Yesterday’s Feast

(with a nod in the direction of, and an apology to, David Kirby)

Yes, yes, there was Schwebel’s famous rye, toasted, with
cuts of Santa Fe Turkey and Jarlsberg Cheese and yes, the Nature
Valley Chewy Cranberry & Pomegranate Trail Mix and later the Kitchens
of India Pav Bhaji Mashed Vegetable Curry on a bed of couscous but in
between, before, during, after, I ate and ate with the appetite of

a glutton, poems, yes, poems, one after the other starting with
samplers from The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary
American Poetry where, being a parochial Johnny-come-lately Pittsburgh
boy I checked to see how many of the 112 important American poets
represented in its 401 pages of poetry lived in Pittsburgh (11 on

my count though others have Pittsburgh roots) and how many of
those read at the recently concluded Hemingway’s Summer Series and
felt this little tingle of pride to find four of them – Jan Beatty, Romella
Kitchens, Ed Ochester and Michael Wurster – if you don’t include the
editor of the anthology, Michael Simms – and a tingle of

something else, too, which, if I were to be uncharitable to
myself, I would call hubris, at the fact that I read at Hemingway’s as
well, little me, stepping into the ring with some of the big guys and hoping
to hell it was poetry and not wrestling I was there for and then, once
I had that out of the way, eating the poems of Billy Collins from

horoscopes for the dead and finding myself walking down
Murray Avenue chortling at his Feedback poem, the five liner where –
no, no, you eat it for yourself – and then for main course, a degustation
menu, serious work that, tit bits and morsels redolent with flavour a
la master chef Cheong Liew, to be savoured slowly, one after

another, in methodical alphabetical sequence, no casual riffling
back and forth among the pages now, eating poems by Kim
Addonizio, Maggie Anderson, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Jan Beatty (finally,
after hearing her read, the taste of her written words, line by line),
Jacqueline Berger, George Bilgere, Peter Blair, Chana Bloch,
Laure-Anne Bosselaar, Andrea Hollander Budy, Rick Campbell, Lucille Clifton, Billy Collins (again!), Steven Cramer, Jim Daniels, Todd Davis, Toi Derricotte, Matthew Dickman, Michael Dickman (twin brothers no less), Patricia Dobler and Stephen Dobyns, looking at their photos as I ate, the brief bio notes little side dishes, little accompaniments, nibbling here, gorging there, masticating slowly, indecorous I know, letting all those different flavours loose on my palate, most untried, as if I had suddenly arrived at an exotic restaurant in an exotic country, savouring it so much there was no time to go to the freezer for some Ben & Jerry’s, and then mixing it up with a little Rod Usher, a little Judith Rodriguez, finding one of her poems burrowing its way into me — not like bilharzia, not heading for lungs or liver, for bladder, rectum, intestines, spleen, no — aiming straight for my heart as some poems do, whether ingested or not. After Judith, I had to stop eating, just for a while to allow a little digestion, a few hours with my two daughters, the older clinging to my leg tearfully as I tried to leave, delaying me for 15 minutes and screaming still as I closed the front door and raced off to Coffee Tree Roasters in Shadyside and the Poetry Book Discussion Group where Michael Wurster, yes, Michael Wurster, one of the 112 important American poets, was leading a reading and discussion on David Kirby’s The House on Boulevard Street, yet another unfamiliar poet and book, and I liked the way Michael said to me, You’re the Australian poet, aren’t you? and how by being an Australian and a poet in Pittsburgh elevates me to the Australian poet, elevates me from my usual happy enough position as one of thousands of Australian poets and a relatively minor one in the scheme of things – no, no, I’m really not saying that from false modesty - and I’m not sure if its hubris again but there was a kind of suffused contentment percolating through all those eaten poems, lodging itself somewhere amongst them, if only for a moment or two before I started eating again. It was a small group – Michael, Joan Bauer and Judy (both Hemingway’s readers) and earnest Art who, bless him, liked my reading enough to buy a copy of my book, and a man in a wheelchair — but no Jimmy Cvetic, who I was hoping to see to tell him that I’d written two poems for his International Day of Peace – silence the violence – poetry reading — and they were already munching bits of Kirby’s book, a bit like Kirby goes for Roman Polanski’s cookies in one poem, with a kind of addictive gusto, despite Judy’s reservations and her
raising that hoary old chestnut *but is it really poetry?* ah, and how many times have we all asked that question, or jumped to the defence of a poem when someone else has asked it? So we mulled that over a bit, everyone except me with their copy of the book with its cartoon style cover, and decided that it didn’t really matter, and

