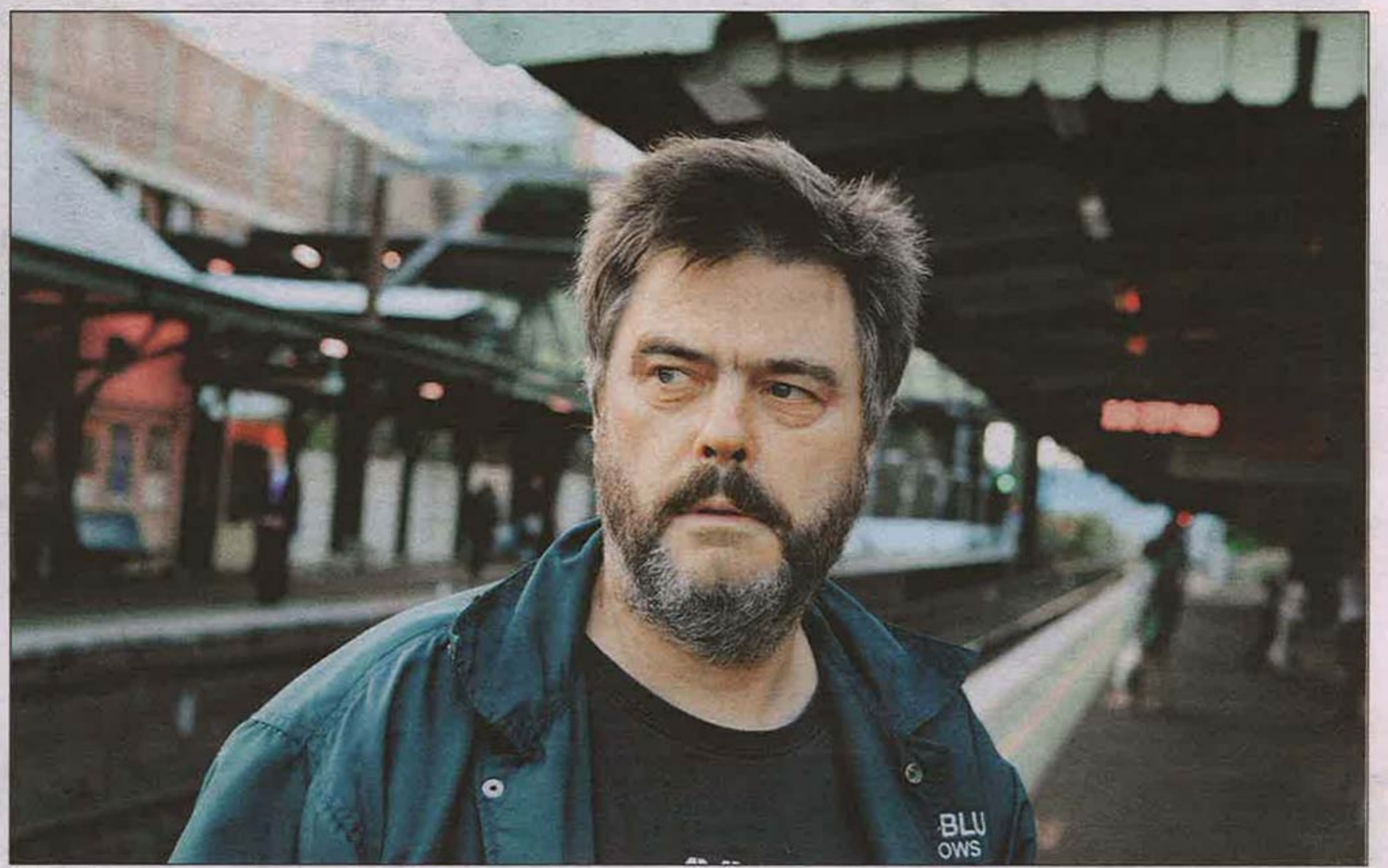
Rhyme and punishment

The Melbourne-born poet tackles the unpopular and forgotten in his latest collection.

INTERVIEW 2

ALAN WEARNE
TALKS TO CAROLINE BAUM



Blood on the tracks ... Wearne (pictured after he was bashed on a train this year) says Sydney is "schizo". Photo: Ken Robertson

ACCORDING to devotees of A. A. Milne's *Pooh* books, there are two sorts of people in the world: people of a cheery disposition, such as Piglet, and people like Eeyore, who have a gloomier personality. On first appearances, Alan Wearne is an Eeyore. His often pained expression suggests a joyless diet of thistles. Awkward and shy, he projects the slightly despondent aura of a loner, perhaps because he considers himself to be "in exile" from his native Melbourne, home to his friends and beloved footy team (he has barracked for Essendon since 1954, when he was six).

