

# CLIFF FORSHAW

## Ned Kelly's Eyes

### **i. Image**

That's him, that awkward shadow, that black, that's Ned.  
He's painted out as if already dead.

Sometimes, it's just a blank, that slit for eyes.  
You look right through the man to clear blue skies.

Sometimes, that void's red-tinged with fire or dawn:  
the burbling billy-can, the day's first yawn.

Sometimes, the clouds in that gash blush with dusk:  
sky buries its burning cheek down in the dust.

Sometimes, there's a flash of silver, say sardines:  
that peeled-back strip you've keyed along the tin.

He has no eyes in the back of his head, of course.  
Sometimes, he rides away (*Black gun. Black horse.*)

into another picture. What's forged by smith  
from black's still fire-lit then, and riding into myth.

### **ii. Poster Boy**

You've seen those Sidney Nolan paintings? Gawky  
uniforms riding shotgun through red or ochre.  
*Bush.* In the gums, a bucketed head: Ned's helmet,  
that famous, awkward square of black. Wild whites,  
eyes dotted, peepers trapped in its narrow slit.

I heard he did the first while on the run:  
AWOL. Lying low. Military Police.

Those wartime letters, the Captain's uncracked morse  
obliterating words and where you are.  
Seems like the censor's ink has blacked Ned's face  
or cut it out to hang on a **WANTED** poster.  
It grows a beard while registers ping rewards,  
show cash racked up in magnitudes of zeroes:  
the price above that head dolorous with silver haloes.

**iii. P.R.**

Sydney 2000. Kellies by the dozens,  
all got up like Sidney Nolan's iconic  
black rectangles—stagey cloaks and guns—  
bushrangers to fire-crack the Olympics open.

Dead, Ned's everywhere. There's no escape:  
a man with a hundred shadows springing up.  
A forger takes a dusty Nolan landscape,  
blacks out a patch to get that masked man in,  
then watches his newly inhabited scrub appreciate  
faster than any downtown real estate.

An enigma in the painted bush  
holds you, the viewer up. Under the hammer:  
views to die for. Lock, stock and barrel.  
A gavel shatters the panelled room's judicious hush.

**iv. Whites**

Eyes peeled like hard-boiled eggs. Flecked red.  
Yellow. Black-dotted. Jaundiced, downcast or lidded;  
hooded with flame, day's end or blood.  
Or pool-balls, yours, spotted, on the edge of the pocket:  
one good crack (stripes, then on to the black)  
and they're lined-up, potted.

Maybe that black, black square shows whites  
so very white you think of a pair staring out,  
framed by a cell-door's slit?

Or eyes you saw the day the constables rode in?  
The Boss unhooked that length of rawhide  
from behind the stable door...  
*Whites*. And what peeped out from deep inside  
that scared blackfella's skin.

*v. Music Hall*

Cracked twig. If what's next's not sudden racket,  
then long silence. Retake that birdsong *da capo*.  
Rosellas, lorikeets, kookaburras, trackers,  
constables, galahs, sharpshooters, all beadily alert,  
out there somewhere, sitting in the darkened pit.

Back in Melbourne, they're spilling beer. Cheers!  
You're a pub ballad, you're a music hall song.  
You listen out among the whistles, calls. That's it.  
Centre-stage again, spot-lit: heart a metronome  
ticking out long bars—doing time till it starts again.

Proof to ten yards  
with a Martini Henry round.

Not quite what you'd expect?  
A quarter inch of iron;  
lappet hanging heavy  
from its leather strap.

*Now constables come and go.  
Down in Melbourne,  
where the Yarra's too brown  
to drink, too thin to plough,  
the rumours grow.*

**ii**



**iv**

They're banging in  
great long nails of light,  
might as well be outside,  
see if those suits stand up.

Nowhere to run. No need to hide.  
Shootout. Returning fire.  
Shot and shot and shot, re-  
load and shot and shot, re-

lentless trochees, spinning barrels,  
heavy recoil and stink of cordite.



saw Orpheus. No lyre. Alternative ending:  
his ripped silence after frenzied stalkers  
had torn him limb from limb.  
Forget downriver. There's no water;  
here's what became of another *him*:  
head tossed sky-