



Secrets of Sydney

Talaloc Takuda put his foot on the gas, speeding away from the toll gate in his battered Toyota. As we reunited with the traffic streaming across the iconic bridge, he looked across at me and smiled:

“Works every time. You’re supposed to throw a dollar into the basket to cover the toll fee, but I go through the motions without releasing the coin.”



I laughed out loud ... *“That’s amazing Talaloc! But you’re denying the state its taxes. How can you justify that to kids in your class?”*



He was a brilliant teacher and a lovely man. I was in my element working with him in the best city on Earth. I adored the place: crossing that magnificent harbour aboard one of the iconic green and yellow ferries, was my heaven on earth.

My earlier memories of Sydney involved a simple guesthouse set on the waterfront. It

was from a bygone era, with worn floral carpets and wood-panelled walls bringing back images from my childhood. But it took me time to appreciate its hidden quality, which was to provide shelter for an intriguing range of semi-permanent guests.

On my first stay and coming early to the breakfast room, I sat opposite a man with long greying hair, wearing a cravat.

“On holidays are ya laddie?” He had traces of a Scottish brogue.

“Yes,” I replied. “With family, from Adelaide.”

This set him going:

“Oh, I remember when I had a family.” he said, stabbing another sausage. “Then they up and left me. I’ve been here for ten years.”

“Ten years?” I said, somewhat stunned. “You’ve been here for ten years?”

“Yes laddie. I was a doctor you know. They struck me off. Things went downhill a bit after that. Lost my house and ended up here!

On another occasion, I set down my small mountain of cholesterol opposite a middle-aged lady with a *Marilyn Monroe* hairdo, betrayed by an inch or two of grey roots. Like the doctor, we soon got into conversation, and I soon realised the lady had once been a star on stage in Sydney’s red-light district.

“I was famous. An exotic dancer: Australia’s answer to Marilyn Monroe ... the film star you know.” Then looking directly at me, she added: *“I worshiped that lady.”*

She continued, while gazing into space: *“There comes a time when you’re no longer flavour of the month. First, I was pushed back to the chorus line, then out the door, reduced to striptease for small groups of horny men, in seedy joints. After that I was in a brothel, then on the streets. I started on drugs. It was a vicious fall from grace!”*

“Yes, but you’re here now, and this place is great,” was all I could muster.

“You think this place is good?” Her voice getting louder. *“it’s a gathering of has-beens: disgraced headmasters, de-frocked judges, they’re all here. I’m not sure if its heaven or*

hell, but its where we've ended up." Then looking down at her plate she added: like this fucking breakfast, bad eggs in a grotty pan!

A few years later the guesthouse was bulldozed to make way for gleaming new glass-fronted apartments. The old place held such a wonderful atmosphere. I often wonder what happened to its glorious mix of residents.



Duncan Gregory

www.whittlingourniche.com

The glorious Sydney harbour

Those glorious districts around the inlets of Sydney's harbour can take one's breath away. Further afield it's a mishmash of old and new, at times appealing, but often a rather characterless sprawl of modern urban living.

Ferry riding on the harbour was my heaven ... and if one evaded turnstiles, then a day's (slightly illegal) excursion cost as little as 50 cents. Neutral Bay was one of the cheapest rides, offering a family holiday on the harbour for just \$1 (kids went free!).

The guesthouse on the water at Neutral Bay was a remarkable relic of earlier 20th Century vintage. No frills or valet service; in their stead, an engaging range of clientele and a wonderful mound of calorific English breakfast.

The poems below were written during stays at the Neutral Bay guest house.

Riding the ferries

I was bowled over by the places that sit on the shores of Sydney's glorious harbour ... and the ferries that connect them. Staying at the old guest house, so wonderfully situated next to the *Neutral Bay* wharf, it was possible to watch the ferry approaching, then nip out to jump on, before departing for *Circular Quay*. Then providing I didn't exit through the turnstiles, I could ride forever on a single 50p ticket, thus becoming very acquainted with ferry travel and absorbed in observing my fellow passengers ...hence this poem:

Secrets of Sydney

*It's strange that in a city
That can boast the size of Sydney,
The atmosphere's so tranquil
Around the harbor, at the hub.
What does it hide?*

*The ferry saunters over
Towards the wharf at Neutral Bay.
Clank and thud on the landing,
Then back to Circular Quay.
Let's go for a ride!*

*Off-hand look of the workers
Surely conceals an inner pride.
The visitors look so casual
When merging with the throng,
(But alas) they sit outside.*

*Sleek yachts just simply waiting
To unleash their weekend sails,
Now stranded in the foaming
Of the ferry powering by.
Our eyes are opened wide.*

Duncan Gregory
Neutral Bay, Sydney 1979

Sydney by night

I recall looking across the water, from the guest house, towards the array of illuminations in central Sydney. Less distant were other lights, on the water and the opposite shoreline. This cacophony of colour shone back: a shimmering haze on the water, reflecting both natural and built environments in the moonlight.

Lights 'cross the harbour

Lights:

***Some still,
Some twinkle,
Some flash,
Coloured
Yellow, red, blue, orange, green.
Some big,
Some bright,
Mostly small,
Mostly white.***

Reflections of light

***Some far
And long
Some near
And squat,
Yellow, red, blue, orange, green.
But softer,
Shimmer,
Mostly thin,
Mostly white.***

Jagged topline cuts the void of night:

***Man-made erections voicing labours of life.
Land-lying dots shimmering 'cross the water.
Reflecting by moonlight an image in time.***

A forest of light:

A reflection on life.

Duncan Gregory
Neutral Bay, Sydney 1979