when it was my turn to read Joan gave me her book and I picked a poem at random and waded into a density of sawtooth-margined stanzas, a form I’d not seen before, sprinkled with allusions and references and French phrases so that Judy, slow to warm to it all, tentatively suggested *narcissism*, and I was trying not to like it either, classifying it as that self-indulgent, self-referential, name-dropping, source-quoting type of poem I have always detested and swore I would never write (but what do they say about saying never?), except that, as I said to Judy if he was a lesser poet, he wouldn’t get away with it whereas in fact, his lines had hooks in them, all kinds of hooks, musical hooks and riffs, the hooks on those bras I struggled to remove, fingers fumbling, nervous, excited, in the days when I still removed bras, and I was reading these stanzas with sentences that went on and on, reminding me both of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, particularly that sentence starting at about page 60 of volume 1 that goes on for two pages and is so full of colons, semi-colons, commas, brackets and dashes that by the time you reach the end you have to go back to the beginning to try and make sense of it all; and of the end of the Beckett Trilogy with its angst ridden hypnotic monologue, but Kirby’s sentences were river cruise sentences, flowing easily downstream, and reading them I was hooked on line after line, flapping with my mouth opening and closing, and it wasn’t just the lines that had hooks, but the poems too, narratives that told meandering stories with such unpredictability, with so many diversions, that you had to keep reading them to find out where they went, and it seemed that some of them didn’t themselves know where they were going, or reached their end and continued somewhere off the page where no-one could follow, so that Kirby became a tour guide but it was a mystery tour with no fixed itinerary and different every time, that took us into side streets and alleyways, concert halls, unfamiliar rooms, gardens and at the same time, Kirby was a host making introductions — and here is Jerry Lee Lewis, fresh off owning a poem, fresh off strutting across the page, grabbing a couple of drinks from a passing tray, and here is Fats Domino, here is Sylvia Plath, here
is, here is, here is — and the party was in full swing and what
the hell, the drinks were free, the company was entertaining and
despite myself I was having a wonderful time, coming to the end of my
poem and listening to Michael read next and when Joan’s turn came,
she found herself part way through a poem getting ahead of her
voice, suddenly struggling to repress a laugh, one of those
laughs that insist on themselves, that will not be denied, until she
lost it and it bubbled up and out, all the way from the belly, one of those
laughs that are infectious, and time after time, Kirby did that too —
brought laughter into the room, laughter despite ourselves, and
how many poets can do that? By the time I went to bed, I had
eaten so much I was bloated and unable to sleep and it was as if the
voices of the poems I’d eaten had lodged in my head because I started
hearing them, they were talking to one another, and I realised
Kirby’s party was still going on but amongst poets now, making
connections or visiting each other again except that, what
happened next?, some Australians started turning up: Ken Bolton
sauntered in and headed straight for the corner where Kirby was having a
laugh with Billy Collins, and then I saw Mike Ladd in deep discussion
with Jan Beatty – I’d wanted them to talk ever since I heard
about Jan, and Mike saved me the trouble of introductions – and
there was Joan, at the door, greeting all the newcomers, effusive as
ever, and the party was still in full swing when I must have fallen asleep,
but when I awoke it was not yet morning and the strobe light
flushing outside the bedroom windows was lightning, the night
filled with the percussive crack of downwards thunder at the
same time as the long growling rumble of the sky’s empty stomach,
thunder rolling sideways, and maybe it was this that silenced the voices,
because by daybreak I could no longer hear them, though I fancied
they would resume their conversations, near and far, with and
without me, and later, on this day after, when I had started to
write this poem and excitedly read a half written draft to my wife, she
told me (as wives do) that it is the worst poem I’ve ever heard and I
don’t like it at all, I don’t like the tone of it, its garrulous and who
would ever read a poem like that? No one will and I thought to
myself well why don’t you tell me what you really think? I
wouldn’t want you to hold anything back and I noticed too that she
didn’t say it was the worst poem I’d ever written or that she had heard
me recite, but that it was the worst poem she had ever heard so I
guess that made me not just the Australian poet but the

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Australian poet who wrote the worst poem his wife ever heard and look, there goes hubris, hubris is leaving the building (tail between his legs) thanks for the visit I say to his sad, forlorn, diminished form, come again soon but I suspect THAT won’t happen though hubris is such a lovely word and not a bad feeling either in moderation, and yes, there’s nothing like a bit of criticism to put the brake on things and of course I know, I can’t write Kirby – no-one can write Kirby except Kirby – so what was I thinking?, but rather than leave that as a rhetorical question, let me answer, I was thinking I was going to have a lot of fun trying.

David Adès