

Syd Harrex, *Five Seasons* (Table One, 2011)

I remember reading an anecdote recalling when the poet Stephané Mallarmé offered a witty homily to the painter Edgar Degas. The painter complained to Mallarmé of his frustrated attempts at creating a sonnet despite a wealth of ideas, to which Mallarmé rather wryly remarks, 'It's not with ideas that one makes poetry, Degas, it's with words.'¹

Mallarmé's elliptic riposte inspired for me a self-styled distortion: perhaps poetry reviews are written not with words, but rather ideas.

Writing reviews for collections of poetry can be an intensely personal and remarkably sensitive enterprise. The force of the encounter between text and reflection, between words and ideas, intensifies further when one has a personal experience of the poet – as the anecdote between Mallarmé and Degas perhaps shows. Is it possible to offer a response to poetry, or any other literature, from a purely objective standpoint when you and the author share an acquaintance?

You would be correct in assuming that there is a story to tell here between Syd Harrex and me. So, I shall tell it.



Syd Harrex delivering an address at the First Fiji Literary Festival, Nadi, FNU, Namaka Campus, October 2011.

In the open restaurant of the Mercure Hotel, Nadi, Fiji Islands, it is easy to appreciate the poetry of daily life. The pleasure of place swells twofold when one is in Nadi to attend the First Fiji Literary Festival. Under the theme 'Creativity Across Communities; Imagining and Imaging the Pacific,' the 2011 festival brought together local and international scholars, writers and creative artists, from around Fiji and beyond the Pacific, myself included.

Seated as I was at a table in the Mecure's 'Rokete' restaurant – overlooking a kidney-shaped swimming pool, sun-baked deck chairs, a tropical garden, numerous palm-trees stretching to an azure sky, and a deliciously cool and creamy cocktail in hand – how vivid becomes the charm of the scene when sharing the company of a man described by Brian Matthews as 'One of this country's more original and moving lyric poets.'²

Long days followed of ensconced reverie at 'our' table; conversations about poetry, sessions of poetry writing, reflections of life, of the past, of loves lost and found, at times intoxicated by a profound sense of congenial simpatico – and others by pure overindulgences – these occasions comprise my recollections of Syd Harrex.

¹ Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé; the Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005) 147.

² In his acclaim of Syd Harrex's *Dougie's Ton and 99 Other Sonnets* (2008). See http://books.google.com.fj/books/about/Dougie_s_Ton_and_99_Other_Sonnets.html?id=TSDmKAAACAAJ&redir_esc=y. Accessed, 2 February 2012.

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Imagine then, if you will, endeavouring to subtract those experiences from memory when writing a review of his latest collection *Five Seasons*, abstracts of which were in fact read at the First Fiji Literary Festival; I among a small number of orators.

Is it possible? Does one even try?

While I cannot promise a wholly objective review, whatever that is, I will make a concerted attempt to share my reception of *Five Seasons* in light of the eminent Australian academic Professor A. R. Chisholm's caution; if one spends 'good money on a poetry review [one] ought to find some poetry in it.'³

Syd Harrex's latest collection, *Five Seasons* has been edited and compiled by Melinda Graefe and Molly Murn, both postgraduate students at Flinders University.⁴ Their introduction is itself a rich and deeply thoughtful meditation on the poet and his work. Read it and you will understand the value. For this section proves exceedingly useful as a kind of existential compass via which the reader might navigate the thematic concerns mapped throughout the collection, as well as orientate oneself to the collection's organisation. *Five Seasons* is divided into five sections; 'Spring,' 'Summer,' 'Autumn,' 'Winter,' and 'Out of Season'. While the majority of poems are newly-published, some, such as 'In Memory of Gwen Harwood' ('Spring'), 'Eclipse,' 'Blood Bank,' 'Return to Sender' ('Summer'), and 'Paddo Plus' ('Winter'), have been previously published elsewhere.

