

Rattus Rattus

PETER ROSE grew up in country Victoria. After studying at Monash University and working as a bookseller, he moved to Oxford University Press and was a publisher there throughout the 1990s. He is currently the Editor of *Australian Book Review*. His first collection of poetry, *The House of Vitriol*, appeared in 1990, and was followed by *The Catullan Rag* (1993) and *Donatello in Wangaratta* (1998). His poetry and criticism have appeared in various anthologies. In 2001 he published a memoir, *Rose Boys*, which won several prizes, including the National Biography Award. His first novel, *A Case of Knives*, will appear in 2005.

Rattus Rattus

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

PETER ROSE



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom

All rights reserved

© Peter Rose, 2005

The right of Peter Rose to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Salt Publishing.

First published 2005

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

This book is sold subject to the conditions that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 1 84471 069 6 paperback



Australian Government



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

To Christopher Menz

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
NEW POEMS	
Late Edition	3
Morning Bias	4
Rope	5
Escalator	6
Ladybird	7
Quotidian	10
Homage	12
Last Words	13
The Governors of the Feast	14
Rattus Rattus	15
The Calling of St Matthew	16
Hospital of the Innocents	18
The Prize	20
U-Bahn	21
Afternoon at the Huntington	22
Keith Jarrett: The Second Concert	23
Caveat	24
Sentence	25
Bespoke Night	26
Graffiti	27
Exorbitant Confession	28
Bridal	29
To Adelaide	30
Sheep at Dookie	31
Murray Drift	32

Balnarring Beach	33
Mildura, 2003	34
Posthumous Jazz	35
The Glittering Prize	36
Ivan Ilyich	37
Dirigible	38
Anthem for Jurors	39
THE HOUSE OF VITRIOL (1990)	
The Wound	43
Alsatian Traveller	44
Mortification	45
Prime Minister's Grandson	46
Pathology	48
Terminus	51
Memorabilia	52
I Recognize My Brother in a Dream	53
Operamanes	55
The Wall	56
True Confessions	58
Imagining the Inappropriate	59
Morning at Kiama	61
The Wind Debates Asian Immigration	62
The Siamese Twin Condition	63
The Classicist's Birthday Tribute	64
Fascicles for Emily	65
The House of Vitriol	69
THE CATULLAN RAG (1993)	
Aviator	77
Parsifal	78

Cactus	79
Noritake	80
The Living Archive	82
Polyphony	84
Podvig	85
Carpenter's Cup	87
Googly	89
Vantage	90
Compact Disc	92
Metro	93
Dog Days	94
The Only Farewell	98
Confetti	99
The Best of Fleetwood Mac	101
A Succession of Suns	103
Ornithology	105
Bait	106
Wart	107
'The Catullan Rag'	108
Kitchen	108
Scarf	109
Sunday Profile	110
Gloves	111
Renaissance	112
Wunderkind	114
Litigant	115
Archive	116
Truffles	117
Glass	118
Terracotta	119

Who's Who	120
Tally	121
Cut	122
Customs	123
Colophon	124
Cinémathèque	125

DONATELLO IN WANGARATTA (1998)

Greening	129
Shaft	130
Steam	131
White Telephone	132
Cut-throat	133
Donatello in Wangaratta	134
Fog over Corsano	136
James Merrill	137
The Shining Fleet	138
Homonym	139
Hitler Weather	140
Arguments of Rain	142
Aubade	144
Roman Blinds	145
Self-portrait in Non Sequiturs	146
Leaving Prague	147
The Hotel Misericordia	148
Magnolia	150
Shuttle	151
Indian Giver	152
Sitting Ducks	153
Amphitheatre	154

Quartet	155
Mitternacht	156
In Your Story	159
George and Martha	160
Twenty Fingers	162
<i>Notes</i>	163
<i>Index of First Lines</i>	166
<i>Index of Titles</i>	170

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments are due to the editors of the following publications, in which the poems collected in *Rattus Rattus* first appeared:

The Age, *Antipodes* (USA), *Atlanta Review* (USA), *Australian's Review of Books*, *Canberra Times*, *Heat*, *Island*, *Meanjin*, *Metre* (Ireland), *Overland*, *Southerly*, *Stand* (UK), *Verse* (USA) and *The Weekend Australian*.

Several of the poems from 'The Catullan Rag' first appeared in *The Best Australian Poems 2003*. 'Morning Bias' was reprinted in *The Best Australian Poetry 2003* and 'U-Bahn' in *The Best Australian Poetry 2004*. 'Rattus Rattus', 'The Calling of St Matthew' and 'Hospital of the Innocents' first appeared in *Time's Collision with the Tongue*; and 'Mildura, 2003' and 'Anthem for Jurors' in *Vintage: Celebrating Ten Years of the Mildura Writers' Festival*. An earlier version of 'Quotidian' appeared in a *Salt Anthology*.

I am grateful to Arts South Australia for a grant which helped me to write *Rattus Rattus* and several poems in 'The Catullan Rag'. My thanks also go to Chris Emery and John Kinsella at Salt Publishing.

New Poems

Late Edition

Most things are never meant.
PHILIP LARKIN, 'Going, Going'

Midnight. A collision threatens
to happen. Sally of breaks.
It procrastinates like an aria,
teasing night editors with their cigarettes.
May never culminate. Interest wanes.
Ignoring the unskilled night
I resume the book of memoirs.
Name-dropping is his genius.
We know each footnote in our
anonymous eyries.

Again, midnight.

Pedestrians, ubiquitous in scarves,
hasten to the equivocal accident,
never sure what it will disclose.
The cathedral stands idle,
bells strung up like colanders.
Silence. Never such silence.
In another part of the house
you sleep on, oblivious—
dreams that may or may not happen.

