Poems

Syd Harrex
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Abstract
Egina

Walking out in the Clare Valley
La Fontaine de Vaucluse
Leaves
A vase of wild daffodils
Bard-Birth

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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.
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.

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.

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.

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
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)
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)