Transnational Literature, Volume 8, no. 1, November 2015

Tributes to Syd Harrex

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Melinda Graefe

I first met Syd Harrex in 1994. I had just completed honours at Flinders University and was attending an English department book launch held at the State Library of South Australia. I recall Syd was in charge of serving wine.

Of course Syd’s face was familiar, but we had never spoken together as I had never studied with him. I will sheepishly admit to not having studied Caribbean or Indian literature at either undergraduate or honours level. No worries. My ignorance of these literatures was about to be redressed, and my horizons broadened. Anyone who has met Syd will know that to encounter him is to encounter the variegated worlds that postcolonial literatures evoke. The two go hand-in-hand in a necessary and vital way. Later, I again encountered Syd, as one inevitably and easily runs into friendly, sociable, intellectually engaged and generous people. They are always there to find, always ready to offer friendship and share ideas. Humphrey Tranter, Syd’s colleague at Flinders, had invited me and another postgraduate student to join them for lunch at the University staff club. In this way I happily fell into an enduring friendship with Syd, which was also a kind of informal apprenticeship in poetry editing (and in deciphering hand writing). I knew and worked with Syd the poet, but I also had the unique opportunity to learn much about the vibrant literatures that have often been consigned to the peripheries of the university curriculum. Syd made the study and researching of them central. Many have gained immeasurably from Syd’s inexhaustible knowledge of the new literatures in English. Recently, Rick Hosking wrote:

[Syd] created a vital and far-reaching research centre and network of teachers and scholars … He connected many of us to a wider world.\(^2\)

The tributes that are collected here, in the journal that Syd founded as an essential medium for exploring and engaging with the new literatures in English, all testify to his far-reaching vision and commitment to all areas of academia.

Many readers of the following tributes will note a recurrent reference to ‘Syd’s Table.’ The table has been variously remembered as Table Ten, Table Four, and Table One, begging the question ‘How many tables did Syd actually need for his gatherings?’ Only one at a time, but they have always been full, with extra seating needed to include as many people as possible. With the closing of the staff club, Syd and company chose to gather at other university cafes, at

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times resorting to perching our lunches on tiny round bar tables, bottoms precariously balanced on bar stools, while the cafes were closed for summer holidays. But Syd and company would always meet. The table numbers changed as the nomad-scholars of Syd’s acquaintance would seek each other’s company in their own moveable feast. Conversation was vital to Syd, and so were the collaborations which emerged from these gatherings. It is through meeting regularly with Syd that I have had the opportunity to meet his many friends and visiting guests – always interesting, always generous – and also to work with many of them, including Gillian Dooley, Michael Deves of Lythrum Press (who published Syd’s poems) and Molly Murn, whose sensitivity to Syd’s poetry is breathtakingly apparent in her tribute-poem. Many of us have fond recollections of meeting the internationally renowned guests who sat at the table, and for students it was a great opportunity to meet these academics informally and engage in the art of conversation.

These gatherings had an especial meaning for Syd; the tablecloth was almost as important as the table on which it was laid. In neat rounded letters, Syd’s pen made its poetic marks on the white paper tablecloths of the university cafes, napery manuscripts that have formed the basis of several excellent volumes of poems. It was initially my role to proofread, make a few suggestions about choice of word, the order in which poems might appear. Shortly after his retirement, Syd had composed so many poems that he required a second proofreader to help with getting them to publication, and poet Molly joined us at the table. Recently, Syd’s handwriting had become almost indecipherable, due to the onset of macular degeneration, but that did not prevent Syd from composing. I remain in awe of Syd’s capacity to compose at this time despite many health-related setbacks, and it was a pleasure for both Molly and me to be there to catch the fragments of verse as they fell to the page or emerged, spoken, unrevised, some perfect nevertheless. The tablecloths that are now held in Special Collections at the Flinders Central Library are watermarked with the inevitable food and wine stains, ensuring further remembrances of Syd’s creative conviviality.