Morning Bias

for John Slade

Crab-like, immaculate,
millionth rollie in his mouth,
the septuagenarian dreams
on his buggy, pressing
ancient greenery before
advent of bowlers in white.
Velvet of ages in a reverie,
soft implicit morning.
Shadows on the green
inch like natural biases.
Flags go up: imperial.
Weekdays bring Apollos
in pinstripes and brogues,
but Saturday souls
are serious as hats.
A car door slams shut,
heralding the first quip.
Old men in white appear:
creased, defiant, stooped.
All week they have spun balls
in the mind, anticipating
the edging out of friends.
Old jokes are passed
like pikelets on a plate.
A new hip is welcomed
to the brotherhood of joints.
Glinting in the sun, a coin
pirouettes and disappoints.

Rope

Oddly moving,
this coiling of hands on a tram,
public ropery
in the swept world.

Sunset happens
in the temples and atriums;
old men peel
anarchic posters from a wall.

Solutions are scrawled
on this our nothingness.
Voices soften—
and the veiled threat.

Escalator

In the dream there is neither
wishing nor deserving.
We move through loveless lobbies,
soviet emporia of the mind,
greet our anguished fathers,
recognizably unrecognizable,
load our brothers on the forlorn slope,
only to bundle them up again
at the foot of the dream,
oblivious to our stratagems,
our needfulness—
naked, contestable, alone.

Ladybird

For my brother

One year ago almost to the hour
we got the news about our father
and it was downhill all the way,
six weeks of crisp mordacity.
No quarter-century lessening for him:
just a curt sentence and eclipse.

Yes, one year ago, almost to the hour.
Except you weren't there,
dead yourself these five years—
on your daughter's birthday.
You never understood my lexical craze
but I could spend eternity hunting for a
long beautiful word for addicts of anniversaries.
There must be a name for it, a need.

Five years. No time, but all time:
lustrum of encyclopedic loss.
You were twenty-two when it happened;
forty-seven at your death, younger than I am.
Why is it that only now do I feel
the full burden of its grotesquerie,
the callous moral heft of it—
not those bulky limbs we lifted
and straightened a thousand times,
but the early loss of you, the spasmodic curse?

And still I go on reading:
for distraction or enlightenment.
Today I'm deep in Gosse's *Father and Son*,
so numb at the horrors of the Brethren
I put myself to sleep quite deliberately—
for thirteen minutes, my watch tells me
when I stir. Well, my father's watch.
Our mother slipped it off his wrist as he lay dying

and handed it to me, consolation in time.
'Not that it's worth much,' she said,
reminiscing about the notorious clip
that always failed him at critical moments.
Collingwood veterans still laugh about it,
how it was always coming undone
during halftime speeches. They'd wait
for Dad to punch his fist for emphasis.
Now it brings me undone too,
during meetings or writing this poem.
Often it dangles down or pinches me,
like a warning, a reminder.

Suddenly I'm dreaming on my bed.
It is a cursory dream, a digest from the dark,
sharp as the flick that wrenched your neck,
your birthright, your physicality.

Thirteen minutes. It feels longer—
curdling a long life into an hour.
That's how long our tennis matches took.
We'd set off on Sunday afternoons,
always fretting about the weather.
You weren't playing, of course.
Patient in your wheelchair, you'd umpire
by the net, laughing at our squabbles,
our limp trademark backhands.

Today, though, in my dream,
it's you I'm competing against—
though the court resembles my bedroom
with its monographs and cityscape.
The game is tense and visceral.
Neither of us bothers to remark
that you're nimble again, competitive.

Tense as compasses we hunt down balls
and eye each line like jealous colonizers.
When your deft backhand hits a corner
I'm about to call it out until I notice
a damp mark on the en tout cas—rather,
my pallid carpet, which shows every stain.
With queasy sportsmanship I call it in
and we play on. I lose the point.
Next game, I watch my nervous backhand
miss by an inch and am surprised when
you hunt it down. But your cross-court shot
misses by feet and seconds later you call 'Out'—
meaning mine. 'A bit late!' I pout,
trudging back and sinking into clay
which oozes now and swallows me,
this high bedroom become a mire.
So the tubercular diva splutters on her deathbed,
impatient for a word. *E tardi*.
I await your response but wake too soon.
The contest is over, always unfinished.
I cannot will it back, resume the game.
Too late, indeed. We leave it much too late.

Yet when I take up my Gosse —
one anniversary over, another to come —
what do I find but a ladybird
creeping over the yellowing Penguin
and settling on my father's watch.
I haven't seen one since Wangaratta.
Straight as an arrow it takes me back
to the bridge we played beneath as boys,
dumping our bikes by the road.
Teasing each other, we'd compete
to find the most ladybirds,
rapt, jostling each other, ecstatic.

Quotidian

Summer and open doors.
Sore throats dry as cepous tanks.
Serpents multiply, worrying about—
not language this time but how
to holiday in a figurative skin.
Before collapse the condition
must be beautiful. Extraneous noises
whether burglar or rodent rattling a pane
bring exchange students seeking
not verification this time
but something to open the wine.
We stammer and splutter
and soar through the roof.
Traffic shuffles its pack.
Manuscripts mate in the rushes—
Adored Allergies, Everyman's Book of Incest.
Lifting carpets they bring us
booty from a bombed Society.
Acrid are those air-conditioned rumours:
her voice quite shot above the stave.
A clinician's sleek phrasing.
Jars of lemon butter
which a grandmother saved.
Or so they said, and open doors.
I remember her vaguely
but not her condiments,
only someone removing her dentures
as in a morality play. We visit
the dead with appalled compliments,
testing upholstery. What frightened me
across that still acre,
everyone's portcullis down?
Panic marches on parliament
giving interviews. On television
the febrile conductor