

# To John Howard

Anthony Stephens

What keeps the old robot humming? No metal fatigue yet after so many wrenches into reverse? Admire how the tin monkey somersaults backwards through paper hoops: assurances given, then given up! See: it lands on its feet! Backflipping's all clockwork, pre-programmed, the dreary voice forever stuck in the same gear, grinding out one-tone conviction. Surely, the endless bending of facts must stuff the transmission sometime! But on it goes: private schools, Iraq, phantom pay-deals, children overboard, weapons of mass detestation, gay marriage, junking the Senate, nuclear power — to activate or reject, just press the button; talk up your own heap, then rubbish the other bloke's. Opinion polls are the star you steer by: three points to the right and swinging voters charge like the Gadarene swine: more safety in numbers! Now for a flashy backflip — save the Snowy! From what? Meanwhile, the mugs barely notice that unis cost more and more — tough for kids that are less than brilliant or rich, but want more education. What did yours cost, John Howard?

Our lives are false, from the soft, well-meaning lies  
mothers tell till the bullshit at funerals: an Age of Embarrassment.  
Laughter's our shame-faced, knee-jerk admitting  
to being duped yet again. Pushed by interest rates, pulled  
by oil-prices, brainwashed into convictions that don't outlive flies,  
putting more on the card, paying taxes no one understands —  
sure! there's choices along the way but they're like  
breathing: never an event — until we choke, gag, retch  
or cast a vote. 'All the power's in swinging voters!'  
What? *We* rule ourselves? Pig's arse we do! King Johnny,  
so puffed with your ten full years and more, so finely  
attuned to our greed, our fears, yes! we're your  
sheep. Cabinet's well-trained mutts, yapping  
their brains out, keep us bleating along. But you, the shepherd,  
dole out the feed, have us crutched, above all decide the cull,  
asylum-seekers or troops, and with the same conviction  
close the pens for shipping them off, John Howard.

While we're about it, call the vet! We'll have  
the Senate declawed. Of course it's respected, pampered,  
it's just got to learn not to scratch! 'For how long?'  
Trust Labor's death-wish to keep up the one-party state.  
Some of ours whingeing, prone to doubt? I say: stamp out  
all grass fires, the forest's for sale! 'Democracy's legal  
pyramid selling', so one former Cabinet colleague said  
at Packer's state funeral. That's my conviction! And who'd  
know better than those who make their exits for family  
reasons, then hop straight back onto the gravy train?  
You have seen so many off, Johnny! Like an old baboon being groomed,  
paranoia saves you for now. But time will have you,  
do you like a dinner, spit out the bones. Will the children  
weep in the streets? Unlikely. Sure, the inane media-flood  
will fill Warragamba, but, for all the deluge of tributes,  
the people you made won't mourn you; a few crocodile  
tears will dry in the wind. Thus you will go, John Howard.