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Between bells, more than a poet is summoned

“Five Bells”, perhaps Australia’s greatest poem, ponders the passage of time and the evolution of memory through the loss of a friend. An attempt to locate the author’s grave in the sprawling necropolis of Sydney’s Rookwood Cemetery echoes some of the key themes in his great contribution to the art of poetry:

*Time that is moved by little fidget wheels
Is not my time, the flood that does not flow.
Between the double and the single bell
Of a ship's hour, between a round of bells
From the dark warship riding there below,
I have lived many lives, and this one life
Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells.*

With the fidget wheels of time turning through an August Saturday afternoon, I drove to Rookwood cemetery with two friends, intent on finding the grave of Kenneth Slessor. I was intent, and they joined me, all of us on a whim and unprepared for the task of finding the poet’s memorial, but confident that his poetic profile along with knowledge from a Rookwood guide would mean that locating Slessor’s undoubtedly grand monument would in the end be quite simple. After all, the poet has a *suburb, like those easier dead*, although his verse ensures that it is not the dissolute locale that will be the fate of most of us.

It was Slessor’s verse that spurred me, in particular seeing the manuscript of his great poem “Five Bells” in the Treasures Gallery of our National Library. So, from out of town and visiting for just a night or two, I had decided I wanted to find Slessor’s grave because in my passing internet searches to date I could find no photos and very few references to it. I would find it, and I would put *that* answer, at least, on Youtube – strike a verse blow, or chime a poetic bell, in the vapid climes of popular culture. Just as Slessor had pulled Joe Lynch out of the depths years after his death to explore the complexities of time and memory, we would in some way exhume the poet for reflection in the same light.

So, with a little effort, might we not hear his voice? After all, poetry had been Slessor’s epitaph long before he had needed a material monument, and it had served him well in the long years after he had become “an extinct volcano” and stopped writing. His verse may have since slipped beneath the wave of public view, but it is there for all to read should they seek it, and surely his gravestone would be there too, waiting like an old memory to be discovered:

*Why do I think of you, dead man, why thief
These profitless lodgings from the flukes of thought
Anchored in Time? You have gone from earth,*

*Gone even from the meaning of a name;
Yet something's there, yet something forms its lips
And hits and cries against the ports of space,
Beating their sides to make its fury heard.*

By the time we arrived at the cemetery that afternoon, all offices were closed. An internet search does not provide much more than a few general clues – that he was cremated and buried beside his first wife Noela, who had died from cancer in 1945. Rookwood is 877 sprawling hectares, with one million residents. Were they in the Catholic, Anglican, Jewish, War Grave or Independent section? Each of these was a vast suburb of dead. A search indicated that Noela was Catholic, but neither her name nor Slessor's appeared in the Catholic or any of the other deceased databases in the Friends of Rookwood website, a search option which in itself was incomplete given the sheer size of the place. *Only part of an Idea*. Like Joe Lynch sinking in the harbour.

Still, we were confident that with our many half-leads and incomplete puzzle pieces, we would eventually succeed. We started telephoning people who may have been able to assist. Sydney Ghost Tours were obliging (it was a long shot; they mentioned Slessor on their site), but the cheerful guide thought he may have been buried in the New Anglican part. He researched along these lines and called us back to confirm this, throwing us off track for a while. A local historian's knowledge covered only western Sydney cemeteries. Both the guide and the historian had worked at Rookwood, but the mind cannot recall what it has not experienced, and both reiterated the immensity of this tract of land and the ease with which one could be lost forever in their repose. Like Joe Lynch from the side of a Sydney ferry:

*Are you shouting at me, dead man, squeezing your face
In agonies of speech on speechless panes?
Cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!*

It occurred to me then that we may not find it. I looked, not like the poet, out of my window in the dark, but over the vast fields of headstones, those *funeral-cakes of sweet and sculptured stone*, stretching off over the horizon, punctuated by roads and administration blocks. I began to feel defeated, not by time or memory, but by an event here long ago that could not cry against the port of space and make itself heard:

*But all I heard was words that didn't join
So Milton became melons, melons girls,
And fifty mouths, it seemed, were out that night,
And in each tree an Ear was bending down,
Or something that had just run, gone behind the grass...*

Driving around at wit's end and about to give in and head back to the city, we found a sign which mapped the vast terrain and listed the hours of business of the many denominations represented here. A single office was open – the Rookwood Memorial Gardens and Crematorium office – breaking step with the other hours of business, it opened on Saturday until 4pm. It was 3pm, and it was our last chance before time's fidget wheels defeated us for the day. Workers in the grounds were unable to direct us to it – “do you know how big this thing is?” – but a landscaping labourer took a break from his work and led us to the Crematorium office.

