



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

'It's Just Thought, You Know': An Interview with Ken Bolton

Heather Taylor Johnson

Ken Bolton cuts a fine literary figure in Australia as a poet, publisher, critic, bookseller and curator of the legendary Lee Marvin readings. I first met Ken at one of those readings, back in the early 2000s, when he surprised me with his intros to the night's list of Adelaide's more intellectually inclined literati. It might have gone something like this: 'Brian Castro is well known as a novelist and the Head of the Creative Writing program at Adelaide Uni, but you might remember him in the film I Sailed to Tahiti with an All-girl Crew'. These readings are symptomatic of Ken's approach to literature: absorb it respectfully, thoughtfully, seriously, but don't regard it solemnly.

He is iconic, as far as Australian poets go, yet he remains a figure somewhat on the outer. For instance, he was not included in the comprehensive Australian Poetry since 1788, yet it was noted in the Australian that he should have been. His books, though shortlisted, have never won a Premier's prize, yet Monash University held 'A Ken Bolton Day: a symposium celebrating the writings and influences of poet, art critic and publisher Ken Bolton'. His style of poetry is uniquely his, termed as 'Boltonian'¹, and has been imitated by many a poet, with the catchy addendum to the poems' titles, 'after Ken Bolton'.

In the late 70s, Ken's first book, Four Poems, was published by Sea Cruise press, a press which he helped to establish. Back then he was also the editor of the journal Magic Sam, where he regularly published his own work alongside his poet-friends. What Ken was doing with poetry at the time was unconventional; someone had to publish it so why not him? Clearly the lifestyle of writing and publishing writing worked for him because he has since had more than twenty books of poetry published (including a Selected Poems, put out by Penguin in 1992 and another from Shearsman in 2012), started another publishing press (Little Esther Books) and edited another journal (Otis Rush). He also edited the anthology Homage to John Forbes. His art criticism has been collected (as Art Writing, 1990 to the 2000s, published by the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia) and much of it collected and regularly updated on the AEA website as The Formguide.

In this interview, Ken talks about his poetry, other people's poetry, humour and John Jenkins and how the two often connect, art, the 70s, Sydney and Adelaide, and plagiarising his own words.

¹ Jill Jones, 'A Coffee with Ken: Ken Bolton's Adelaide', *Adelaide: A Literary City* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2013) 244.

HTJ: You spent your early writing life in Sydney, where you were writing within a circle of like-minded experimental poets. You also published the alternative journal *Magic Sam* and teamed up with Anna Couani to start Sea Cruise Books. It would seem you were, by all accounts, a mover and shaker in an avant-garde literary way, 'a Sydney poet'. Now, living in Adelaide, you write about its city streets so frequently and vividly that you could be called an Adelaide poet. You also curate the Lee Marvin readings and run the Dark Horse Bookshop for the Australian Experimental Arts Foundation, so it's fair to say you're also a literary mover and shaker here. Can you compare the two cities as personal 'poetry places' and as larger public and cultural poetry spaces?

KB: The experiences are a long way apart in time. I was in my mid twenties doing those things in Sydney: which is a big town. My moving and shaking was not particularly noticed (Sydney can absorb a lot), though it did have some effect. I was 'getting started' and helping some others whose writing I liked: by publishing, organising the odd reading etc. Basically I was just in the swim, like all the others, a young poet, reading books, going to parties, writing, thinking, thinking I was an adult. I was growing up, learning.

I didn't know Sydney well, or extensively. It was my city, but I was in no way 'across it', as they say. And I left in 1979 (for very nearby Coalcliff, out of Wollongong).

I still don't know it, though I like it. It has changed since 1979. Adelaide is smaller – and in some ways easier to have an effect in for that very reason. On the other hand, I don't think Adelaide feels to itself as if it really is a capital city, that it counts as the literary 'real world' in the way that Melbourne and Sydney see themselves. For that reason it is possible to feel that nothing matters here, nothing is ever achieved. This shouldn't be the case, and it *mightn't* be the case, or not any more. I don't know.