A teaching job at the University of Wollongong, where his persona is popular with students, is what keeps him in NSW. After a decade, he's used to the place. "I like being part of an organisation that accepts me and it's a relief to be less broke," he says. "But I raid Sydney in my latest poems and I tell you what, Sydney's redneck quotient makes the outback look tolerant. I know Melbourne has all the gangland crime but the things that happen in Sydney, like the Cronulla riots and the talkback clowns, that doesn't happen down south.

"Sydney is schizo: it's the city of the Gay Mardi Gras and Fred Nile and the Hillsong church, just like the early days of settlement when you had the Reverend Samuel Marsden on the one hand and Bacchanalian convict revelry on the other. When Sydney is nasty, it is really vicious."

Clearly, if not exactly enamoured of the place, Wearne (who was the victim of a bashing on the South Coast train to Wollongong subsequent to this interview) understands what makes it tick.

Often hesitant in conversation, Wearne is anything but on the page, where his fluency has earned him a solid reputation as one of Australia's most idiosyncratic poets. He is one of a handful, like Les Murray (with whom he had a famous public falling-out) and Dorothy Porter, to tackle the verse novel in a way that appealed to general readers and critics, which is what makes his own description of himself as "an elitist and an entertainer" so accurate. *The Nightmarkets*, his sprawling picture of urban Melbourne which took seven years to write, was turned into a play and won a Banjo Award, while the first volume of *The Lovemakers* won the Kenneth Slessor Prize.

Wearne started early, writing from the age of five. "I wrote my memoirs when I was 10 and read them aloud at lunchtime in a shelter shed at school," he says. Which perhaps explains why, when he reads his work aloud today, he loses some of his Eeyoreishness and assumes a more confident persona that holds audiences spellbound.

He has orchestrated his love of music into *The Australian Popular Songbook*, a collection with a soundtrack that captures the era of his adult life – popular songs from the charts, refrains and choruses providing a counterpoint to snatches of his own life and the lives of friends and a cast of imagined characters. Pop songs are not what Wearne listens to at home – his "uber hobby" as he calls it, is classical music. His normally diffident demeanour evaporates on the subject of Bob Dylan. "The most overrated person of the 20th century!" he pronounces, screwing his eyes tightly shut, as he often does when making a point.

He has the acute ear of the cultural anthropologist who specialises in urban tribes. Some of the lines in Wearne's latest collection may belong just as well in an episode of *Kath & Kim* (which he says he has never seen). Words such as "swatvac" and "ridgey didge" may not be normally associated with sonnets but they're there, as are references to Ikea and Target. He peppers the lot with political figures from both sides: Billy McMahon, Don Dunstan, Gough Whitlam, Harold Holt, positively bristling at the suggestion that he is some kind of unofficial poet laureate of the left. "I know where the bullshit stops and starts and it's on the right but I'm not of the left, I'm an individualist, a radical. Sure, on social issues, I am left of centre but I don't like the left's preachy side," he says.

The *Australian Dictionary Of Biography* is a regular source of material for Wearne. "It's great at telling stories about us as a nation, featuring a cast of not-so-prominent people – I like accounting for them," he says of the union officials, church ministers and obscure figures he has used as the basis for his cast of imaginary characters. And then there are the crims and other bit-players in their world – "the less psychopathic, likeable offsiders" who continue to exert a powerful fascination. One poem is written from the point of view of a courier for the Mr Asia drug syndicate; another extended monologue is narrated by Ruth Nash, the Sydney hostess whose New Year's Eve party Gilbert Bogle and Margaret Chandler attended before they were found dead beside the Lane Cove River the next day. An ABC docu-drama suggested the river killed the couple with a cocktail of toxic fumes but Wearne remains unconvinced: "Each era offers up a solution that is in keeping with the preoccupations of the times. Now, we see the environment as an active player," he says, suggesting that the human elements are far more potent. "The criminal world is a distorted mirror of society and it intersects with our lives in all sorts of contexts – even crims and cops barrack for a footy team."

For Wearne, the challenge – and the element of risk – lies in being able to put himself in another person's shoes and, for him, it's as hard to imagine himself belonging to Melbourne's upper classes as it is to try to embody the feelings and thoughts of a killer or, as he did in *The Lovemakers*, a pedophile.

The actual experience of writing can itself be violent for Wearne. He describes a three-day period of intense productivity when he wrote the first four poems in this collection after months of nothing, "in a sort of brainstorm, a hyper state. It was as if they were just bursting to come out, boom, boom, boom." Other poems take forever to emerge. "You are living with a poem for years, even if you are not writing it every day. The Ruth Nash poem took two years to complete, to get the vernacular and the tone right."

Wearne has a class to teach. Does he offer any advice to those of his students contemplating the difficult road of poetry? "No, though I do love telling them that the great Wallace Stevens was an insurance company executive," he says with a fleeting smile and, for a moment, Eeyore is gone.

The Australian Popular Songbook by Alan Wearne is published by Giramondo Publishing, $22.