

# Kunapipi

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## Poems

Syd Harrex

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## Poems

### Abstract

Egina

Walking out in the Clare Valley

La Fontaine de Vaucluse

Leaves

A vase of wild daffodils

Bard-Birth

# Syd Harrex

## EGINA

The island's white-washed villas  
are semi-blinding in the sun;  
others painted in pastel colours  
converse with their green gardens,  
their orange and lemon orchards  
garrulous with unchecked grass.

Elderly ladies in black shawls  
accept an invitation from Hades  
to drowse in the shade of cypresses,  
while their men-folk in quay-side cafes  
sip coffee and ouzo, and stretch a joke  
the length of a summer afternoon.

Even the cemetery dead partake  
of the town's affairs (their marble  
graves like icing on wedding cake),  
as through the eyes of their formal  
photographs, they soliloquise  
on business and bliss in the after-life.

The xylophone feet of phaeton  
horses echo down the street that takes  
us out of town through fig-tree fields  
of scarlet poppies, yellow daisies, stems  
with pale-blue pre-Raphaelite eyes;  
Nature that always, that never dies.

I stroll for a mile, rest by a wall;  
think of all I lack in accurate speech,  
even to mime so clear a miracle  
as dappled sunlight on a white wall.  
Thus mute and meek, I want to do some thing  
outlandish, freakish. Jump across the wall  
and disappear entirely through the mirrors  
of my own eyes, like an Indian fakir,  
being the other side of sight just once  
before I gratify some undertaker.

(from *Atlantis and Other Islands*, 1984, Dangaroo Press, Mundelstrup, pp. 24–25)

# Syd Harrex

## WALKING OUT IN THE CLARE VALLEY

i

The morning gate is shut  
but if you  
don't open it  
and walk out

the hour does anyway,  
and after it the day.

ii

The distance between  
one step and the next  
is a length of charred bark  
that was snatched  
from a passing tree.

iii

Yellow and orange irises  
lodged in olive flesh  
return my fixed stare:

more wild flowers  
in the October bush  
than my poor pupils,  
may ever number, ever sight.

iv

Don't speak,  
not even to yourself;  
so delicious the birds'  
tones, their music:  
despise commentary.

v

Fields full of grass  
like green wool  
ready to be sheared  
by knitting sheep.

vi

A large log  
across your path  
invites you to sit  
a while and rest  
between stanzas.

Like your last footsteps,  
your thoughts are melting ...

vii

Plovers squabble,  
crows are shrill  
and garrulous,  
but kookaburras  
just laugh out their name  
over and over.

viii

The cathedrals of Europe  
gothic in their beauty,  
final in their pronouncements;  
  
yet put one here amid  
the blue ranges and ochre ridges,  
how confident then  
its answers to the oldest  
questions this country asks?

ix

Two boys on bitser bikes  
ride through my riddles  
leaving me to recoup  
what truth I can  
  
like their dust  
in my watering eyes.

x

The bush cottage  
and vine-row oils,  
the watercolour hints  
of floating hills,  
  
are not the only spring  
exhibits: charcoal sketches

from last summer's ashes  
still arrest the eye:

fragments of black bones  
scattered in weeds and sky.

xi

Picture in four months' time  
in the dry brown weather  
the wind a belting door  
on hot screaming hinges,  
the perforating rasp of sheep  
rattling thick herds of dust,  
the creek with nothing, nothing to say.

xii

Despite the savagery of fire,  
the land and its animals'  
black and smoking carcasses,  
the ritual of renewals  
is secure as the sun is secure.

Winter rains raise the word  
of death to speech of seed and leaf;  
the single human has only one  
life's chance of being heard.

xiii

So I think I can't imagine  
the nuclear winter they say  
we are threatened by  
even here where the fat sun  
grazes like a munching cow  
in a froth of poppies,  
and eucalypts shimmer into song.

But suddenly I shudder  
in my tracks, stopped by an idea  
that all I breathe,  
touch, taste, see, hear,  
is only magic waiting to vanish,  
as men ordain,  
in everlasting death.

xiv

Flames love the fat  
of the land, its wheat fur,  
when the bush is a lather  
of heat and sweats buckets  
like broken-in horses.

Then if a wind rises  
out of the north's oven  
carrying a single spark,  
the Lord promises  
black judgement.

xv

There is also slow decaying wood  
feathered with fungus and moss  
which did not burn;

a peace so prevailing  
that makes fire even  
seem unaccomplished.

xvi

In the ploughed paddocks:

great gums recently uprooted  
by machines like giant ants,  
by metal men like robots.

All that remains  
of their forest power,  
like toppled towers  
on the pile of history,  
is the fading traction  
of a lost message.

xvii

Sun disperses  
bush filters  
blood-trickling light;  
earth on which you walk  
is a cushion of cool shade.