The tributes collected here form part of a much larger international response to the lifework of Syd Harrex. Notably, Ron Blaber has edited a beautifully-produced collection of writings, ‘Whaddya Know?’, the title echoing one of Syd’s famous Humanities hallway greetings (published by Wakefield Press, 2015). And Mohammad A. Quayum, Asiatique’s Editor-in-Chief, has published a collection of tributes that can be found here: http://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/AJELL/issue/view/30. Transnational Literature continues to celebrate Syd’s unique achievements with a range of tributes in prose and poetry, from friends, colleagues and former students. We hear from distinguished professors Edward Baugh and Gerhard Stilz, who enjoyed tours of the southern regions of South Australia with Syd and his wife Jane; we hear from former students Sue and Rick Hosking, who flourished under Syd’s guidance to become exceptionally fine scholars who have made important and unique contributions to the field of Australian literature (and there are many more of Rick’s
anecdotes of Syd to be found in ‘Whaddya Know?’); we hear from fellow poets, some of whom were also from a more recent generation that studied with Syd and colleagues at Flinders University – Peter Endersbee, Kate Deller-Evans, Ioana Petrescu, Steve Brock, Molly Murn and Adrian Caesar provide exquisite mirrors that reflect their memories of Syd, of his guiding influence, his conviviality, and his passionate vision of and for the world. The poems also engage with Syd’s love of poetry in general; Kate’s ‘The Tempest Suite’ developed out of an initial project, ‘Postcolonial representations of Shakespeare’, commenced under Syd’s supervision.

In her eulogy, Jane remembered Syd as a gentleman. A gentle man. With gentle guidance, Syd has made a significant contribution to changing the academic landscape for the better. He has shown us, with great clarity of awareness, the ways in which we as academics and artists should nurture, foster, understand and respect the literature of all cultures. He ran the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English with few material resources; the centre itself was manifest in its web of strong relationships, affectionately nurtured with academics and artists from around the world. All of us who travel in Syd’s footsteps have learnt that one must tread softly:

Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.  

Thank you Syd, for presenting to the world a rich embroidery of possibilities for how we might go about our work in more meaningful ways as academics.

I would like to thank Peter Endersbee for sharing the photographs that he took on a recent trip with Syd to Kangaroo Island. Like many of Syd’s former students, Peter shared a close and enduring friendship with Syd, based on a shared love of poetry, music, and footy, and more especially the musical poetry of the divine bard, Dylan Thomas, a recording of whose poems

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Peter listened to with his mentor at Syd’s home. Kate Deller-Evans’ ‘The Tempest Suite’ appeared in *Divan*, 5 (2004), and more recently as part of Kate’s chapbook *Strut & Fret* (Ginninderra Press, 2014).
A Tribute to Syd Harrex

Sue Hosking

There are many of us, spread across Australia, from Perth to Norfolk Island, and across the world, from India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji, Jamaica, Canada, and the Americas – who are part of an extraordinary community that Syd created. I was lucky enough to be one of Syd’s students – one of the first intake at Flinders, fifty years ago next year. As a university teacher, Syd was patient, encouraging and firm when necessary: ‘for heaven’s sake speak: you’re as quiet as a little old lady waiting for a train with her knitting bag.’ Now, half a century later, I find myself knitting in front of the tellie, but I’m no longer afraid to talk.

Syd was inspirational, especially when it came to poetry. His reverence for Yeats, Dylan Thomas and Robert Frost, particularly, opened my eyes to the power of poetry. ‘The force that through the green fuse drives the flower;’ ‘Something there is that does not love a wall …’ When Syd read these poems, as a poet himself, we understood them.

Syd was more than a teacher to so many of us. His postgraduates, many of whom came from overseas, were nurtured by Syd in the Centre he established: the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English. That Centre was immensely important, opening up the field of what Syd chose to call New Literatures in English: that was a ground-breaking innovation. I worked for Syd as a research assistant for a few years and will never forget the visitors who came to Flinders, expecting a named building and finding a room, in which postgraduates worked under Syd’s guidance to edit the CRNLE Reviews Journal, which he founded, as well as other publications. If eminent visitors were sometimes surprised by our basic amenities, they understood that the Centre was more than a room: it was a hub, connecting people, all of whom knew Syd and shared his determination to promote literatures in English that had previously been excluded from the canon.

