

IN THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEW Australian poet John Forbes (1950-1998) talks to Australian poet John Jenkins. It originally appeared in *Helix* 5/6 (1980). (*Helix* ceased publication in 1985). The following, reprinted from John Jenkins' site with permission, is a slightly edited version, and includes some material originally transcribed to first draft from cassette tape, but not included in the printed version. Edited by John Tranter, 2014.



*John Forbes, circa 1978,
Newtown, photographer unknown.*

Paragraph 01 follows:

JOHN JENKINS: At times I've seen you dancing to the bands in Sydney pubs you seemed almost ostentatiously 'pro life' — positively celebrating it, and no scythe. Recently, however, Peter Kocan cites you as doing a 'Dance of Death' on Australian poetry. What does he mean?

JOHN FORBES: I think he means I'm not religious. I think for him poetry has an ethical function. It replaces religion as a focus of values. I don't conform to that stance.

03:

JOHN JENKINS: Or you are positively hostile to it?

04:

JOHN FORBES: In so far as a poem depends on that procedure or outlook for its worth, or to work, then I am against it. A lot of people, however, have written poems from similar orientations which have been very good poems, which haven't needed the back-up of those sorts of assumptions. But a lot of poems, for instance Peter Kocan's, depend for the reader's response on a shared view about certain key words. I suppose he finds in my poems a lack of that stance, an awareness of it; and the poems are happy about it, too.

05:

JOHN JENKINS: So these key words — perhaps traditionally charged words like 'sin', 'faith', 'search', 'darkness', 'profound', 'portent', 'angst' and the like — cue in a whole backlog of implicit meanings that are the real subject matter of the poem?

06:

JOHN FORBES: Well, the poem depends on them to work. It is quite possible to write poems from the same area of sensibility which don't have that dependence. For example, a lot of Peter Porter's poetry.

07:

JOHN JENKINS: So, if you question the implicit rationale, you reduce those key word to their lexicon meanings only, without them having the privilege or weight which is able to enforce the poem?

08:

JOHN FORBES: Yes. I think all poems should be judged this way. For a poet to depend on a certain code weakens his poems. The poems would depend on the words only. In larger context, there's also a whole code that gives the idea of writing a poem itself a meaning. It is false to depend on that rationale too, but it's very hard not to be involved with it in some way. Because, if you ask yourself, 'What are you doing?' You say, 'I'm sitting down, typing.' 'But what does this mean?' 'I'm writing a poem.' Then, 'And what does this mean?' Well — then there's a whole set of implicit assumptions about worth of the activity itself. I think it's always right to question them as much as possible, to do without them as much as possible, even though they're self-reinforcing.

09:

JOHN JENKINS: People approach poetry, your poetry, with inappropriate criteria?

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JOHN FORBES: The average poetry reader probably looks at poems in a way Peter Kocan would condone one hundred per cent. They see poetry as a focus of meaning in a world where religion is no more.

11:

JOHN JENKINS: Or where humanism is unconvincing?

12:

JOHN FORBES: Well, humanism follows on from religion. They don't find any of these things in my work and they judge it by this lack — which is fair enough in a way. But it is sometimes irksome — to be criticised on grounds you've never occupied or ever wanted to defend.



Photo: Four poets: L to R: Rae Desmond Jones, John Forbes, John A. Scott, Laurie Duggan, Courthouse Hotel beer garden. Photo by John Tranter.

13:

JOHN JENKINS: In a recent *Surfers Paradise*, the magazine you edit, you quote Christopher Pollnitz: 'Frivolous poetry we enjoy but difficult frivolous poetry we resent.' Why?

14:

JOHN FORBES: Well, it's as if that quote shows him approaching poetry with guaranteed or developed criteria of judgment about what sort of poems do what. He's asking poetry to define what sort of response it wants.

15:

JOHN JENKINS: This is 'frivolous', you will be expected to laugh...