I like Adelaide. And although I live here as an adult, I don't know the city all that well really: just the bits I've worked or lived in: Hindley Street, Rundle Street back in the 80s, three or four suburbs, some beaches. In Sydney I knew Glebe and Sydney University, bits of Paddington, bits of Annandale, Newtown, Redfern. I hardly felt like Prince of the City. I love going back there: it seems so very 'Sydney' in a way that it couldn't till you'd lived somewhere else.

HTJ: And on the Sydney side of 'nothing matters here, nothing is ever achieved' is the idea that 'really important things happen here, we're getting noticed', which can be a bit intimidating. I'm wondering which is more advantageous to a writer, because it's not always the outcome we need to think about, but process, and even our ideas about what it means to *be* a poet. Did you find your idea of yourself as a poet changed as you changed cities?

KB: I changed. I mean, your temperament settles a little. (So my idea of myself as a poet has probably firmed, but I think it was on its way already.) For me 'removal' to Adelaide was good. It removed me from the day-to-day torments of bumping up against a literary world and trying to make one's way. I was operating here in a vacuum: I wasn't much involved with local writing till around 1987 or so, and even then it was on my own terms – and I wasn't expecting much from it in any case. My head was somewhere else: a fictive space, probably, maybe not the 'real world'. Mostly being down here meant I wasn't involved in an argument

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from one day to the next, or made too aware of my lowly standing. I became much more involved in the visual arts, looking at its issues, testing my ideas against that backdrop or mirror or whatever it is.

HTJ: I have to ponder that connection between art and poetry. You studied and taught art history at university and spend much of your writing time in the area of art criticism, so it would appear one might feed off the other. My favourite poems of yours have a common structure in which lines are dissected through small and large spaces, and the lines might alternate between a right and left justification or might be centred (or all three could be the case!). How much of your visual aesthetic is grounded in a concept of language and how much stems from an artist's eye?

KB: It's derived from some notion of the page as a field, where spacing, line breaks etc., affect pacing and sense: partly a form of punctuation, partly of 'charting' the text. It stems from O'Hara, Berrigan and Charles Olson and others – and behind them, probably Pound and e.e. Cummings, whom I've never much read. And probably I've made it my own gradually over the years. The purely visual part of it – though nothing is ever purely anything – is to do with surprise, I think. I don't think it makes me an artist.

HTJ: What I find interesting is that the sort of structure you work within often creates a certain choppiness in some poetry, maybe due to emphasis on particular words or maybe due to a natural desire for pauses, yet the movement of your poems somehow remains fluid. I know you've referred to your poetry style as trying to capture the thinking process, so that the poems read as thought unravels. I think you succeed in that because your poems have a written-on-the-spot appeal, un-edited, voilà! Of course one might be naïve to say such a thing because I'm sure the *sprawl* is quite honed. Could you talk about this process? How long does it take you to get a first draft down and how much do you actually edit?

KB: I think the effect varies from poem to poem: sometimes chunkier, sometimes more flowing – varying within the poem, too. A good sentence carries its own momentum, will need less 'help': which can mean one can compromise it more, to get other effects while keeping its sense (or the sense of its pace and meaning, the variety of them that coexist as options – the uncertainty you might want to import to a word). Other sentences, with, say, more tenuous syntax, will ask to be scored for correct reading. It's complex, because the differences are subtle: but it's not conceptually difficult. It's a matter of attention on the page, and sensitivity and intuition, and of having done it a lot of times. Some poems are more successful than others.

I don't always write that way, though I may have written that way exclusively for long periods: most of the 1980s, possibly. (I'd have to look back through the books to check on that. It'll probably turn out not to be true.) Some poems are caught almost entirely in first draft and will be tinkered with endlessly, but to little effect. Others change a lot: I might decide to increase the poem's overall breadth on the page, or to narrow it. Some poems I reconfigure entirely: they begin 'open' with the stepped phrasing and lines across the page – and I will try them in three- or four-line stanzas, maybe, with the indentation of conventional

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poems, or as long and skinny. Or they may start conventionally and I decide to re-write them as 'open field'. And there are poems of mine now that move from one form to the other and back again, as needed.