I benefitted enormously from Syd’s mentorship. I learnt how to conduct scholarly research with him. He insisted that anyone who participated in research leading to publication should share authorship with him. Because of this generosity, many of us who worked with Syd as editors, postgraduates or research assistants, built up publication profiles that enabled us to apply successfully for jobs in other universities. I’ll never forget the excitement of following Syd’s hunch that the popular Letters of an Indian Judge to an English Gentlewoman was a hoax. Nor will I ever forget his encouragement to accompany him to a conference in Mysore, staying with the late Professor C.D. Narasimhaiah, taking a hair-raising taxi ride with Syd, after the conference, from Mysore to Mumbai. I felt safe with Syd in India, even when the taxi driver turned his lights off at night, to save petrol, he said. Writers and university people recognised

and respected Syd there. He knew where to go – what to do – how to make friends and influence people. He was loved and admired and we bobbed along in his wake.

Syd was to me, as he was to his postgraduates, a teacher and mentor. But he was also a friend. He remained interested in all of us, wrote poems for significant events, such as the births of our children, wined and dined us far beyond our deserts, shared our triumphs and cried with us when life was too sad. His comfort, his presence and insights, are impossible to forget. I am one of many who will be always grateful for his legacy and I hope that those closest to him, his family, will take some comfort in this.
A Tribute to Sydji

Rick Hosking

I met my wife Sue in Syd’s first-year class at Flinders in 1966. He taught me only one short course on the Indian writer R.K. Narayan: only in the 1970s would Syd develop his world-famous specialisation in the New Literatures in English. We knew him first as an inspired teacher of American Literature and of poetry in particular.

While Jane (Syd’s wife) might have called him Tiddles, for close to half a century I have called him Sydji: the honorific suffix given to teachers and gurus in India. He has been not just a teacher and mentor but a best mate: one of Flinders University’s most celebrated teachers, researchers and postgraduate supervisors. For decades he held the record as the most successful postgraduate supervisor in Flinders: Syd’s postgraduates teach in universities all around the world.

A few years ago our head of faculty had her bag stolen in Singapore; she rang the Australian High Commission to get some help with the paperwork to enable her to fly home. She managed to get the Cultural Attaché on the phone; when she told him she was from Flinders, his first question was: did she know Syd?

There are so many wonderful memories of Syd: generous, good-humoured, friendly, collegial Sydji. Syd winning Vince O’Sullivan’s Bronze Turd Award one night in Brisbane with an extraordinary telling of the wide-mouthed frog joke – with the actions. Syd by the side of the Bangalore to Mysore road in south India, at two in the morning, our hire car broken down, his big thumb up, hitching a lift. Then Syd in the back of the bus that picked us up, surrounded by young Indian men and holding court on matters of great import: cricket and Bollywood and poetry, claiming all the way to Mysore with great authority that his travelling companion was Dennis Lillee.

A colleague from Social Sciences went to a conference in Calcutta, and found himself a little unsettled by a cohort of young men in the back row intently following his presentation. At the end of his paper they trooped down to the front of the room, and – expecting a barrage of questions about his paper – he was delighted to be asked the question: was he knowing Syd Harrex?