16:

JOHN FORBES: This is serious, you will be expected to cry... Yes. He objected to the poetry he reviewed in the article where that quotation appears. For him, I suppose, 'difficult frivolous poetry' is a bit like Chinese food. An hour later you're hungry again. He was looking for meaning in poetry that may be there, but which is not a function of the poetry to be there, and he didn't find it. His quote —

which seemed a very neat summation of that whole view, and this was why I used it – suggests the ground is completely mapped out and everything is in its place. So he’s objecting to poetry that wants to be two places on his map at the same time. The fact that the poem might be using a completely different map of that same area, with a different geography in mind, he’s not going to concede. I think it’s all irrelevant. There is poetry that works out of his view-of-the-world, or what have you, and that works very well. I wonder how he’d go with someone like Empson? [Sir William Empson, 27 September 1906–15 April 1984, was an English literary critic and poet, widely influential for his practice of closely reading literary works, a practice fundamental to New Criticism. His best-known work is his first, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, published in 1930.] Say he was writing forty years ago. I think he’d find Empson rather hard to come at because Empson didn’t signal ‘serious’ or ‘unserious’. Finally, it seems an argument against originality or even the attempt at originality.

17:

JOHN JENKINS: Some people feel that on this team, the game’s all sewn up?

18:

JOHN FORBES: In sport you can’t change the rules in the middle of the game.

19:

JOHN JENKINS: (Interjecting: Oh yeah! I follow Aussie Rules!)

20:

JOHN FORBES: (Continues)... Because poetry is different. In poetry, the rules change all the time, and at any given moment it either succeeds or fails according to the rules in operation at that moment, but it keeps changing them. It’s exactly how normal life operates –

where the criteria for judging actions can change totally in a second in response to some perhaps very tiny change in the environment. That degree of complexity with which Pollnitz would be perfectly at ease at a dinner party or when talking to people at the office, he won't accept in poetry.

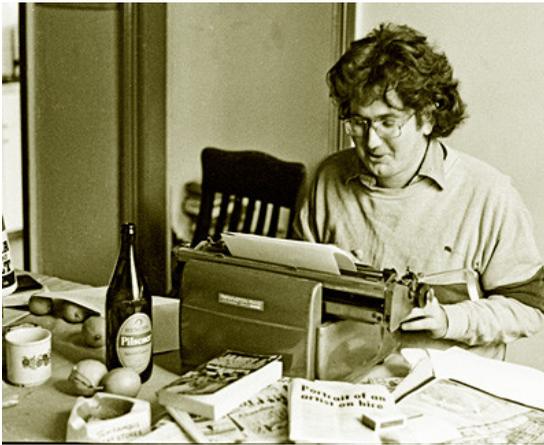


Photo: John Forbes, 1980, Fort Street, Petersham, Sydney. Photo by John Tranter.

21:

JOHN JENKINS: Staying with misconceptions, you once mentioned that a Sydney academic found extraordinary meaning in your poem 'Ode To Tropical Skiing' where it goes, 'Shall I compare thee to a surfboard lost in Peru?'

22:

JOHN FORBES: He said something very odd about it. He thought the image was supposed to convey real poignancy: The surfboard, orphaned, lost in Peru. I said to him, 'If I'd wanted to give that impression I would have said, "Like a Jew lost in Peru."' He

responded with a baffled stare. However, the thing about his article that really did annoy me was his reading of the ‘Rose Selavey’ poem. I quote him: ‘When the irrationality of his best poems hasn’t deteriorated into meaninglessness, his mockery borders on contempt, and the poems are merely sensational or trivial exercises in debunking.’ Then he quotes: ‘More precise than a stocking, / Julie lounges at the pool / she moves like a heatwave in December. It’s the year slipping by / it’s the strange coast of Mozambique I’ve never seen // No, it’s Julie / buying a blazer. / O abhorrent sunglasses!’ Now, how he read that as mockery is beyond me. The poem is meant to be quite the opposite of mockery. It’s a poem of praise, but he couldn’t imagine that you could praise anyone in those terms. That is, praise someone for their style or their effect, rather than for their depth of feeling, or what have you — as if the two things were separable. To him the poem was incomprehensible.

23:

JOHN JENKINS: (Aside... He obviously never met Julie!) Seriously, his reaction seems to suggest that all meaning, all that’s in the ambit of ‘genuine human values’, is internal and primary; while seeming, action and effect, perhaps even agency — all that’s in the external world we all share — is secondary?

24:

JOHN FORBES: Yes, well that’s what it might suggest. But I find it very odd, very curious. It’s a bit like talking to someone and finding they have different meanings for all your words. When you ask, ‘Where’s the toilet?’ they pour you a cup of tea. Strange.

25:

JOHN JENKINS: Would you like to say anything more about critical misdirections?

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JOHN FORBES: It seems that a lot of critics have said things about my work which are bizarre and useless. That chap didn't tell me anything about my work. He told me something about how it affects him. The best piece of criticism I've ever had was from Ken Bolton in [the magazine] *Magic Sam*. It was illuminating, because he talked about how the poems worked. He talked about them in their own terms and found patterns in them that I hadn't seen before. It was useful. Whereas, the usual criticism has not been.

