

The Quiet Guy

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Clive James

THE BOOK OF MY ENEMY:
COLLECTED VERSE 1958–2003
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SOMEONE ONCE DESCRIBED Clive James as ‘a great bunch of guys’, a joke worthy of James himself, although he is probably tired of hearing it. Some of those guys — the television comedian and commentator, the best-selling memoirist — are better known than others, and there’s little doubt that their fame has obscured the achievement of two of the quieter guys in the bunch.

One of these is a literary critic — and there are few better — but the quietest of all is Clive James the poet. Partly, this has been a deliberate, if optimistic, decision to let the poems speak for themselves. ‘If they do,’ James writes of his poet-self in the introduction to his new *Collected Verse*, ‘it might be because no one was expecting him to speak at all.’

Screened by a big, noisy front row of alter egos, the poet has been sneaking up on readers in recent years. A few poems have scored anthology tries — especially the title piece, ‘The Book of My Enemy Has Been Remaindered’ — but I still sense a resistance to look beyond James the jokester. A tide of anti-expat feeling in recent years may be part of this, although that tide is currently ebbing. In an essay in the *New York Review of Books* on David Malouf’s work (‘Great Days’, 21 December 2000), James wrote that Malouf’s short story ‘Dream Stuff’ is the story ‘of an internationally successful writer who has taken his risks, including the risk — perhaps the scariest of all for an Australian expatriate — of going home’. That scary risk is very much evident in James’s recent poems.

Purists may also question his commitment to poetry. Of an earlier book of poems, James writes that it ‘even got some favourable reviews, although all but the very best ones took it for granted that I was expressing myself in verse form only as a sideline to my other activities, most of them pretty reprehensible’. But, of course, poets who are full-time poets are few and far between, and among the greatest poets in English last century were an insurance adjuster, a paediatrician and a bank clerk. Most poets need what Les Murray likes to call a ‘cover job’, and James’s cover must have been more fun than most.

In fact, the part-time poet Clive James is yet another sub-bunch of guys. Best known of these is the poet of public occasion and public performance, the alternative British Poet

Laureate who wrote such pieces as ‘An Address to the Nation’ and ‘Poem of the Year’. He is the twin of the Augustan composer of polished, metrical, epigrammatic verse, who would have been at home in Alexander Pope’s company, and who, while he can be glib (like, well, Pope) is often his equal in the proper study of men (Philip Larkin, W.H. Auden, Les Murray) or women (Marjorie Jackson, Margaret Olley). James also writes superb verse letters, many of them to other writers, which read like one-sided and more rhythmic versions of his memorable radio conversations with Peter Porter.

Next comes the jokester poet. Many of the poems are extended jokes, if in a more subdued key to the hilarity of his memoirs. The best known of these has given this new book its title, and a *schadenfreude* that has an extra resonance, given that James has always regarded writing verse as *his* enemy, financially.

Are jokes — side-splitting or subtle — the basic building blocks of all his writing? He can’t help being funny. And the joke, to my mind, is a subspecies of poetry. That is, it shares the qualities of the best poetry: concision, rhythm, timing, perfection of word order, memorability. Like poems, jokes must be memorised and performed perfectly. And like the best poems, the best jokes also hold something back; they invite us to take part in the creative act. As do epigrams, which are another type of small poem, and one at which James excels. ‘On my shelves now,’ he wrote somewhere in his memoirs, ‘collections of aphorisms sit like containers of radioactive material.’ He wrote there, also, of his desire to ‘pack a loosely troubled world into a tense neatness’.

Not surprisingly, given these various gifts, he is a terrific satirist, although there is as much homage as parody in, say, his Peter Porter version, ‘Once Smitten, Twice Smitten’. Parodies of this order are among the best ‘reviews’ it is possible to write of another writer’s work, and reveal the deepest understanding.

Clive James the writer of song lyrics has also been out and about again, recently. As a writer of light verse, he would seem a natural as a Tin Pan Alley lyricist, and many of his lyrics are as deft and amusing as Ira Gershwin’s or Yip Harburg’s. Or the lyrics of their predecessor, W.S. Gilbert. Or *his* predecessor, the Byron of *Don Juan*. But there is a glimpse of another Clive James here in those songs, where simplicity is of the essence. ‘A King at Nightfall’, ‘Touch Has a Memory’ and, especially, ‘I Feel Like Midnight’ are beautiful, distilled lyrics, in which each individual line, while close to cliché if taken out of context, is revived by that context, until the sum is much greater than the minimalist whole. Critics of garrulity need to understand: you have to have written a lot of words to be able to write so few as these.

Quietest of all the quiet guys is the composer of my favourite poems here, where all these various strands — the

distiller of songs, the Augustan technician, the epigrammatist, the memoirist — pool their talents. Many of these poems have to do with the loss of his father, or his mother (or his motherland), and are tinged with various complex flavours of nostalgia. We are all expatriates to some extent from that other country, the past, and it *is* scary to revisit, especially the risks — and rewards — of turning into a sentimental bloke, after all.

My tears came late. I was fifty-five years old
Before I began to cry authentically ...

(‘Son of a Soldier’)

In the same essay on Malouf cited above, James writes of Malouf’s astonishing recollection of childhood detail: ‘When he names the objects in his mother’s sewing basket, it’s doubtful whether he needs a photograph; he photographed them with his mind when the basket was level with his eyes.’ We knew it from James’s memoirs, before reading his poems, but when James was knee-high to Australia, he photographed it equally well, and he revisits it in the wonderful recent poems ‘In Town for the March’, ‘Go Back to the Opal Sunset’ and ‘Son of a Soldier’.

Of course, a growing awareness of his own mortality lurks beneath the surface of these poems — and others, such as the subtly moving ‘Six Degrees of Separation from Shelley’. James has entered what my partner likes to call The Finite Zone, those later years of life when the lip of the void suddenly seems to be approaching at speed. ‘The Lions at Taronga’, a poem of his life in London, ends thus:

Been there, done that. The Queen, she hung one on me.
I’ve got it in a box. The box to frame
My body will be built here, like as not,

And probably quite soon. I’ve lived in London
For longer than some people live all told.
Except for the way out, I know it backwards.

So at night when the lions at Taronga
Roar in my memory across the water
I feel the way they must have felt, poor bastards —

Gone in the teeth. The food dead. On display
All day and every day. Sleep in a fortress.
Every familiar walkway leads to strangers.

Almost every line is a memorable epigram in its own right, if some merely glib when separated from context. But once again, their accumulating totality moves beyond that. The tragic sum is much greater than the comic parts. Back to the Malouf essay for one last borrowing. Regarding *Harland’s Half-Acre*, James writes that it is a book where ‘all of Malouf’s gifts can be put to work reinforcing the centre of the book rather than glamorously circumnavigating its perimeter’.

James is a brilliant circumnavigator himself, and I always enjoy voyaging with him, but the rich centre of this book are these recent poems, and the songs, which fit so much into few words and which show us that James, despite all the other hats he has worn and brightly coloured balls he has juggled, has always been, in his own words, ‘the incurable poet, the lifer’.