I think we should all be grateful and delighted we knew Syd Harrex. In 2016 Flinders will be 50: Sydji was there at the beginning, and will be remembered as one of the great creative presences of our first half-century.
Thanks to Syd’s initiative, I spent the month of September 1989 at Flinders University as Visiting Commonwealth Scholar. I had got to know Syd through ACLALS, and he quickly became one of the most unforgettable characters I had ever met. He wasn’t in Adelaide when I arrived on the 3rd, from Wollongong, because he was attending the ACLALS triennial conference at the University of Kent. When he returned, on the 5th, he came bearing the news that I had been elected Chair of ACLALS for the next three years. Syd was a most engaging host, and my month at Flinders was unforgettable. Apart from the seminars and talks (including to the Adelaide PEN Club and the English Department at the University of Adelaide), there was the camaraderie and conviviality of Syd’s students and colleague-friends: lunch at the ‘Raj Mahal,’ tennis on afternoons, followed by a beer at the Duck Inn. Syd also took me to see my first (and-up-to-now last) Australian Rules football match.

Perhaps the most memorable experience was the two days I spent with him and Jane on Kangaroo Island. Here are a few sentences from my diary:

**Saturday, 24th**: 7.30 a.m. Goodbye to my VIP flat at Flinders, and it’s off to Kangaroo Island (yes, there is such a place) with Syd and Jane. By ferry from Cape Jervis to Penneshaw on K.I. … Choppy sea, but effect alleviated by the fact that the wind was behind us. … Syd and Jane have a little bungalow, which they call a shack (with electricity, running hot water, telephone, bath, etc!), on the low hill overlooking the bay and the jetty, and looking across to the mainland.

After a quick lunch, we headed out, towards the western part of the island. Seal Bay: a unique place – only place in the world where people can walk on the beach among sea-lions in their natural habitat. They are quite unconcerned about onlookers, although they can be dangerous if angered. … The bay itself – even without the seals – spectacular and unspoiled, wild, windswept, the path to it quite steep. …

Then on to Flinders Chase, a vast wildlife reserve which occupies the western end of the island. Wallabies with their ‘joey’s’ in the pouches – very ‘tame,’ coming up to the car in the hope of being given food. We were also lucky to see the koalas eating in their (special) gum trees and swaying in the breeze as they did so, and one fast asleep in a fork lower down. Also saw an emu – ostrich-like.

At Admiral’s Arch, a spectacular archway of jagged rock curving over a tiny inlet – you look through to the sea and the sunset, the waves beating up – and in the ‘pool’ below, New Zealand fur seals … frolicking. Then the Remarkable Rocks

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The ‘Raj Mahal’ is an affectionate reference to the Flinders University Staff Club (now permanently closed), which was established by Emeritus Professor Raja Huigol.
(an understatement) at the south-western-most tip of the island, a wonder of ‘natural art,’ … a perfection of masses, displacement, concavities and convexities, solids and hollows, weight and delicacy, texture, colour – … a magnificence to walk round, walk through, … walk under, touch, stand back from – Henry Moore might have stopped sculpting if he had seen this!

… At least an hour of the ride back to Penneshaw was after nightfall. Once we nearly hit an opossum, who, blinded by the light, turned back just as he had reached the middle of the road; and later a wallaby just missed copping it as he came hopping towards the road. … Back to a terrific, juicy, thick fillet steak done by Jane – the slices cut by her from a fillet chosen by her from their butcher. …

**Monday, 25th:** In the morning headed out again, west again, but this time … towards the Northern coast, and eventually to the secluded Western River Cove. … Jane, pregnant, had to stop for a leak at Parndana (or some other place). Should have gone myself, because I’d had a beer with Syd when we stopped at a viewing-point a little earlier, in a strong, chill wind – but foolishly held back, so then was in trouble for the next hour at least, until we finally reached Western Cove, where I asked if there was a toilet, only to be told that I’d ‘have to go bush’ … Trouble was, there was no bush around, only an old broken-down latrine and other tourists, but did get the blessed relief behind the latrine. …

**Tuesday, 26th:** Back on the first ferry at 8.30 a.m. … We then drove into the McLaren Vale, one of the best wine districts. Stopped first at Hamilton’s small winery, where one of the proprietors, Hugh Hamilton, mid-forties, was on hand – friend of Syd’s, so leisurely conversation while we tasted, and I had to appear knowing when asked my comments. I did particularly like one of the whites – ‘fumé blanc’ – a very distinctive flavour. When Syd and Jane decided they’d take that and one of the reds, I revealed my innocence of the life-style by offering to pay for them, as a gift, thinking that they meant one bottle of each. But Syd charmingly and easily disabused me of my error, by saying that they were ‘serious wine drinkers.’ They bought two cases.