27:

JOHN JENKINS: Red herrings, you reckon? At least, a bit raddled and tossed across the track, huh, uncritically?

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JOHN FORBES: Yes. I don't feel like fighting about it, it's so inappropriate. I can think of more damaging criticisms from their point of view than they can from their point of view. But I tend to think of criticism as a constructive exercise. If someone criticises you it's because they pay enough attention to you to want you to do well. I look to criticism for guidance. But I realise that a lot of criticism is not written in that spirit. Criticism that was, would be very useful. But it's not really a big deal, because bad unfair or misunderstanding criticism has nothing to do with the quality of the poems you write. It is more important in the financial and political sense, because it steers the audience away from your work.



The Pen or the Sword? John Forbes with toy howitzer and newspaper, Annandale, Sydney. Photo by John Tranter.

29:

JOHN JENKINS: It's often said that there are deep and bitter divisions in Australian poetry, at least at the moment. If so, what are the areas of agreement and what are the areas of disagreement?

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JOHN FORBES: The disagreements are more philosophical than anything else. Disagreements more about how the world works than about how poetry works. These disagreements are political in the theoretical sense. But they spill over into disagreements about poetry. I think the thing that everyone agrees about is tone. What they do with it is quite different, and is what annoys people.

31:

JOHN JENKINS: How do you mean? Expand a little. By tone, I take it you mean how the words sound?

32:

JOHN FORBES: Yes. It's a matter of how the words sound. Tone is the area of agreement. The problem isn't easy to see because it's too close — you could go all the way from Bruce Dawe to ... Fuck! I can't think of his name for a second. He was one of the original La Mama people, then he went fire watching...

33:

JOHN JENKINS: You mean Bill Beard, I think...

34:

JOHN FORBES: Yeah, Bill Beard. Anyway from Dawe to him — I like the tone, but it's not what I would have done with it. But the areas of disagreement are more obvious.

35:

JOHN JENKINS: Can you draw the dividing line?

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JOHN FORBES: In relation to poetry, rather than broadly, perhaps. Some poets write within a given idea of the poem whether they're conscious of it or not. Other poets write in an attempt to surprise themselves. It may turn out that unconsciously they have a model they're writing within. If they're doing that they should become aware of it and dig it out. But there are other poets happy about writing within a given idea of the poem and who think it's inevitable. That's a broad division, but whether it's a useful one or not I don't know.

37:

JOHN JENKINS: Do you think the adverse response to poets of the 'new poetry' from such quarters as the so-called 'Canberra group' is

attributable to a narrow understanding of the social and financial problems of the former?

38:

JOHN FORBES: It would be nice to say yes. To say, 'We're all struggling and down-and-out and they're all secure'. But I don't really think it's that sort of prejudice. I think that most of the 'Canberra School's' goings-on are political; they want to make a place for themselves.

39:

JOHN JENKINS: It's all just duck-shoving within the ranks?

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JOHN FORBES: More or less. I mean, their arguments about the Australian tradition seem to me to be completely spurious; in that they consciously align themselves with Hope and Campbell. If you look at what constitutes a tradition, namely continuity of context, they're on very shaky ground. The alignment is mainly a political device, to gain elbow room. All the criticism so far has been very one-sided. Those guys started off in 1974 writing that mock epic 'The Harrowing Of Balmain' abusing everybody. [A long mock-epic poem in the manner of Pope's 'Dunciad'] Some of it was quite humorous too. But they didn't get any response. And various people since, not necessarily of that group, but sympathetic to them, have written critical articles in the quarterlies. The last and the worst was the (Canberra) Mark O'Connor in *Overland* No. 74. Again, it's not worth responding to because these are purely 6th-form debating tactics. These polemicists tend to (a) posit a group that isn't there for a start and (b) of that 'group' pick out the weakest work and make it stand for the rest. They never quote, or examine a poem seriously or thoroughly. They tend to restrict

themselves to generalisations, they only quote to illustrate, and only that which accords with their thesis. It's criticism on a level with 'He rhymes' or 'He doesn't rhyme'. It's about as useful as that.

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JOHN JENKINS: It is irrelevant?

42:

JOHN FORBES: Poetically, yes. Politically, it's more interesting, and politically I suppose, reasonably successful. The thing that annoys me is — because they do this, they say, 'these poets form a group' — people tend to believe them. It makes for misconceptions. And as a lot of people already read poetry with a fearful barrage of misconceptions, it just adds to and distorts them.

