

JOKES FALLING IN GRAVITY:

A Review of Jones' [*The Brave Never Write Poetry*](#) and
Gabe Foreman's [*A Complete Encyclopedia of Different Types of People*](#)

[Coach House Books](#)

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A Complete Encyclopedia of Different Types of People: 2011, 96 pp., \$17.95, ISBN: 978-1-55245-244-8

The Brave Never Write Poetry: 2011, 104 pp., \$17.95, ISBN: 9781552452455

REVIEW BY [E MARTIN NOLAN](#)

It is perhaps unwarranted to compare Gabe Foreman's *A Complete Encyclopedia of Different Types of People* to Daniel Jones' *The Brave Never Write Poetry*. But when Foreman's book was launched on the same night that Jones's was re-launched, the comparison was somewhat inevitable. Many in attendance that night were introduced to both poets at once, and the books seemed natural fellows: both drew laughs (actual laughs, not just the inappropriate ones so common at readings) and both were jarringly refreshing in their natural irreverence.

But upon further reflection, stark contrasts began to emerge. Jones is funny, yes, but he is also heavy. You could smell these poems, they left you bruised. Jones wrote gutter poems in clean, straight-ahead English that nonetheless retained a lyricism, as if insisting that some brittle grace survives the nastiness that otherwise dominates them. Take, for instance, these lines from "The Anti-Bourgeois:"

I'm drunk
and getting drunker,
spending stolen money
and wasted Sunday afternoons
in the same taverns—
all of this because we drank
our weekend beer
on Saturday.

There's a little bit more.
I've got a bladder full of words:

don't stand in doorways.

Jones' speaker has failed to follow his own advice here, spending "wasted Sunday afternoons" in the doorways of life rather than entering its rooms. He *is* standing in doorways, and what he sees from there is failure and suffering. In breaking his own rule, he does gain a valuable insight, but one can guess it would have been better for the speaker if he stayed out of that particular doorway, despite its advantageous viewpoint.

But he didn't, and that speaks to Jones' unhesitating honesty, which is his greatest asset. Despite its title, this book is proof that sometimes it does take bravery to write poetry, because Jones' willingness to acknowledge his own weakness is admirable—and evocative—even if it is but a small, personal act of bravery to admit to it. But Jones' openness admits more than simply pain; it also allows him to capture raw moments of intense, and often perverse, beauty. From "Love Poem:"

He simply quit eating one day.
Death was slow but satisfying for us both.

Yesterday, I rouged his rotting skull.
Now, a fly crawls from an eye socket.

I sit, smoking cigarettes,
And watch the semen run down the bone of his thigh.

To this pervasive grittiness, *The Brave Never Write Poetry* adds a welcome taste of humour and rebellion. In his afterward to the new addition, Kevin Connolly emphasizes both the book's alienation and the "gallows humour" that emerges in reaction against that alienation. There is also, Connolly admits, a fair bit of melodrama here, but that comes as a relief. Jones' poems come unapologetically from the heart, and it's good to be reminded that that can still be done.

By comparison, Foreman's *Encyclopedia* at first comes off as light and trifling, more interested in idle wisecracking than serious work. These poems, written two decades after Jones's death, seemed to have given in too easily to a cultural malaise that will only admit a conviction soaked in irony and detachment. But it doesn't have to be that way, I thought. You can be funny and rebellious and still get to the reader's heart; just look at Jones. Yet Foreman's work (as I moved through its first third) skipped lightly off the rib cage, leaving even the skin intact. First of all, there's

the title: *A Complete Encyclopedia of Different Types of People*. This is pure joke, with the author at its centre, pointing out a laziness that clashes with the ambition suggested by “complete.” And the book’s first third does little to dissuade you from this first impression. “Bookies” is a typical example:

It starts with a large bear
cutting in one too many times
with the fresh-wed bride—shoving
the smiling groom aside to waltz farewell
with fair Ramona, as men gave her away.

To the assembled guests, the bear’s left paw,
passing across the bride’s ass twice, implied intent.
Her laughter, unaffected—
the way their hips connected, a lick
still lingered in passion’s trampled embers.
Either way, the bear’s look of mock apology and shock
fizzled in her mother’s quickly drained champagne,
triggered the father-of-the-groom’s unfolding frown.

When it came to gifts, one dancing bear
had given the guests a night to remember.
I gave the lucky couple a Black & Decker
while the bride’s own mother gave them three months, tops.

This poem is fun, for sure, but it is difficult to identify anything that is at stake. Perhaps a bit of sadness leaks in at the end, with the mother playing bookie and predicting a failed marriage, but this hardly brings to mind anything as symbolically resonant as William Carlos Williams’ “divorce is the sign of wisdom in our time.” Instead, we are left with a feeling resembling that which follows a good, shallow sitcom. “That was silly,” we might think, “so what’s on next?”