Syd asked Hugh to suggest a new winery worth visiting, so off we went to Hugo’s – even smaller, it seemed, and more rustic, but apparently some good stuff … Here they bought another case-and-a-half. Clearly, Russell McDougall’s wine rack, with about 200 spaces, wasn’t a rarity.2 Finally to a large, long-established winery, whose name I’ve forgotten. … Syd introduced to two new pieces of wine-tasting terminology: ‘lifted’ and ‘fat around the middle.’ Lunch at the Salopian Inn, referred to by Syd and Jane as Philippa’s, after the proprietor, who is apparently known to most people as Pip (Forrester) … I chose ‘green curry duck’ – not bad, but could have been more piquant and spicy. Jane drove the rest of the way back.

As a jolly gesture before my departure from Adelaide (for Sydney and Macquarie), Syd had a few of us (me, him, the students) contribute to a clutch of farewell light and nonsense verses. His was titled ‘To Eddie Leaving Us (The Raj Mahal, 27/9/89).’ This was my contribution:

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Having been harassed by Harrex
to the point of an-harrex-ia nervosa,
this verse, as you see, is supposed to rhyme
but by gum and be-gorra it refuses-to.
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2 Russell McDougall is Professor of English at the University of New England. When I visited Flinders, he was a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Adelaide, and Acting Director of the Adelaide Centre for Australian Studies, of which he was a co-founder.
Meeting Syd Harrex

Gerhard Stilz

13 October 1983. Yesterday Syd Harrex, my colleague from Flinders University, picked me up and hauled me here in a University car. A reliable old Holden, he insisted. We arrived a few minutes before eleven, and I asked Syd whether he had something for me to do. Yes, he said, now, at eleven, I was to give a lecture. I searched my pockets for a script, a handout was quickly copied out, and at high noon I was through with my speech. Another visiting lecturer followed, and the two of us were introduced to the colleagues of the department. Brian Matthews, a lecturer who is busy with his dissertation on Henry Lawson, shared our lively reminiscences of Malta, that early ACLALS conference five years ago. Anne Brewster helped Syd in editing the review journal named CRNLE and immediately asked me to write a review or two for its pages. By mid-afternoon, the introduction had transformed into a lunch and finally developed into a drinking bout at the bar of the University, both spirited and inspiring.

Later in the afternoon, Syd took me to his ‘cabin’ in the woods and forests of the Adelaide Hills. His private Volkswagen Beetle, more than twenty years old, replaced the honourable University vehicle. Syd owns some twenty acres of land on top (and including parts) of a deep gully which abounds with Australian native grass and gum trees. He counters my romantic feelings with his complaints about the grunting and snorting sex life celebrated by the koalas, his animal neighbours. During summer, he says, the area falls dry, and water becomes scarce. He then relies on his own resources and those of his neighbours. He collects the rainfall of the winter months in huge tanks. His cabin expands into a wooden deck overhanging the cliff above the gully. It consists of a big room for living, cooking and eating, and several bedrooms with access to the terrace above the chasm.

Right on my arrival in Flinders I realised once again how small the world is. Syd surprised and indeed puzzled me by introducing Meenakshi Mukherjee, another of Syd’s momentary guests, currently Professor of English at the University of Hyderabad. After all, she is on my itinerary on the way back to Tübingen in a couple of weeks. She has just returned from archival work in Sydney, is about to stay in Flinders for some more research and will only be back in Hyderabad a few days before we are scheduled to meet there for a few lectures and a good talk.