43:

JOHN JENKINS: I've always assumed that after a space has been created for modernist or very contemporary poetry in Australia we would see a plurality of poetics rather than any form of orthodoxy. It seems logical because only then would there be room for the development of an individual, or original, work. Do you agree?

44:

JOHN FORBES: Yes, I think that's what's happening now. What you said about contemporary work, I think has become the case; and if things work out I think that's what you'll see. There's an incredible diversity amongst people who tend to be lumped together — diversity of style, for example. That's why I'm producing *Surfers Paradise*, to show that there is an amazing variety that can exist quite happily without the writers feeling they're being compromised or overshadowed by writers whose work is very different. In a great many ways, my work is totally different from, for example, Alan Wearne's, or Bob Adamson's, as it is from Laurie

Duggan's or John Scott's. They are often people I am listed with. I think they'd feel the same way about each other's work too.

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JOHN JENKINS: Do you see the possibility of a genuinely fertile and tolerant plurality ever being achieved across the whole spectrum of poetry in Australia?

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JOHN FORBES: Not yet, people aren't confident enough.

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JOHN JENKINS: But still quite desirable, possible, very likely, given time?

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JOHN FORBES: Yes, of course.

49:

JOHN JENKINS: Let's turn to your poems. I find they seem to have a consciously manoeuvred consistency of tone which forms the 'surface' of the poem. Beneath the 'surface' is an often lightning-fast association of images. Sometimes this seems random, or it suggests a dream-like order, or sometimes the images generate a narrative option. Do you mean the reader to take this option, or are you playing with our conventional expectations?

50:

JOHN FORBES: Quite often where there is a narrative structure in my poems, it doesn't really work. The dream-like one (to call it that) works better. The narrative one does fulfil expectations, but to that extent probably bores the reader. On the other hand, what I want to achieve is a very traditional approach. I mean, it's Aristotle's idea of metaphor, the bringing together of two different things through a still unobserved but common quality that they have; and the poem depends on that common quality, which may not be really there at

all. It's only there because bringing these elements together in the verse creates the possibility of it being there. 'Is that a baby or a shirt factory?' A line the real Mark O'Connor gave me. Now, there's something those two things have in common?

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JOHN JENKINS: Linen, perhaps.

52:

JOHN FORBES: Yep. Linen, or whiteness.

53:

JOHN JENKINS: Bright, dazzle, sunburst, first perception of freshness, immediacy, brilliance...

54:

JOHN FORBES: But you don't normally think of babies together with shirt factories. It's a connotive rather than a denotive relation. I think that narrative tends to work on denotive relations, and to be rather second best; unless you set out to be purely narrative — then a different art and craft come in, limiting the connotive relations and making the denotive ones much stricter. For me, narrative hasn't been this, it's tended to be a relaxation.

55:

JOHN JENKINS: Even your most narrative poems seem slightly fragmentary. There are frequent quick cuts to new ideas or images, sometimes hinging on the sound associations of words, the ambiguity of prepositions or the fact that one word may have several meanings. Often, these rapid transitions are surprising and exhilarating. Is that what you intend?

56:

JOHN FORBES: I make them because I get so far with one thing and it doesn't seem to go any further. I don't write with a conscious predetermined plan of what I'm doing. Quite often the poems, the

lines, are moved around quite a lot — to produce an effect that interests me, without really worrying about the effect they're likely to have on the reader. What I've been working towards and what I'd like to be able to do is use blocks of established verbal relationships — clichés, almost — and put them together in interesting ways. Instead of just the words working off each other, whole sentences or lines or phrases could work off each other.

57:

JOHN JENKINS: Like collage. Or 'set pieces' a bit sliced in, like collage?

58:

JOHN FORBES: Something like that. That's why I like [the poem] 'Stalin's Holidays' because there are no new words in it — there's no verbal invention. The invention works ...

59:

JOHN JENKINS: In terms of larger units.

60:

JOHN FORBES: Which have rigidly determined meanings.

61:

JOHN JENKINS: Which create tensions between the blocks?

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JOHN FORBES: Yes, and which create unforeseen relationships between blocks.

63:

JOHN JENKINS: Do you ever feel there is a danger of excessive fragmentation in your poetry?

64:

JOHN FORBES: Yes, but I think those ones signal that they're not working. Which did you have in mind?

