’s work confirms poetry as a kind of writing both tethered to the everyday, but ready to unhinge it. This is especially important, I think, as regards how we conceptualise the fields of art, poetry, the nation or the milieu. In writing of Adelaide, of Europe, poets, or movies, or whatever, Bolton writes in from the globalised cultural habitat that urban Australia is. But that habitat is also whatever room the poet is in, a bedroom, a house, a café, a workspace, a set of singular tastes. *Habitat* has a root in the Latin *habere*, ‘to have’, which reminds me of a John Forbes quip: that the poet should write “what we actually have.” Many poets will not do it, and many not with Bolton’s casual grace.