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## Poems

Syd Harrex

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## Poems

### **Abstract**

DAVID UNAIPON: NARROONDARIE'S WIVES, WHY?, SURVIVING DARKNESS (for Vincent & Ruth Megaw), A WINDOW VIEW (for Anna Rutherford)

# Syd Harrex

## DAVID UNAIPON: NARROONDARIE'S WIVES

### I The Casuarina Song

Boonah Narroondarie the Sacred Man  
of the Narrinyini tribes turned to birds  
all those who failed to heed his call. His last  
earth home was two bald hills, fringed by mallee  
and honeysuckle and our Lakes Albert  
and Alexandrina stocked with fat fish:  
sweet Thookerrie forbidden to women.  
One day Narroondarie going to fish  
was stopped by the sad song of a sighing  
She Oak tree, and found the source of these pleas  
and lamentations was two maidens jailed  
in the trunk of a Grass Tree to save men  
bound for the Spirit Land from their clutches.  
The Sacred Man of pity set them free.

### II The Fall

He was snared, as sacred heroes are, by  
siren vows, and as they stepped from the Grass  
Tree, by these maidens' Punerrie of beauty.  
They became his wives in his mia mia.  
And so he counselled them in Spirit Law,  
warned against forbidden fish and the dire  
consequence of transgression – Death! But first  
chance they got, netting in the lake, they hid  
the fish, made a fatal fire, and the catch  
tasted delicious. 'Men are so clever,'  
they said, 'making laws to deprive us.' – Now,  
Narroondarie, miles distant, heard the bream  
fat sizzling, smelt the treachery. 'They must  
be punished,' he said, 'these frivolous wives.'

### III Flight

Narroondarie's love for his wayward pair of wives, the two sisters, was deep as any sea but he knew the tragedy they tied him to; their appointed executioner.

In vain he wept, prayed for their forgiveness, but they had fled and he must track them down; follow their camp-fires' ashes, shells, mullet bones, their journey to the west coast, the Bluff where they would placate Khowwallie, Blue Crane, the keeper of the thin land bridge and cross to Kangaroo Island, the Spirit Land, and be free of punishment forever. But Narroondarie, endowed by the Great Father's will, had other plans to deliver.

### IV Rhunjullang: 'Two Sisters'

*From Cape Willoughby you see two pillars  
stuck in the ocean at Backstairs entrance;  
ghost granite in mist, whale smooth in the sun.  
Myth and chart sea-marks, they warn trespassers...*

All Great Spirit, the Nhyanhund, had sent sacred instructions woven out of air.

Narroondarie reconnoitered, and chanted the West Wind's tempest, and the South Wind's flood, and the North Wind's annihilations. And his wives, the two sisters, confused mid-way across the evanescent bridge, were drowned. 'Command their bodies be turned into stone so all women are warned through the ages.' *Matthew Flinders named these rocks the Pages.*

## WHY?

This of all questions, the persistent toddler's,  
the ancient pursuit of the modern mind  
that summons less knowledge than it infers,  
the bewildered cry of the maimed and blind,  
the death rattle stuck in the feeble throat  
when the maker fails to return the call,  
the clicking of catechisms learned by rote:  
this is the perennial why of all.

A word too hard for word, number, or sign  
to render redundant, explain away,  
a voice too admissable to decline,  
a mark to start and end every day.  
I shrug my heart, retaliate with hot  
and cold passion and say to *Why*: 'why not?'

## SURVIVING DARKNESS

(for Vincent & Ruth Megaw)

This afternoon in your leaf-splashed garden,  
while sub-dividing clouds thrust warmth, lift light,  
your guests may wonder why in life and art  
best effects may be miniature, slight  
insights, and what we code as familiar  
is intact with mystery. Suppose an eye's  
(insect-lensed), an animal's nostril knowing;  
the aerial range of van Gogh painting...  
if theory's your bent, that is. There's also  
wrinkling planks and nails, the tar and saw,  
planes of shape in sawdust sunsets, the lathe  
of language. Spun in the sun's achievements,  
nature does the rest, surviving darkness,  
until its ancient arms hold, rescue, all.

**A WINDOW VIEW  
(for Anna Rutherford)**

This window view of the estuary,  
where seabirds fossic and investigate  
the victuals of the mud, is history.  
There, as they embrace, tides eviscerate  
each other ... leaching foam like bubbled blood.  
And who remembers a first trysting here  
as we stuck to each other sud to sud,  
declaring we shall never disappear?  
How wrong that twisted trust, how right the wrong;  
so forever more am I a scientist  
of primeval places like the Coorong  
whenever littorals are lost in mist.  
When all the energy of love's despair  
forms in the frantic kiss of fire with air.