Everything near you expands  
into the mystery of itself,

except for your own shadow  
stretching  
disappearing  
beyond who you are...

xviii

The wending valley lingers  
in its dusk which peels in places  
where window panes and  
tilting poles brier lights.

Do those who nurture here  
see the fruits of gladness,  
a beacon name like *God*,  
sculptured in their porches?

Their planter ancestors  
of the riesling vineyards  
were also pickers  
of the Bible's metaphors.

xix

Vineyards on hillsides  
wineries in hollows  
orchards in pastures  
gardens in orchards  
go forth and multiply...

dirt roads and lanes  
plank and rock bridges  
stone and wooden houses  
weatherboard churches  
stone and slate churches  
go forth and multiply...

xx

Here in this sooner age  
I am content  
with the wine  
from the bottle,  
gold from the green  
red from the brown;

an occasional smile  
for the grace and miracle



# Syd Harrex

## LA FONTAINE DE VAUCLUSE

Trees in the wind-churned orchards now  
 are curdled in saffron blossom  
 from L'Isle-sur-Sorgue by cottage wall  
 and road to Fontaine-de-Vaucluse  
 where we came on a pilgrimage,  
 though not of the orthodox kind:

came not to the twelfth-century  
 chapel in homage to the Saint  
 (Holy Bishop of Cavaillon),  
 but to patriarchal Petrarch  
 who in the same church first looked on  
 Laura and fell in love in rhyme.

Their love is a local legend  
 still, though not of promiscuous  
 passion but of grand privations,  
 as they signalled one another  
 between vertigo rock and pine  
 across the Vaucluse fountain's gorge.

Yet as I stare into the stream  
 of ovulating jades which drowned  
 their sweet sighs, I wonder how much  
 false myth and fickle chastity  
 now conceals their intangible  
 hearts: who's the dreamer, whose the dream?

And I can't help feeling Petrarch  
 and Laura were not so famished  
 by virtue as the tablets say,  
 especially as all around  
 us trout are spawning in canals  
 and bees are honeying in blossom.

(1970)

(from *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy*, 1999, Writers Workshop Books, Calcutta, pp. 24–25)

# Syd Harrex

## LEAVES

*for Judy King*

I would emulate  
 the productive laziness of leaves  
 green growing  
 falling with dignity  
 in their beauty,  
 returning to skeletal tissue,  
 mulching under winter darknesses:  
 Thus am I when I sense  
 my mortality like an encroaching frost,  
 feeling the deciduous glancing off of leaves,  
 the emptying of my branches.

But on an Australian Indian summer  
 day like this late April one,  
 the blue bowl sky  
 paling to windless white,  
 immortal longings bestow  
 willing suspension of disbelief,  
 and the leaves I would now emulate  
 are the canoe-shaped eucalyptus,  
 their shining oil of health  
 immune to the seasons  
 of flood, drought, ice, heat,  
 and regenerative even after holocaust.

Days such as this, like a Shakespearean  
 conceit, seem to prosper forever.

(from *Dedications*, 1999, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, p. 44)

# Syd Harrex

## A VASE OF WILD DAFFODILS

*Something far more deeply interfused*  
*Wordsworth*

You picked them a month ago and  
despite the skittish tortoise-shell cat  
vibrating with intimations of Spring  
they had not been havocked yet, nor knocked  
off their tea-tray table on wheels.  
But let's face it, they are looking  
wrinkled, they are whiskering  
a sort of rot on the white  
lace periphery of egg-yolk visages,  
just as I imagine Dorothy  
and William were prone to, towards  
the close, blinking at elegiac sunset  
light while echoes of a sense sublime  
shiver like rain along the hills,  
and heartbeats droop to rest in the dales,  
and next season's daffodils slyly  
prepare to bloom out of this year's slime.

(from *Under a Medlar Tree*, 2004, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, p. 17)

# Syd Harrex

## ‘BARD-BIRTH’

(for Ken Arvidson who invented that term on awakening to ecstatic noise in the bird-bath outside his bedroom window in Adelaide, a far time ago)

The past incorrigibly iambic,  
 Eros spawns your sonnets with felt-tipped tongue  
 to suit your pumping lines, yet when you're hot  
 rules are there to crunch between trochee thighs  
 so readers can mould simulacrum truths  
 into things of beauty. This is the way  
 a love play, out of sorts with death, makes good  
 the sad business of lost brotherhood.  
 From your example we learn the salving  
 art of redressing errors so they seem  
 not to have happened; magical logic  
 that cossets candle flames against the draught  
 with firefly phosphorescence in a glass  
 luminously, as fitful shadows pass.

(from *Dougie's Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, 2007, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, p. 1)