HTJ: I'm interested in another type of structure you like to work with: the letter. Not only do you often write about reading them and sending them, but many of your poems are actually staged as if you are writing one. Can you talk about this epistolary passion of yours, particularly in the age of computers?

KB: They are kind of 'communications', and kind of solipsism of a sort: a good bit of my mental life (picture here Tarkovsky, snow, industrial suburb, with a bit *El Topo* thrown in) is spent in imaginary communion with a very small group of three or four people: the poems are just thinking aloud, self-explanation, in-jokes and inventory. In most cases they are letters, and more likely to say something of interest than my normal ones (which are emailed usually – well, I suppose the finished poems are, too – so they're just letters that take a while to post). I mean for them to be interesting for the reader who doesn't know me or their nominal recipient.

HTJ: Once we get involved in your poetry it's difficult to resist the feeling that we do know your recipients. This might be a good place to mention one of your older poems, 'Happy Accidents'. In it, you talk about influential poetry in the 1970s (John Forbes, Laurie Duggan, and Pam Brown, to begin with). The poem ends with '...and then it was the 80s, / and another poem.' If you were to write 'and then it was 2014', would you add to your register?

KB: That was meant as a kind of history of what people were reading and recommending to each other. I thought it might be interesting to record it (even though the poem's manner is pretty jokey), because people are curious about 'the new poetry' of that period and how it came about. I couldn't do the same thing for today: I don't know what the hipper young are reading today – and/or it's available knowledge: there are blogs and on-line sources for advertising what people are on about. People send texts and photos of their latest enthusiasm taken on their iPhones. I'm no longer part of a scene in the same way.

There was also nostalgia involved in *Happy Accidents* – and amusement at the idea of a poem whose subject was bibliography.

HTJ: It's interesting to me because I feel your poetry has a serious, almost brooding quality about it (perhaps stemming from the nostalgia?) yet it seems like amusing yourself is integral to the overall tone. It's a great balance. You've talked about your collaboration with John Jenkins before and there is a strong sense that the two of you enjoy yourselves immensely during the process, feeding off jokes and creating whole books from them. Can you talk about the role of humour in your collaborative work and how the two of you have evolved as co-creators?

KB: Well I hope not everything I weighted with nostalgia. It's just 'thought', you know – serious enough but tied to the mood, that lifts and shifts, hardens or softens around where

the ideas take it. For me thinking almost always involves humour: all those categories and propositions, that confound each other, put each other in a relativised or ironised light.

Yes, John and I write entirely *to amuse ourselves*. We began, literally, to pass the time and have gone on that way ever since. Occasionally we have given ourselves larger projects, that are definitely work, but they are fun, too, of a kind. I mean verse novels and the like. We began when John was over from Melbourne for a visit: after a while we had exhausted the interesting gossip, so we thought, Let's give this a go. It clicked and we've continued ever since. A lot of what we do is 'warring epistemes' and creative misunderstanding, each of the other: regularly playing off the 'poetic' against something counter to it. We laugh a lot while doing the writing. We often have a few going at once, so I'll hear John's laughter and wonder what I'm going to come up against when I hand him, say, something we've passed back and forth a few times already, for him to add more and I, in turn, pick up what's next on the pile for me from him. At other times one of us will do the transcribing of the other's dictated material, cutting, editing, subverting – while interspersing more of their own. These additions are often not made available to the speaking, declaiming partner till afterwards. So for them the finished poem is a surprise, resembling a toreador now much mutilated by the bull of the other writer, fine costume, and high thoughts and finery, in amusing tatters. The lyric gets dusted up, sort-of-thing.

Here's a quote (so I know John will not object to this shared statement, as it's been issue before): 'Ken Bolton and John Jenkins have been writing collaboratively since the mid '80s though their friendship goes back to mid-'70s Sydney. As to composition: sometimes the mail was used, but for the most part the poems were composed while the authors were together – via a mix of procedures: talking at cross-purposes, insidious undermining, go-you-one-betterism, you-do-the-ideas-I'll-do-the-afterthought-and-description, or I'll say the things *you* say – you say the things I'd say – even, Look-this-thing-needs-finishing – and sundry other methods.' And it ends – 'their co-written works hold a place in the hearts of all. Yes, all.'