Meenakshi shared our dinner, commented on Syd’s art of cooking but wisely refrained from interfering. Syd featured an unusual array of fish and chicken, amply spiced in the Indian manner and prepared in the midst of all of us on the central table cooktop of his living room. His big, round frying pan was surrounded and occasionally invaded by lecherous flames, red, white, blue, green and yellow, as new spices were added. Most of us admitted that they had eaten Indian food before in its country of origin. Therefore various kinds of chili were freely added, until the expectant assembly, under coughs and tears, pleaded for mercy. The heavy smoke gradually lifted and disappeared through the ceiling of the wooden house. After a good hour, dinner could be served. In spite of many highly commendable Australian wines consumed as antidote, the ingeniously spiced main courses left lasting effects and memories. Today I limit my lunch to a very small piece of pizza and some orange juice.

On leaving, Syd Harrex said that his beloved wife Jane was about to cook again today. I countered by inviting them to town for dinner – some Italian or Greek food, perhaps? But no
way, we will have another round at Syd’s place today. This time, Jane says, she has found smaller fish. Let’s see what happens.

We approach Syd’s cabin in his 1962 Beetle, the seats appropriately worn and torn, the floor bulging and almost complete (but not quite), the muffler noisy, but the engine runs and runs and runs, as should be … unless it is stopped – as it is now. Syd has left the car in the midst of nowhere among the Adelaide Hills, in order to ‘console a friend … won’t be long.’ All around there the songbirds chant and the kookaburras laugh. Just now the sun has set, and the sky is aglow with hundreds of cushions of red clouds.

14 October 1983. As anticipated and well prepared, we had another dinner yesterday at Syd and Jane’s cabin. Yet that was unexpectedly pleasant and peaceful. For Jane’s fish was no warrior fish like the barracuda procured by Syd, but rather what distinguished people choose to call ‘fruits de mèr’ – huge spiny lobsters, king crabs, prawns and shrimps, all fresh out of the sea near Adelaide. They tasted excellently well, next to a few bottles of superb and soothing Australian wine – which brought us to rest early, at Syd’s place. No koala brawled after this delight. So we started today, Syd, Jane, Meenakshi and me, quite early, on a University tour, in the University Holden, on an instructive excursion into the fruitful south of South Australia. Ignoring wind and rain, we reached McLaren Vale, certainly not to ignore those big and well-known wineries, whose products cannot and should not be excluded from the cultural and regional studies which they are said to inspire. Some of those wineries have even resorted to their old German names which they had to disguise or dissimulate under the precautions and anxieties of two world wars. Philosophising on today’s Australian multiculturalism, Syd suggested that we should taste the wines of no fewer than two wineries. Certainly we also bought some of them.

16 June 2015. Though the material substance of those wines has evaporated long ago (and though I had to recapitulate the lie of their land on a later visit), I well remember their tastes and their names. And to this day I remember Syd’s charm which continued to inspire and make fruitful our mutual visits ever since – here or there.
For Syd

My pen’s an ergot act
To rye-grass Ezra Pound,
An Ode to Shelley’s
Purple beaded musk.

Words above your lectern float,
On Wordworth’s clouds we flew,
Communing with the daffodil host
In the Olden Age I knew.

From Peter Hudson’s freaky goals
To William Yeats’s mythic gyres –
Failed fortune and men’s eyes,
I’d turn it all around for thee.

Retrouve, recherché du temps perdu
Those golden uni days with you.

Peter Endersbee

Syd Harrex tribute: For Syd. Peter Endersbee.
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The Tempest Suite

CALIBAN

I
I should go
I know
away from here
where temptation’s
a rough flirt
willing the fate
I’m plotting
for myself.

II
Violence begets violence
falls now, to the sweet
swell of pleasure
a good fist brings
or the clean blade
made sudden red
wiped on your pants
forever its delicate russet
a reminder of the pattern
taking freedom makes.

III
When I was hit
the pain didn’t register.
Later, my ribs ached —
a year, maybe longer.
I always sensed
the bruise
a mistranslation.