This is not necessarily a bad thing. There is certainly skill involved in a poem like this, and it is enjoyable to read. The voice in “Bookies,” and many others, attains a lightness that many poets cannot approach. And although these poems are rarely impressive strictly as lyrics, there is a smoothness to these poems that is almost undetectable; much of their prosodic strength comes from the ease with which they roll off the tongue. So why not accept the *Encyclopedia* as what it is? After all, why should film and TV be allowed to be light and funny and not poetry? Is there

something about poetry that disallows the shallowness that is undeniably a significant aspect of our day-to-day lives? Of course there isn't. Still, I remained dissatisfied with Foreman's collection. Perhaps it was that, although there is no natural law precluding the elevation of a poem like "Bookies," I had come to expect something more, or different, from a poem than fluffy humour. Perhaps it was that, in deciding to sit down with a book of poems, I had always anticipated a certain level of gravitas, such as Jones provides in his sincerity. And perhaps those expectations were misguided. Then I came upon "Social Butterflies:"

An alternative to believing anything lies
in convincing passing strangers
you can fly.

Our convictions
are more like indigestion
than a force life gets pinned down by.

The specimens that flood your belly rule the sky.
Happiness feels more like wings
than gravity.

This poem marked a turn for me. At first blush, Foreman seems to be justifying his comedic approach and its apparent abandonment of conviction. These poems seem to be searching for "an alternative to believing anything," with comedy standing in for "convincing passing strangers/ you can fly." The second stanza deepens the speaker's argument that convictions fail to centre our lives, claiming they "are more like indigestion." The third stanza, however, complicates matters. "The specimens that flood your belly"—or the ingredients of our indigestion-inducing convictions—"rule the sky," where, presumably, one would fly as "an alternative to believing anything," which we can assume includes convictions.

How can that which we aim to fly above—convictions, belief in anything—rule that through which we might fly? Foreman's answer is subtle, and a game-changer. "Happiness," he tells us, "feels more like wings/ than gravity." These lines are tricky. Does happiness feel like wings more than it feels like gravity, or does the state of having wings feel more like happiness than it does like gravity? What's being described here, wings or happiness? And if those are the same, is it at all realistic to hope for either? The key to this final tercet is the double-meaning of "gravity." Gravity

opposes both flight, in a physical sense, and happiness, in an emotional sense. Therefore, both of the possible interpretations mentioned above apply: happiness is a feeling like having wings and gravity is the opposite of both happiness and flight. But here's the rub: the gravity associated with convictions is parallel to "indigestion," while the "specimens that flood your belly"—or the ingredients of conviction—"rule the sky," meaning that the happiness that aims to fly above the difficulties of conviction and its attendant gravity is nonetheless ruled by that very same conviction. In other words, happiness is a sham; it is an attempt to flee our Earth-bound existence, but in its flight it is irrevocably marked by the truth it attempts to flee. The truth, then, is that however much we try, we cannot evade convictions. In the end, our convictions may not be as definite as gravity—"a force life gets pinned down by"—but like indigestion, they are unavoidable and impossible to fly above, or to joke our way out of.

"Social Butterflies" reveals the heart of Foreman's project. We readers are the passing strangers, and much of the *Encyclopedia* is trying to convince us that it can fly above the convictions we expect from both poetry and life. However, no matter how much this flight appears to succeed in poems like "Bookies," "Stock Brokers," "Only Children" and the like, it is a project doomed to failure, and Foreman knows this. This brings us back to the question: why do we resist shallow poetry? Why do I only respect Foreman's collection after I come to believe that he is aware of its apparent shallowness and is using it at least in part to get at something deeper? Again, is this the result of something fundamental in poetry's nature, or an accepted and un-thought-of piece of traditional poetic doctrine? One could argue both ways: written poetry asks a lot of a reader, so one is right to expect to be rewarded for that work with some lasting impression. This is opposed to the shallow sitcom that asks little and gives little back beyond amusement (not there's anything wrong with that; it has its proper place). On the other hand, the best comedies create characters that we really care about, and for whom we can feel sadness, while they remain, on the whole, mostly created to amuse. These are comedies that acknowledge the tragedy that exists beyond their scope, and I'd argue that Foreman has made a book that is very similar to that. The *Encyclopedia* is not pure amusement, nor is it only using amusement to get at deeper themes and to critique our amusement-obsessed culture. Instead, it is funny while being aware of the depth beyond and within its humour.

