

DAVID PRATER

BETWEEN EMPIRES



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BETWEEN  
EMPIRES

THIRTY-TWO POEMS

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*for V.*

## PEACE FALLS |

“We didn’t really  
realize what was  
going on in Europe  
until we went to Japan  
and Australia ...”

Cyndi Lauper, quoted in  
Edward Dorn, *Abhorrences: A Chronicle of the Eighties*

## AMERICA

please  
do  
not  
put  
anything  
into  
this  
toilet  
unless  
you  
have  
eaten  
it  
first

## THE BLOODY HOLLYS

we're the upstate reincarnation  
of Radio Birdman's AC/DC nation  
if a stage needs amplification  
why pause for self-congratulation?

our white shirts impeccably tailored  
we're cut from the same cloth as sailors  
we dream of the next Norman Mailer  
our chord changes will never fail us

death to the swamp blues & Pixies  
wear g-strings & start screaming Dixie  
pump bi-carb & snort all the trixie  
get bloodied & start feeling frisky

for we're after the bellows not rhyming  
concerned not for critical timing  
with new cred we're nickel & diming  
invisible pop charts we're climbing



## BUSTLING

on the streets & the subway  
discern the bustle of conversations

in the soul food cafe gravy  
taste the fried meat flavour bustling

in the park, through the haze  
see the bustling squirrels' business

after the parade, on Broadway  
police bustle—do not cross

in the curt replies, inquiries  
ignore the bustling self-obsession

in the evening, this aftermath  
fill your houses with bustling activity

at the crossing over, the tide  
bustle like you mean it—be bustly

## EMPIRES BETWEEN

just as the sand in the zone  
where it meets the sea is wet  
so too my heart in this terminal  
or that economy class reflects  
the between-ness of things  
the false empiricism of old bones

see an entire empire laid out  
before someone turns it forever  
into a ballooning & bloated  
donkey's carcass that will never  
deflate or cease expanding on  
course with the crashing wars

cynicism's volatile as semtex  
morphing into the plastic now  
of rubble the beards of surfers  
brand new t-shirt cash cows  
& the gritty stubble of death  
wrapped in shrouds (not syntax

## EXHALE ON MAIN STREET

America hands me a business card.  
I clutch it gamely  
& exhale there, on Main Street,  
dreaming of Toronto—

everclear city of my childhood's  
TV programmers!

—just 2 hours & a Maple Leaf away.

I stick to Molson,  
almost shouting “Bienvenue!”  
at the Canadian border guard,

a red stamp all I retrieved  
from an afternoon of breathing  
on that pitiless Peace Bridge.

## HOLDING PATTERN

She calls & I'm placed in a holding pattern.  
Tuesday gets exfoliated in a tub. Our future  
talk listless as an air wing's random blubs.  
We tuck chins under sub-machine woofers,  
space-age tugs. A tarmac beckons & aches.  
The inside of Essendon's lo-fidelity transit  
severed, pending government intolerance.  
International Roast industrial relationships  
float alongside, like homing seagull tail-flaps  
glisten, like oily origami manoeuvres taxi-ing  
on a still runway. I hail this premature flight  
ejector's translucent pilots gloating up there,  
somewhere above the Airport West tramway.  
Sounds of the 1970s riots decelerate again.  
We are experiencing the new turbulence,  
a tailwind swept homewards like 2000 new  
jobs & hopes of terminal redevelopment.

## EMPIRE STATE (ICEHOUSE)

You find a tape deck & I'll find a buyer;  
my rhythm is faltering my accent dire.  
We can get together in a new empire  
far more majestic than Sydney's (toaster

Build me an icehouse, a new greengrocer;  
imminent crisis in the state of Formosa.  
Iva, never met ya before: come closer.  
Hey little girl, sliding down that (spire

Queuing for skyscrapers out on a wire;  
stroke dawn's ego; yeah, ride it higher.  
Touch me there, way down in the fire  
but no promises: I'm an empire state (liar

## GREEN GODDESS

It's more than passive aggressive—  
in fact I'm green with its goodness.  
Though it hurts to admit to jealousy,  
I'm chuffed you strangled Christmas  
trees, & th Tindersticks, like this year's  
Strokes or 1980. Somewhere, up there  
above the fairy lights, a goddess grins,  
holding useless water buckets. She's  
tempting Blair to bring in the army!  
Like a committed unionist (that guy,  
Fawkes, was merely incendiary) not  
an anarchist. Not very Christmas, is  
it? Not very fun to be called heroes  
on hundreds per week short of fair  
wages. Now a comfortable new howl  
is just the same old story: defend  
our homes, then fuck off & be merry.  
Christmas? I hope you burn in hell!