HTJ: Is that quoted from one of you?

KB: It's copy I made up for the inside of *The Wallah Group* – one of our most serious-toned collections.

HTJ: That's brilliant! Very serious indeed. I remember him giving a good reading at Lee Marvin back in the mid-2000s. On the subject of readings, what were the ones you curated in Sydney like?

KB: I never ran a series: it was more that one would sense 'the group', or 'a' group, getting restless about being ignored still – or up for it because a number of them felt they now had something new to read since last time (maybe a few months ago). And one of us would say, 'Why don't we do it?' And some would be eager and others at least agreeable. So: six or seven poets and prose writers would be got together to read, in a small art gallery somewhere – the CAC, just off George St – or actually in a big house, or a bookshop: a poster would be screenprinted and a few stuck up around Glebe (where most of our tiny gang lived),

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maybe Balmain, Newtown, Forest Lodge. And typically there'd be 6 writers and 7 others to hear them: a flagon available from which to pour drinks. By the end of the 70s I organised some bigger ones. But they were not a runaway success most of these readings – or not in terms of gaining a public. Sometimes they made us feel better, sometimes depressed. We were mostly reading to each other.

The Poets Union organised a series that would get fifty or so along to a pub in town: to hear maybe five or six readers. There were interesting reading-workshops at Nigel Roberts' that I went to. I found them quite intense: everyone critiqued the work and it had to be something new. These ran for a summer or two, I guess: 1975, 76, or 77. Between six and a dozen people around a table, copies handed around and so on. John Forbes organised a few readings at the Tin Sheds (Sydney University) around Surfers Paradise magazine – which I went to but didn't read at. Our crowd read at the 1976 Adelaide Festival Writers Week – and many of us had gone to Melbourne to read and check out things there: again, usually smallish readings, but they were usually good for one's morale: you'd meet people whose names you'd known, whose work you had an opinion of. Connections were made.

HTJ: What was the impetus for beginning Lee Marvin?

KB: Well the series has stopped and started a number of times as you know. I'd run an earlier series, with a writer-friend Brooke Watson, called *New Writing Performed*: and those I began just out of boredom, I think. Starting in 1987 or 1988. I hadn't read for quite a while – not much at all since arriving in Adelaide. I remember some young artist friend of mine saying to me that she bumped into a poet who said that *I used to write poetry! I was a little stung – so when Brooke rocked into Adelaide and said 'How come there are no readings?' I thought I would get started. Just so that I wasn't entirely invisible. (I began *Otis Rush* magazine for the same reasons at just that time: I could do it, it might be fun, and I would not be quite so invisible nationally.) That first series, *New Writing Performed*, ran for a few years – at a nightclub called *The Club Foote*.*

When the club folded so did the readings, but I got bored again after a few years and started in again, this time as *The Lee Marvin Readings*: at first at another nightclub, *Supermild*, and then at the small *Iris Cinema*. The series you'll remember would be those at *De La Catessan*. By this time I did have a bit of a purpose in mind: to try to engender something of a scene here – just by running a reading that lifted the bar a little, critically. Which is still the aim, though I do need Dark Horsey, the bookshop that is the current venue, to make a little money out of the sales that are generated. It generally does. The Australian Experimental Art Foundation, I should say, is glad to host these readings – for their own value, but also as a way of broadening its audience. It's called Lee Marvin just because I happened to have a photo of Lee that I liked a lot, that I could use for the publicity: him looking vaguely menacing – a tough guy in a suit – while he sticks some kind of nasal spray up his nose.

HTJ: I'm seriously laughing right now. Okay, let's move on to your new book, *Threefer*. I want to ask you about the poem 'Footprints'. The name suggests repetition, a looking back while moving forward, which is exactly what you do in quoting from your older poems ('aeiou

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(twice)', 'Nonplussed', 'Talking to You') and listing the names of your other poems within it. Can you talk about the workings behind 'Footprints'?