The very helpful administrative officer pointed out that some records have only recently been digitised, and fetched some of the old books from the fireproof vault. Even the crematorium covers 280,000 inhabitants across eight hectares, and is the oldest operating crematorium in the country. A behemoth within a behemoth. If records were destroyed in a fire, the resting places of thousands could be forgotten forever. Some inhabitants had indeed been buried at Rookwood prior to stringent documentation and lost forever, without record. Would our poet be lost?

Five bells, the bumpkin calculus of Time.

Kenneth Slessor died on 30 June 1971, but the July 1971 records did not reveal his name. A search, in a graveyard just as in a memory, further back, to 1945, through antique books written in faded fountain pen, revealed Noela, for whom we had found several surnames. It turns out that those bells conjure not just imperfections of memory, but the recording of them; events upon events, systems piled on systems.

You were here who now are gone.

And there it was. Slessor was cremated elsewhere and brought to Rookwood six months later to rest beside his beloved first wife and her mother in December of 1971.

Tree 1856, Sunken Garden – how appropriate! Not far from the office. We made our way down to the garden and wandered around the different levels. Would it yet elude us? A cry from my friend – it was found. A simple, small plaque, one of three, badly tarnished as we all are by the passage of time, but with *dissolving verticals of light* ferrying not moonshine, but the last of the afternoon sun through the trees. How could one of our great poets be so uncelebrated in his eternity, left to a little corner plot in a non-descript memorial garden? I stood there squinting at the plaque, easily missed, easily passed by the few who would come this way, and I thought about “Five Bells”, and I thought about the night Joe Lynch died and the night Kenneth Slessor died, but as for the poet, I could not go that way. We had found the memorial, we had found the physical marker of finite time for one man, but no other answers, nothing more:

*The Nothing that was neither long nor short;
But I was bound, and could not go that way,
But I was blind, and could not feel your hand.
If I could find an answer, could only find
Your meaning, or could say why you were here
Who now are gone, what purpose gave you breath
Or seized it back, might I not hear your voice?*

“Five Bells” was voted Australia’s favourite poem by ABC listeners in 1988. It appears in most anthologies of Australian poetry. A towering, troubled and troubling elegy to a departed friend, to waning years, to a world outside of time that one day we all shall know. Slessor let time pass before he wrote or at least finished his poem about Joe Lynch, but it still rails against the coming dark, articulates the human burden of knowledge – of time, transience, mortality, the knowledge that loss is inexorable. Joe Lynch may have tumbled through midnight water to be lost forever, but he ended up with a grand poetic monument; it turned out to be Kenneth Slessor’s, too.

Some weeks after I posted the video, Kenneth Slessor's son got in touch after seeing it. I floated the idea of fundraising for a fitting memorial for his father. An affable man, nevertheless he set me straight: the only monument his father would have wanted, or stood for he said, was poetry.

And you are only part of an Idea.

In the end, in city or town, in graveyard or in friendship, even on that harbour where the cross hangs upside down in water and the buoys toss fireballs to each other, perhaps in straining for the lost voices we all hear nothing of consequence – just the fleeting boat's whistle, the half-heard and far away seabird's cry, and perhaps just the bells that toll us forward in that strange flood that does not flow:

*Where have you gone? The tide is over you,
The turn of midnight water's over you,
As Time is over you, and mystery,
And memory, the flood that does not flow.*

The friends I went to Rookwood with, those friends more outgoing than I, who asked questions, pressed for answers, and found us a poet, have passed in that flood to other things now too. When I think of that trip, I think not of Joe Lynch, and sometimes not even of Kenneth Slessor or "Five Bells", but of my friends, not gone from earth or the meaning of a name, but for me, between bells. We do lead many lives, and all of them are but a moment between bells. When those bells peal again, they will summon imperfect remembrances of events which transpired in the gentle hum and vibration between chimes:

*But I was bound, and could not go that way,
But I was blind, and could not feel your hand.*

On the way back in to the city that August afternoon, we celebrated our success by visiting Patrick White's house on Martin Road, a far easier feat even in the deepening Sydney winter evening. We took photos in the fading twilight as though, having learned nothing from the poem, we could make a permanent, seamless memory:

*If I could find an answer, could only find
Your meaning, or could say why you were here
Who now are gone,*

That night we didn't argue about blowing up the world – that, in a way, would come later – and as I sat in reverie over the day's events, my friends talked on, already planning for tomorrow. Dinner was finished, we sat on the balcony late in to the night drinking wine, and as the turn of midnight fast approached it occurred to me that the clinking wine glasses sounded, just a little, like bells.