It is clear from the individual works that the poems track a personal journey, or rather a series of journeys, which at times intersect, then depart, and merge and then remerge to realise an altogether new trajectory. These are poems of travel *in* time, but they are also poems *of* time; of a particular time as much as a particular place, and of a particular person as much as a particular encounter. Traversing decades at points only to then claim a moment in breathtakingly vivid detail; Syd opens the door to a journey where the reader becomes an ever-moving passenger. We shift, as he does, in literary spaces where time expands in one moment and then truncates in another:

This is My Room

This is my room. Here I am, here
I have to leave to sleep in a real bed.
I'm not schizoid. Just like any lover,
sumptuous with desiring before autumn's ...
shall I say passed or conveniently out
of the way. But now is high summer,
the clouds on heat, erogenous images
multiplying on towels on the beach.
And the outside world's out there silent
or gregarious as the case may be; while here,
the library of questions never answered,

³ Alan Rowland Chisholm, 'A Sheaf of Poetry,' Melbourne *Argus*, 23 October 1948, 21. By 'ought to find some poetry in it,' Chisholm, I am sure, refers to the necessity to include references to the poet's poetry in a review, rather than Chisholm's inclination to simply disparage a reviewer's prosy attempts to respond to poetry. Yet, it appears a successful disparagement whatever his agenda.

⁴ Molly Murn and Melinda Graefe's paper, "'No Man is an Island": Sense, Memory, and Illumination in the Recent Poetry of Syd Harrex,' was read by Sudesh Mishra at the First Fiji Literary Festival, FNU, Namaka, October, 2011.

the inexplicable death of the rose,
the last wet whispering eros kiss,
the other side of Paradise of bliss. (16)

Five Seasons embraces that we are each acutely aware of the seasons throughout our youth, but that as we grow older they never emerge as we remember them. Time and season no longer fully equate. Autumn is not quite spring. Winter seems more temperate than we recall. Spring offers shades of summer always with the dark prelude to winter. Autumn and spring are seasons in between. The sequence of the seasons is somehow out-of-cycle as a catalogue of time when we look from the short days of our adulthood to the long summer-times of our past. *Five Seasons* is more than a meditation on what was ... *once*. It creates a new world where past and present things interrelate, like the seasons, within a re-conceptualised cycle of time, life, memory, love and loss that creates room for out-of-season-ness.

By offering the reader slices of his life once lived and now commemorated, his poems invite complicity in that truly human pastime: remembrance. For me at least, I am transported back to the days I often stood gazing out over Hobart from the peak of Mount Wellington ('Up and Down the Slopes of Mount Wellington'), or returning to Hobart for a very brief visit in 2010 ('Back in Tassie'), or to the recollection of my days as a postgraduate spending hours in the Morris Miller Library reading the works of a much-admired poet ('In Memory of Gwen Harwood'). From my here-and-now I occasionally believe these were my halcyon days, although at the time these moments appeared as merely everyday life.

Such is the season and out-of-season tricks of memory:

Sublunar Lovers, and Other Miscalculations

I have a presentiment of dark
clouds over snow-covered
Mount Wellington returning
to haunt me when the
full moon is lazy
and my release framed. (43)

Indeed, as we are in the journey of reading *Five Seasons* compelled backward, forward, and to those slippery places in between, we too recall our own many seasons and there discover a prickly satisfaction in the riddle of being and remembering. As mortality is the lot of human life, *Five Seasons* embraces the gift of observation by making possible encountering a world where meaning is hindsight, foresight, *in-sight*.

So too do the poems in this collection explore those 'times' which do not quite fit within the order – the season – of things. This is the bittersweet kind of in-between-ness that forces the reader to wonder at the *after*life from the armchair of their here-and-now. This is a time *between* time – between time of life and the inevitable time of death – and thus, poems *between* the order of things. We are forever in life between that profound contradiction of reconciling death while in and between negotiating life:

Piece of the Moon

For Danny and Norman

(i)

They brought home pieces of the moon,
thus abolishing poetry:
put them back, you say.

(ii)

To be late
with studied nonchalance –
to one's lecture, wedding,
or funeral –
has a high priority
in your repertoire of the ideal.

(iii)

If man fucked up earth
who fucked up heaven?

(iv)

A poem is the result
of a mind moving
from why to how –

like foliage in the sun.
Poetry is how, not why,
you postpone your death. (57)

And so, to appropriate Mallarmé's enigmatic remark, I believe *Five Seasons* acknowledges Syd Harrex as the master of writing poetry not with words, or even ideas, but rather with time.

The cycle of *Five Seasons* is unique and celebratory precisely because its literary works relishes the impossible delight of being in, and out, of season.

Nicole Anae