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JOHN JENKINS: A recent one from *Surfers Paradise*, 'Pillow Talk'.

66:

JOHN FORBES: I'm not happy with it...

67:

JOHN JENKINS: Well, it seems you really do have to walk a knife edge between surprise and continuity?

68:

JOHN FORBES: Well, that's the trick. To be able to sustain that is very amusing, exhilarating and involving.

69:

JOHN JENKINS: Many of the techniques of cinema or TV seem to be finding their way into poetry, is this true of your own work?

70:

JOHN FORBES: Not consciously, but perhaps by osmosis. How we see things in the world is determined by the way our perceptions are structured, and structure is a cultural thing.

71:

JOHN JENKINS: Would poetry taking on the methods of other media indicate it is unable to withstand the force of these media, that it had assumed a secondary, even parasitic or derivative, relation to them?

72:

JOHN FORBES: Ideally not. When you fail, yes. When the poem succeeds I think it can do things the other media can't do because the other media work on a different type of perception. On predetermined meanings. The ads are a good indication of that. Whereas the poem, ideally, when it succeeds, is working toward a meaning that hasn't occurred before.

73:

JOHN JENKINS: Well, sometimes I think that people in a modern society might actually think and experience in a way totally

different to anyone living before, say, 1910 — and poetry is just beginning to reflect this fact, in the same way other media have both helped to create and simultaneously reflect a modern consciousness. Do you agree?

74:

JOHN FORBES: Yes, the world's definitely changed. It's not better, it's just different. I think we have a different concept of ourselves, which is created by our cultural context. It must be different. From 1950 until now there has been more energy released than in the whole history of mankind prior to this time. Most of that energy has been released in our type of society, and it has brought big changes which have not been worked out.

75:

JOHN JENKINS: Like to give some example?

76:

JOHN FORBES: Well, to be literal, heat in the world's atmosphere is rising. Something we will have to work out.

77:

JOHN JENKINS: I am intrigued that you are on to this. Though I shouldn't be, because you read widely. It's a bit off the point for our interview, but I was reading some of those 'Club of Rome' reports, and 'limits to growth' economic models, and wonder how long we can go down what's been a pretty happy path in some ways, that's brought prosperity to many, but might have to be re-thought... As you said, energy that has been released, but not worked out...

78:

JOHN FORBES: (Coughs...)

79:

JOHN JENKINS: As to the vision of your work's place and time, in a broader sense... Where do all those exotic and tropical images in

your poetry come from? Do you see yourself reflecting an intrinsically Australian cultural geography — that is, being on a large, ex-colonial, continental island in the middle of the Pacific, which is full of imported European cultural influences, overlaying a small, embattled and hopefully resurgent Aboriginal culture, surrounded by Melanesian, Polynesian and other Oceanic groups on one side, and both Westernised and semi-traditional Asian cultures on the other?

80:

JOHN FORBES: Well, no to the first part of the question, in that I don't consciously do it. Another creative cocktail from the Cococabana Bar at the Sydney Hilton! Politically, in terms of a pre-determined vision of what Australia is, I agree with the one you posit here, as a sort of ideal image. The fact is, we're potentially more like that, but the country is largely determined and controlled by overseas capital in a way that distorts it or makes it go in quite different directions. I'm speaking on the level where say Les Murray would establish his republic. An idealised image of the society — how it should be seen. What you present, approaches my idealised image of what the society should look like. But I don't think either of these two images — Murray's or mine — is relevant to reality. Unless your sensibility is based on what we actually have, your poems tend to become preachy, as I think Les's quite often do, because you're trying to convince people about what doesn't actually exist. That image of Australia doesn't exist in fact. It could. But it doesn't. What exists is a basically neo-colonialist, capital-controlled situation.

81:

JOHN JENKINS: What about American influences. Geopolitical or poetic?

82:

JOHN FORBES: Politically, they're definitely there. What you bring up here is the situation of a colonial culture. The colonial is in a bind, because the controlling country brings good things to the colony. But the price of bringing them is economic exploitation and a certain amount of control — both political and cultural. Here we are now, no America, no rock and roll. It's very difficult to sort out a coherent approach to this problem. I think the Maoists are wrong with their forced and unnatural nationalism, because they distort what things actually mean to people. But on the other hand the California Capitalist idea is quite wrong too. That is 'it's a groove, go to the beach, collect your dividends, and wait for the next shipment of disco tapes'. It's an enriching situation in some ways, but it's a very difficult one to define coherently, and to base anything more than short term political activity on...