## IDENTIKIT NATION

diet by collective amnesia  
eyes by liquid THC  
leash by voluntary dingo  
logo by bandanna republic

visor by the new bloc  
puff jacket by fabled nor'easter  
mouth by lust & the sex issue  
genitals by design

wristwatch by sniper  
attitude unknown  
soundtrack by soft jazz  
elegant by mistake

hair by punky brewster

## WE MISS YOU!

Under the blood red subway leaves,  
the spangled Madonnas of 66th St  
shed miraculous tears of vengeance!

Coz we miss you! Like an ATM slip, or  
something like you; the Graeco-Roman  
subway tiles just joined the NYFD!

Coz we need heroes! In our aftermaths,  
shuddering at these short straws—  
as children draw us dandruffed hats,

clocks frozen over, red second hands  
slit across jersey's little wrist. Coming  
down in a cornfield intact, huddling

under silver. Seagull's wings, the long  
night follows. Encore, staggered salute.



## NEW COMPOSITION

daydreaming allowed as long as it's passive  
down on the corner of Sunrise & Massive

a life wide-ruled, this time we're elastic  
out with the new as we say in the classics

## PEACE FALLS

Someone turn Niagara off.  
I'm waiting for the peace to fall,  
listening for its dull ricochet  
against the war-weary morning.

You'll hear me before I appear,  
though my epicentre is right there  
in front of your sleeping noses,  
curled up like homeless wishes.

When you sneezed, who then said  
"Bless you,"—a peace-infected stranger?  
You might already be a corpse  
were it not for my immunisations.

Someone turn Niagara off.  
The peace I seek is louder still:  
it requires ten years of silence,  
then a boom, to break the monotony.

## RATTLE & BUM

Previously it held Pringles (his extended can);  
now it resonates with microscopic jingles—e.g.  
“We’re shuttin’ U2 down!” or was that Orange Co.?  
No place for rock concerts (let alone a bum!).

Cocoonin’ (Roman-like) shield, cardboard box,  
a hidden face betrayed by what Bono’s croonin’.  
Rap on skinny knuckles, for I am a target (stung)  
No place for patronising Irishmen in this ghetto!

“But i still haven’t found what I’m looking for—”  
(money). Say hi to my friends in Poughkeepsie!  
Free food for the homeless or just plain hungry.  
I am no tour bus junkie, thank you, too (honey).

“Let’s move ’em on out!” Saddle shoppin’ trolleys!  
Make the twist, shout (strap on American quilts)  
boil over! The empty stadium’s hidden treasures:  
cigarette butts galore, collectin’ them fo’ pleasure.

SLAM!

Hell-bent, spent, relentless, immune  
to the edicts of the so-called poetic government: WHAM!  
This is your legs-up honey—  
pass me a barrel of small press.

Engage, enrage, camouflage your age,  
croon to stare off the so-called block blues: BAM!  
Last drinks, mud-guts—  
get off my new page.

Intuit, don't do it, live through it,  
canonise free speech & so-called soft blades: SHAZAM!  
Wake *down*, spring picket—  
coz this old mike just blew it.

Emote, devote or free float,  
pretend until the very so-called end & then: SLAM!  
into the bright superstructure of now;  
but please just make it matter, people —

they'd be grateful for it.

## UNMARKED HARLEM

The concierge was a boxer once;  
sleek & mediated as his city,  
he hailed delirious crowds but  
now apartments line Lenox like  
blood in a glass menagerie. Born

magnificent, unmarked Harlem  
rises, gliding by on plush maroon  
seats, prowling the avenues for  
naturalisation ceremony papers,  
the soundtrack: Senegal, 1978.

The door pops like a safety clip;  
it's safe & automatically rising:  
unmarked Harlem's new dawn  
fanfare, the unnamed clubs off  
116th Street. At 5 a.m. the crowd

morphs into shutters & blocks:  
unmarked Harlem, spurning the  
door-lock wager, guns through  
Queens for a blazing glimpse of  
another African-American dawn.

