

CLIFF FORSHAW

Ned Kelly's Eyes

i. Image

That's him, that awkward shadow, that black, that's Ned.
He's painted out as if already dead.

Sometimes, it's just a blank, that slit for eyes.
You look right through the man to clear blue skies.

Sometimes, that void's red-tinged with fire or dawn:
the burbling billy-can, the day's first yawn.

Sometimes, the clouds in that gash blush with dusk:
sky buries its burning cheek down in the dust.

Sometimes, there's a flash of silver, say sardines:
that peeled-back strip you've keyed along the tin.

He has no eyes in the back of his head, of course.
Sometimes, he rides away (*Black gun. Black horse.*)

into another picture. What's forged by smith
from black's still fire-lit then, and riding into myth.

ii. Poster Boy

You've seen those Sidney Nolan paintings? Gawky
uniforms riding shotgun through red or ochre.
Bush. In the gums, a bucketed head: Ned's helmet,
that famous, awkward square of black. Wild whites,
eyes dotted, peepers trapped in its narrow slit.

I heard he did the first while on the run:
AWOL. Lying low. Military Police.

Those wartime letters, the Captain's uncracked morse
obliterating words and where you are.
Seems like the censor's ink has blacked Ned's face
or cut it out to hang on a **WANTED** poster.
It grows a beard while registers ping rewards,
show cash racked up in magnitudes of zeroes:
the price above that head dolorous with silver haloes.

iii. P.R.

Sydney 2000. Kellies by the dozens,
all got up like Sidney Nolan's iconic
black rectangles—stagey cloaks and guns—
bushrangers to fire-crack the Olympics open.

Dead, Ned's everywhere. There's no escape:
a man with a hundred shadows springing up.
A forger takes a dusty Nolan landscape,
blacks out a patch to get that masked man in,
then watches his newly inhabited scrub appreciate
faster than any downtown real estate.

An enigma in the painted bush
holds you, the viewer up. Under the hammer:
views to die for. Lock, stock and barrel.
A gavel shatters the panelled room's judicious hush.

iv. Whites

Eyes peeled like hard-boiled eggs. Flecked red.
Yellow. Black-dotted. Jaundiced, downcast or lidded;
hooded with flame, day's end or blood.
Or pool-balls, yours, spotted, on the edge of the pocket:
one good crack (stripes, then on to the black)
and they're lined-up, potted.

Maybe that black, black square shows whites
so very white you think of a pair staring out,
framed by a cell-door's slit?

Or eyes you saw the day the constables rode in?
The Boss unhooked that length of rawhide
from behind the stable door...
Whites. And what peeped out from deep inside
that scared blackfella's skin.

v. Music Hall

Cracked twig. If what's next's not sudden racket,
then long silence. Retake that birdsong *da capo*.
Rosellas, lorikeets, kookaburras, trackers,
constables, galahs, sharpshooters, all beadily alert,
out there somewhere, sitting in the darkened pit.

Back in Melbourne, they're spilling beer. Cheers!
You're a pub ballad, you're a music hall song.
You listen out among the whistles, calls. That's it.
Centre-stage again, spot-lit: heart a metronome
ticking out long bars—doing time till it starts again.
They make a song and dance, aim to make you sing.

The ballad of your life lived out. Your song—
A one-ah, a two-ah, a-three—top of your lungs—
sung out among the crows and currawongs.

Dress

i

*Helmet or bucket?
Kick it. Fuck it.
What's it matter when
eight thousand pounds
press on four men's heads?*

Forget the Bible. Swords
beaten into ploughshares
are crook to what's hammered
out of duff ploughboards.

The twist that scragged
earth's arse got blunt;
now it's cheeky, bent
to a new job.

Helmet, chestplate:
riveted, rough
as rock-snagged half-acre,
but ready enough.

Hard to work the thick
plough-shares. Tested.

Proof to ten yards
with a Martini Henry round.

Not quite what you'd expect?
A quarter inch of iron;
lappet hanging heavy
from its leather strap.

*Now constables come and go.
Down in Melbourne,
where the Yarra's too brown
to drink, too thin to plough,
the rumours grow.*

ii

Memories of the Mollies:
our blacksmith's turned
seamstress; learned to sew
a dress of wild colonial iron.

Vanity, vanity, stitching rivets
through the bodice, lacing
glowing ribbons
through neck and sleeve.

No greave-plates, chain-mail,
gorget or visor.
They move heavy as iron-clads,
augur the tank.

Helmet or a bucket?
A veil of ore, bride's bonnet:
travesty, travesty,
that's married them to dark.