83:

JOHN JENKINS: In the poems 'TV' and 'Return of the Golden Boomerang' there is a high degree of recursiveness. Is this consciously elaborated?

84:

JOHN FORBES: No, not consciously elaborated. It has something to do with the recognition that not much more is possible in a given situation. 'The Search for the Golden Boomerang' talks about the Inland Sea, something they really hoped they'd find in the 1820s, and it wasn't there. I suppose you could read meaning into the inland sea: Freud's oceanic feeling?

85:

JOHN JENKINS: (Interrupts.) ... It wasn't there because it's ephemeral. Besides, we got to it millions of years too late. The meanings had evaporated.

86:

JOHN FORBES: Well, that's why the poem is recursive, in the sense, that it doesn't read meanings. Just generally, if I know what a poem means when I'm half way through it, it's rooted. The poems that work best are just verbal constructions. That's definitely not an argument for not thinking about them, because that would be fake... pretending that you can't see something when you can. It's best to try and work beyond what you know, but not artificially limit what you know. It's like saying one thing and doing another. It's like working for an effect.

87:

JOHN JENKINS: Like a romantic scientist?

88:

JOHN FORBES: A romantic scientist is not one who gets excited by a simple experiment, unless that simple experiment suggests to him something he's never thought of before. And to be a romantic scientist is, yes, to be in bad faith, pretending you don't know as much as you do know. To write out of something less than your total awareness of what you're doing is futile. It makes it harder to write out of the total situation. Like a poet's having a predetermined idea of what he's doing. He's settled for the craftsmanlike production of a thing, pretending his creative process is like a car factory and he already has an image of what he's trying to produce, of the finished product. Instead he should keep changing the production lines around.

89:

JOHN JENKINS: Yep, if you already know the outcome, why bother? Do it once to see if it works, maybe do it twice for old time's sake, but why do it again? A waste of time. I totally agree with you about this.

90:

JOHN FORBES: (Lights a cigarette. Pauses.)

91:

JOHN JENKINS: But on the level of interpretation, looking at poems like 'Search for the Golden Boomerang', they seem to enumerate a creative process in restrictive contexts which limit and define them. Do you agree with this interpretation?

92:

JOHN FORBES: Yes, to a certain extent. The restricting context is only my personality. The extent to which I'm restricted or restrict myself – the poem is restricted. It's not that poetry follows life or that life follows poetry, but for the poem to be interesting to you as a writer you have to put everything you can into it.

93:

JOHN JENKINS: What about the reader?

94:

JOHN FORBES: I think the reader would feel that too – ideally. That's where originality comes into it – you have to be as original as you can.

95:

JOHN JENKINS: You're about to have a new collection of poems appear fairly soon.

96:

JOHN FORBES: I think I am.

97:

JOHN JENKINS: Within the next six months?

98:

JOHN FORBES: Yes. [In fact John Forbes' next collection of poems was *Stalin's Holidays*, published by John Tranter's Transit New Poetry in 1980.]

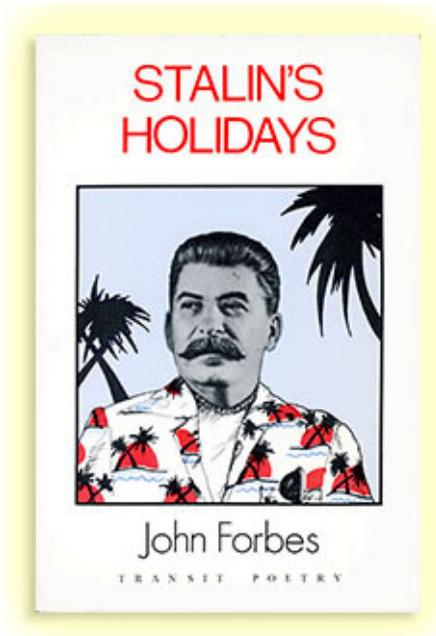


Image: cover of Stalin's Holidays. Scan by John Tranter.

99:

JOHN JENKINS: Would you like to say something about them?

100:

JOHN FORBES: John Scott was saying he could see an even tone throughout all my work. So what I'd like to do — and I won't bring the book out if it doesn't happen — is something that really surprises me. Coming back to what you said about a space being made for this sort of poetry — presuming it is a sort — well, that's

going to be the interesting thing for me in the next ten years.
Seeing just how much further I can go.

101:

JOHN JENKINS: Thanks John.

E N D