KB: It was an attempt to recycle lots of favourite bits of old poems in quite arbitrary combination with each other. The title is that of a Wayne Shorter tune that was recorded by the Miles Davis Quintet and is also featured on Shorter's own much more recent CD, *Footprints Live* – in which he returns to a lot of his old material and gives it a very new workout. I'm working with fragments, not whole poems – and the criterion was just for variation, bounce and clash, and sometimes 'continuity', between the parts – and some 'musical' (quasi-musical) alertness to repetition and so on.

I think of it as an 'abstract' poem, analogous to some kinds of abstract painting. I had no purpose other than to see whether I could do it. Someone told me they thought it was a love poem. I can see there are reasons why you might think so, though it had never occurred to me that it could seem so. I've forgotten how much 'new' material went into it – written in the process of putting it together – as bridging material, as necessary sweetener or to sharpen it with something contrary and biting – fifteen percent of the total?

The other, and much bigger poem in *Threefer* is 'Some Days' – which does some of the same things, but with much less admixture of new material and confining itself (I think) to old material from the 70s and early 80s that I had not used at the time. It has a much more documentary or narrative feel to it, though clearly some of it is spurious: old jokes, sketches, bits of 'fiction', bits of old poem. So the reader is never going to feel on very firm ground.

HTJ: In that poem, 'Some Days', you say

‘But the making of poems,
 as against (*what?*)
 versified opinions and illustrative moral
tales, means the deliberate choice and creation of limits’

Does it?

Doo dee-doo do-doo

(*Very depressing?*)

With the question 'Does it?' posed and the little ditty following, I'd say there's nothing *too* heavy about how you really feel, yet the last line and the question mark suggests something more might be brewing beneath the surface. The contrast is what interests me. Can you talk a bit about that sentiment in relation to your poetry or even poetry as a whole?

KB: Hmm. Well you've got to remember that I put this poem together – it's an assemblage, a collage, with the implication of a fairly serial structure – in 1999. Over the next decade or so I worked on it, cutting, finessing, sometimes adding more material sometimes taking it out, adding new stuff, but 5% or less is 'new'. And I'd leave it alone for six months or so, even more once or twice. A year would go by. It's all drawn from the notebooks in which I wrote back in the mid 70s: sort of 1975 thru till about 1987, but the bulk is the 70s. Anyway, it's

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stuff that hadn't ever made it any further: drafts of poems, quotations noted down, bits of 'fiction', some things (poems or prose, poetry or journal) that are 'true', etc.

The bit you're talking about, I remember, surprised me when I looked at it, because I was very familiar with it, though from the past – and at the same time it was strange: it took me a minute to slip back into that ancient head-space that had been mine in 1975 or 76. You know, a young poet, barely published in a few magazines, reading all the time, head in the clouds, probably. 'But the making of poems', that passage, is probably from a John Tranter review – very likely part of his attempt to break the strangle-hold of the conservative poetry of the time, and the sacrosanct status given to landscape poetry – as being natural, nationalist or patriotic, and 'truly' Australian. 'Very depressing?' the poem asks, but this is the repetition of the same phrase, where it was uttered half a page before, with no question mark attending. It comes after a parodic bit of landscape poetry –

I'm walking now, amongst my old
friends, the hills (witnesses I think
to so much of my past life.

Hmm,

The hills have reminded me
of modern Australian poetry, the kind

Les writes
(Very Depressing)

There's a break after that and some other stuff comes up. Then the patch you've quoted. So, it asks, *How depressing exactly, really, how depressed?* Jokingly. ('Les' is Les Murray.) As to the question, 'Does it?' – plainly the speaker is happy (even amused) to have the aesthetic question shrugged off, unanswered, there, but in abeyance – and to pose as feckless stumblebum or goof-off. (You know, hands in pockets, whistling, kicking a drink can along the gutter.) I might still be that same guy now?

HTJ: I think you very much are.

Heather Taylor Johnson is the author of three books of poetry (Thirsting for Lemonade, IP 2013 is her latest) and one literary fiction novel (Pursuing Love and Death, HarperCollins 2013) and is the poetry editor for Transnational Literature. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Adelaide and occasionally tutors in it.

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