(ON THE TOMB OF)  
THE UNKNOWN WAITRESS

In a bar jammed with arseholes  
she stood out like a well-timed joke:

the glint I might have seen  
                  in someone else's eye  
covered her entire face!

She was a lens flare  
in a state where bison floated,  
or grazed,

& I, a dim corner of a field  
that was last year in England.

She sculpted sunshine after hours —

slapped backs with an aggression  
only partly inherited from *Cheers*.

My glass, forever half-asleep

beneath her smile  
a new world order:

spare change for her tomb.

## FOREVER WENDE |

“Sit on the rails and ch-ch-ch-ch-ch.”

Ralf Hutter, Kraftwerk

## A TOURIST IN YOUR OWN LIFE

May there come a time when,  
a tourist in your own life,  
breadcrumbs bring you home again,  
my recently-departed wife.

May there come a time when  
phone-sex is deemed old school;  
like, we're talking circa 1980 again,  
you incredibly ignorant fool.

May there come a time when  
we are each other's bank balance,  
equal at the ATM again,  
oh, freshly-painted phalanx.

May there come a time when  
all words rhyme with orange.  
We'd love it if you came again,  
like a freshly-plucked lemon.



## ALLES KLAR?

Bed-bound but forgetful, arrive once  
but never finalise. Your belongings  
lie nowhere in particular—alles klar?

Act resentful during autumn. Irritate  
a vowel. Swim through sewage.  
Always turn left—alles klar?

Stay sick of bacon. Rehash hash or  
choose to be drunk, as deference  
switches harbours—alles klar?

One hand on stomach, one hand  
on head: you've heard of penguins  
but not marzipan—alles klar?

(Zusammen): *Ja, alles klar.*

## BLEISTIFTSPITZER

this pencil is a cigarette  
smoking poems on the page

futility is an ashtray  
the filter its only friend

passive is its maiden name  
holding back the drag

bliss is a perfect cylinder  
pulling out a pack of poems

lit words to keep me warm  
dreamt of a smoke-free zone

## BULLET PENCIL

I'll show you an imminent war  
sketched on cardboard boxes,  
serviettes & plastered tourists,  
train timetables;

& I'll show you a burgeoning story  
(though bourgeois) laced with tragedy  
& suggestions of snow-steps,  
rubber currency;

& I'll shoot: targetting another  
truth sayer, bespectacled,  
restrained, brain devoid of hope  
(current lies);

& I'll show you a gum:  
chalk-stained, infected, aloof;  
of all these sounds, its scream  
the final erasure.

## ENTGEGENGESETZ

the verb after the subject/ object  
placed reverse-chronologically/ back  
through the waning season breaks/  
sentimental tradition/ accomplished  
exit/ train from entrance/ pay/ upon  
departure or transfer/ validate when  
you have safely made it/ back home  
where the dishes remain/ unwashed  
from your yet to be digested dinner/  
there on someone else's doorstep  
hours/ to kill now since it's time/  
to return/ unmolested from the white  
light/ of carbon/ dating agencies/  
electric with unexploded passions  
melancholy as the hour before/  
mourning/ all the suns are sleeping/  
& cows reverse park/ into the dark/  
side of the scatological /moon

## EURONAP

Napping in short-changed Euro  
lounge surrounds & gold stars!  
Sky-blue napkins: automatic no-

glance—supper-trance. Mere  
sommambulist Euros on the floor.  
Frankfurt am Main's got main—

Dublin's got Core.

'Cheer-leaders' unterhosen'  
(text from a Swiss *roman*).

## FASSBAR

I understand the wind observes  
the overcoat of a young woman  
searching her pockets by a phone

(I mistake its previous conversant)

I comprehend the logic of U-bahns  
though in contemplation of diagrams  
my pipes & nerve endings jitch

(I believe in mass teleportation)

I process the stubbornness of clouds  
despite the forest entropy of airliners  
unmoving as an iceberg or mortar

(I possess the day's grey charisma)

I concur with nature's experts  
seasons come like dreaded conversations  
the rolling down of summer's shutters

(I still prefer the hero's haircut)

## FOREVER 1980

... puke on new wave tricked  
by upstart wire strings on a  
shadow invisible wall pinned  
patriot dim access impaled  
optimist gothic time streets  
rain elliptic x-rays shaded  
gaze of new berlin retired  
socks up staircases pulling  
new paper track stars it's  
forever 1980 make myself ...