Inside it's loud and hot:
breath, beard rustling iron
against the blush
on each hidden cheek.

Four heavy morning suits
worn once only, at Glenrowan,
by Kelly, brother Dan,
Steve Hart and Joe Byrne.

*And who will sing the ballad
of the Hotel Glenrowan?*

iii

Stopped at the Inn. Thin walls,
spinsters, Victorian wallpaper
pinned like a summer dress
to a mannequin.

Breastplate. Iron corset.
In the backroom,
a rifle's barrel
rests against a spindle.

Remember, some time back,
a beard in a frock:
Steve, cross-dressed, saddling up,
spurs catching at his hem.

And now the clumsy
groin-piece has gouged
a blackgum furrow
along a lacquered table.

Ninety-seven pounds
of imperturbability.
Each movement pondered,
in all its awful gravity.

Blinkered. Stare straight ahead.
That pull of earth.
Heaviness finding sweat
beneath the long oilskin coat.

It's not that heavy *Drizabone*
that's come unstitched,
but something closer worms
along your inner seams.

Some hidden thing unknits
the suit of bone, unskins,
turns inside out
the underthings of flesh.

Light through darkness,
could be Sunday coming in
like a bright silk sampler
on the walls of the Glenrowan.

*No choirs yet, but organ stops,
rumble, clacker of heels in aisles;
knees hit boards; hymn books,
hard-backed; pews creak. Begin.*

iv

They're banging in
great long nails of light,
might as well be outside,
see if those suits stand up.

Nowhere to run. No need to hide.
Shootout. Returning fire.
Shot and shot and shot, re-
load and shot and shot, re-

lentless trochees, spinning barrels,
heavy recoil and stink of cordite.
Slugs on flesh and *pang!* on iron
as they take aim, go for legs.

Crossfire. *Blug!* is leg hit.
Joe Byrne killed.
Woodcrackle. Smokemell.
Dan Kelly, Steve Hart dead

as hotel burns.
Flimsy underthings alight
and shining through its stays.
And Ned? And Ned?

Captured, they cut
the boot from his foot;
took it as a trophy
along with his Colt.

Hotel smoulders, locals
fossick for keepsakes:
spent cartridges, hooves
cut from their dead horses.

*Filched from embers,
something to remember them fellas by.*

*Knot a square of wet linen
around your nose and mouth.
Smoke still stings your eyes,
as bandannas turn sightseers bandits.*

*Laid out in whitestuff, shifts.
Spooked by sheets. Too late
for wound-dressers now.*

v

A photo of Kelly
the day before he's hanged,
shows he's casually arranged
a paralysed left arm:

hooked the dead meat
into his belt,
while his right's
nonchalant on his hip.

He's hip alright,
with a cool and oily quiff:
big-bearded prophet meets
an Elvis *avant la lettre*.

He stares the future out
—not going to fall
on his face or to his knees.
Glimpse some support

near the shackles
round Ned's ankles,
but it's still the eyes alright
that pull

that dead man upright,
to his feet,
free of all
that weight.

Alternative Ending

Sidney Nolan's "Death of a Poet" - Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

Death of a Poet was what they called it:
head hung in a branch; roughed-up paint;
wristy little vortices where rag
scrubbed board, twisted bark
right through flat mid-blue.
Bush. Heat-struck head hung
against a cloudless dumb forever.
Archaic. Stark.

Not hard to see why
(a sniff of lemon leaves, a fierce Greek sky?)
the municipal Victorian neo-classical Walker

saw Orpheus. No lyre. Alternative ending:
his ripped silence after frenzied stalkers
had torn him limb from limb.
Forget downriver. There's no water;
here's what became of another *him*:
head tossed sky-high, caught in trees.

But what we've really got here's dead Ned's head.
So odd to find, in Liverpool,
his face for once—at last his naked skin.
Yet though he's out his box, escaped his tin,
and all around the bush is blasted through
to *ripolin* blue enamel skies
the one thing you can't see here is his eyes.

Tight shut. Not really him at all.
Death-mask or bust. Kicked the bucket.
Right now he's just something in the trees,
round as a gourd, shiny on top,
bald as baked clay, a terracotta pot.

Or one that's bloomed, blown, grown scratchy dry;
breeze-rustled beard ready to fall to scrub,
dead-headed by some passer-by.



Sidney Nolan: Kelly and Horse, 1946
Inscr. "March 46 Sept 46 N"
Ripolin on board 92.1 x 122.4 cm
Nolan Gallery, ACT 2620, Australia