We never did
really connect —

there always were
lost words
between us.
FEŘINAND

he was gone
I fathomed that
anyway, a father
can be too close —
I’d been drowning
under that sensation —
the burden of all his dreams
he’d sunk into me.
I had no space
to breathe, eat, sleep —
I was repository
of his failing life
his hope of the new.

All I ever wanted
was this escape,
a forgotten place
my own time,
the chance to make out —
chase a bit of skirt
forgo the intricate
play of words,
learn firsthand instead
the diplomacy
of sex.

MIRANDA

When my thirst came I looked around
old faces, none new
never new around there.
I had to content myself with myself
keep Dad at bay
and his sundry hangers-on.

Then I met the boy
from abroad
knew my luck had changed
took no time at all
to have him sleeping over
sneaking to each other
the hot fug of night,
Dad thinking he’d spied it all
but not.

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To get out of home
I saw I’d have to play the game
I won’t say if you don’t
and turn a blind eye to the rest.

It worked.
Have my own place now
five kids, grouchy husband
always off with his mates

and a photo on the mantel
desert isle’s honeymoon snap.

**ARIEL**

Hunk like him
I always thought
his thighs,
the turn of his shoulder
when lugging wood,
spread of his hairy chest
a waste on that girl.

He wanted her.
I watched while he
jumped through the hoops
plotted for her
tried playing dumb, then cute
acting all-knowing
when he hoped
it would impress.

Brute strength won out
why shouldn’t it?
all that frustration —
in his shoes I’d have
made sure to slip it in.

That’s not my fancy, but
I promise
far greater delights
await him
when we come to be
alone.

*Kate Deller-Evans*

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.
Vanishing Point
for Syd Harrex, 1935–2015

life is lived
between the asylum
and the grave

you revealed
in the afternoon light
over lunch
and bottles
of chardonnay

I had thought of death
as a vertical line
something to journey toward
not this horizontal crab shuffle

a change in perspective
not unlike when
in a flourish of hand
you upturned a wine glass
and exclaimed
this is what the poem must do!

I now recognise
table 10 regulars
through Proustian guise
at your funeral

it’s as though
you’ve brought us all
a step closer
to the grave

while later
down the road
on the pub verandah
we up-end glasses
in a final salute
as your parade
rolls by
and the asylum
slips over the horizon.

*Steve Brock*
The Old Man and the Poem

—For Syd Harrex

I see you in your little boat, awash with blue, and blue the gloaming deep of your eyes.

I see you casting out the lines—reverential—as you always have done and always will.

I see you waiting for the words to come and take the bait; mouth clamped to hook.

I see you buck against their artful dips and curves—the fishes’ graceful elusions.

I see you surrender and let the words win over; catching you, as they reel tenderly in.

I see you in your little boat, awash with blue, and blue the gloaming deep of your eyes.

Molly Murn

Photograph courtesy Peter Endersbee ©
To a Poet, Going Blind
(For Syd Harrex)

I heard news you’d joined the seers,
blind in your cabin, looking to the hills
where still the muses visit, your amanuenses,
who are writing large those mazy figures,
which chart the staggering progress
of the drunken boat with its heavy cargo
of loss and longing through waves of grief.
Your onward surge suggests the darkness
is not implacable, light shines inside out
by which we all might navigate:
the stars are braille to guide a blind man’s eye;
I see your fingers reach for them and read.

Adrian Caesar
Syd’s Table

That table, everyone knew it at Flinders.

No one dared occupy his corner before Syd arrived, no one dared sit there unless invited by Syd.

Jovially but strictly, he presided over his domain. Shhhhh: secret academic business.

The Kangaroo Island conference dinners provided an extension of that space,

Syd’s table again, convivial, sometimes serious, always fun, the place to be.

For me, it took four years and a Doctorate to be asked with a smile to join Syd and Rick and Graham, I had arrived:

Flinders Doctor and honorary Australian academic certified and celebrated at Syd’s Table.

If Syd has found his way to King Ludd’s share of heaven perhaps he’s got his own table there

perhaps he talks about fishing and poetry and his never used computer.

Ioana Petrescu