## FREUEN!

—to meet you, Eastern friend!  
The railways rise to greet us:

inside an alleyway's tall glass,  
honey barely still but frothed.

Disguised as German airports,  
we rudder joyful under Linden

in the left-hand driving rain,  
the *Wende*-wave's red re-entry.

We're in the newspapers again;  
our pockets lined with euro-cops.



## GENAU

Hostel sleep talking's compulsive but  
communal dreams rarely resort to—

“same-sounding *bier hier; feuer? Meine  
Freund, einem imbiß ist much warmer*”.

There's the authentically ruined glance  
in your direction; it's—GENAU!

The enz of the world, which we began  
a long, *eine kleine taxi musik* time ago ...

I leave the capital exactly.  
Ever-correct change lacks a motive.

## GUISEPPE!

Austrian-born, you outclassed Hitler's  
'Braunau' style: an old leather coat,  
a crumpled hat & lips to die for—

Guiseppe! When you served drinks,  
the lifestyle became you (if only for  
the opportunities it gave you to

flip LPs like crisp hamburgers,  
smoke hash & rant on about Public  
Image Ltd.'s affinity with club music

(*z.b.* without Lydon's lyrics). My German  
was complimented, his missed chance  
to be born in Anustralia regretted

but that's history; we were closer than  
brothers across that bench bar, anyway.  
So long, Guiseppe!

& thanks for the tequila.

## ICH BIN EIN TOURIST

Thank you for the compliment.  
*Ich bin ein Tourist* ha ha—in  
*meinem eigenen Leben!* Access  
all areas Deutschland *Ja, ja!* One  
tourist under a visa/short of  
change/an excuse. They will kill  
me upon my return. Thank you

for the oom-pah welcome! You  
rationed me like white bread. I  
prowl the perimeter of my new  
travel zone. Meanwhile Gretel  
grows sad, having realised that  
this trail, just like the last one,  
never did lead home after all.

## ÖD(E)

The strange tedium of road builders  
whacking blocks with rubber mallets,  
like retentive poets trimming lines.

This one's for you, Björk & the umlaut:  
abruptly you are vanishing from signs,  
like the mythical blue skies of Lübeck.

The wall's bad teeth (a bracket's braces)  
holding pants & smiles up for a camera,  
like babies at a forced emigration.

Frozen in the luggage carousel of day,  
embittered by the slightest orange roll,  
like a toymaker with several splinters.

Strange to be singed here in similes:  
every silence hangs mispronounced.  
Like my surname, it's a beer garden.

## STABLES OF THE RECONSTRUCTION

Reconstructing TV,  
supplying cables,  
eradicating vestiges  
of Bremen's musicians:  
even the stables.

No horse's hoof  
disturbs the cobbled lane.  
Now only the slickest  
rubber tyre sounds,  
restrained as  
digital instrumentation,

remain  
to soak up  
reconstruction's vein.  
The needle shoots  
along the new train  
line, North Sea-bound,  
old before it was even  
photographed.

Public SOS messages,  
reconnaissance towers,  
rumours of an old war  
buried beneath the bowsers.

Soaked in ammunition,  
dampening the spires,  
horsepower feeds  
the animal pyres.

## TOR

Streetside waits a stencil boxcar  
marked 'ironbound invisible gate'.  
Meat hooks from the future state  
hear the rubble of some victory,  
our tunnels to the now defending  
ghosts from gore & the take-home

videos' silence down the red years.  
Taps & the foreign tanks' alphabet  
denied something else: not parade  
mounds, viral drumming, mirrors  
or smoke. Seven silent gateways in  
a nation of black dogs & crackers,  
the neatly invisible burning books  
thrown on cobblestones like darts.

## TÜCHTIG

Rich plumes from a cigarette's union  
with an 8-minute-late train from Lübeck  
strike the smoke-free platform  
attendant like an intermittent *anschluss*

as old as the station itself, a testament  
to outmoded classicism; a page from  
Proust or, say, Thomas Mann, waiting  
for a Zurich train: expecting its arrival

slightly late but not never—

not yet.