At its best, Foreman achieves both of these impressions simultaneously. Such is the case in "House-Sitters," which in the course of playfully describing a cottage-country party weekend stumbles into becoming a moving meditation on the temporary nature of the material world. Just before the

narrator of this prose poem (one of a handful in the collection) does or does not drown (Foreman leaves it suggestively vague), he leads us into “the silence that bloomed” over the lake and realizes that “a person is just a surface, and nothing is worth keeping except what others see reflected there.” But as with the collection as a whole, this insight does little to dampen the lighter moments of this poem. It is as if such deep insights are streaks of oil in the general water of the *Encyclopedia*, becoming all the more heavy for their rarity. “House-Sitters” ends with the revellers going for a swim, directed by “you—or someone who looked like you.” This “you” can only be the reader, and the surprise and wit with which the book points at “you”—it’s almost embarrassing, like a practical joke—is an example of Foreman’s effective use of play. But what is more impressive is how Foreman then regains the meditative tone he had struck earlier and quickly turned away from. The poem ends:

At that point you—or someone who looked like you—selected a direction at random and swam, somehow certain you would reach the dock—though the shore was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And darkness was upon the face of the deep. And darkness was upon the face of the deep.

The chant that ends “House-Sitters” is another of those streaks of oil, and in this case it is actually occurring in water. The water, which in the same poem has been used to describe the surface-ness of life, now comes to also symbolize the deep mystery, or void, beyond life. Notice how the two uses of the water image do not clash: the water has both a surface and a depth.

That duality is key to the *Encyclopedia*, the central tension of which is between the comedy and play that exists on the surface, where we humans frolic, and the mystery that is beyond our understanding and that we just cannot seem to stop worrying about, no matter how fruitless a search it becomes. “Zoo Keepers” sums up the limits of the surface level nicely:

Out of context, unable to fend,
a joke makes no sense, just heaps of crap
for some kid to point a dripping milkshake at
and laugh, while his pregnant mother rolls her eyes.

Let me throw you a banana:
this joke has longed for death so long
it isn’t even funny.

The *Encyclopedia* is organized in alphabetical order, so “Zoo Keepers” finds itself very near the book’s end, a good position from which to sum up. And sum up it does: my initial suspicions of the book’s jokiness stemmed from a fear that these poems were without a proper context for their comedy, and so were “unable to fend.” As the book progressed, however, that context emerged, with “Zoo Keepers” as one of its strongest pillars, reminding us that the impulse to joke is very often caused by comedy’s opposites, such as the alienation Foreman very much shares with Jones. This realization casts somewhat of a pall over the jokes that so densely populate this collection, making you wonder if the joke at the heart of it “isn’t even funny.” I think it is funny, but it’s more than that, too.

Still, while these poems are more than just objects to roll your eyes at, rolling your eyes while grinning is probably the best response to a lot of this book. The structure itself is silly enough to discredit any claim that it is, in the end, notable for its gravitas. This is a mockery of a reference book, and it is effective as such. For instance, the “entries” to this “Encyclopedia” amount to a random and utterly *incomplete* tally of personality types. The poem titles, meanwhile, often relate only obliquely to the poems’ content, which, in turn, does little to describe the “type of person” seemingly indicated by the title (“Bookies” is an example of this). In addition, the entries often direct the reader to other entries, with the connection between the poem titles becoming a joke in itself. My favourite example of this: the poem titled “Working Stiffs” directs you to “see Zombies.” “Zombies” then directs you to “see Working Stiffs.” The final layer of formal play is the use of illustrations, mock job applications, and concrete poetic structures, all of which help add to the grab-bag effect of the collection. No need to read linearly here; just open it up and see what you’ve come upon.

It may look strange on your bookshelf next to the grand voices of the canon, but the *Encyclopedia* does something a grand voice could never do: it captures life at its mundane middle, in which we often muse. It also captures life in our uncertain time. Foreman’s recurring Oracle character—who does little oracling beyond pointing “a needle at the rattling tin kettle” or rolling her eyes (there’s a lot of that here)—bears out the absurdity of any attempt to predict our future. But with all that we have to worry about these days, we can remain on the whole devoted to making this life amusing while we’re here. Comedy will always remain popular, and the negativity, or gravity, or whatever it is that comedy fails to explain, or hopes to avoid, does not make the comedic impulse fickle or cowardly. Instead, it proves that comedy can co-exist peacefully with gravitas, as it does in

Foreman's collection. Perhaps, like Foreman, we are today so inundated with dire predictions that we've grown so used to our negative emotions and forbearances that we have fully incorporated them into our lives. Perhaps, like in a Foreman poem, we are comfortably sad and, yes, amused. I think Jones would've gotten down with that.

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