

## A Selection of Previously Published Poems by Syd Harrex

### List of Syd Harrex's Collections of Poetry

- Syd Harrex, *Atlantis and Other Islands* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1984).  
 ---, *Inside Out* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1991).  
 ---, *Dedications* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1999).  
 ---, *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1999).  
 ---, *Under a Medlar Tree* (Adelaide: Lythrum Press, 2004).  
 ---, *Dougie's Ton & 99 Other Sonnets* (Adelaide: Lythrum Press, 2007).  
 ---, *Five Seasons* (Adelaide: Table One, 2011).

### From *Atlantis, and Other Islands*

#### *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

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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.

### 3 Patrou Street, Plaka

Listen, my window, listen.  
No one listens any more:  
only you, me, and our pigeons.  
The word, the act, *listen*  
is now out of fashion  
as shy susceptibility  
to mist, meadow light,  
and jonquil whispering.

Excavate the tin-can talk  
below, and what have you?  
Ego grunts of Athenian drivers  
revving their hormones;  
tourists with armchair vowels  
sun-tanning their clichés,  
burning the book of speech;  
language, throat commodity  
witlessly degraded, blasted  
to conversation rubble  
which chokes the warping street.

I prefer my neighbour  
pigeons' bastard cooing,  
like water on slow-boil,  
as they nestle their heads  
in neck eiderdowns  
like Elizabethan ruffs;  
blue-green, beige and grey.  
They remind, in the willow  
garden behind my eyes,  
of courtiers in plumage  
for whom the word was worth;  
lyric's coined gold,  
or policy's devious silver,  
weighing the smocked galleons  
and ingots of brute truth.

I see bird and man flash-fused,  
crystal, in a flying dream;  
the word weapon, window, wing.

Then was the syllable  
virile, slayer of barbarism;  
not as now mere mechanical  
utterance, typewriter stutter.

Easter is eating the streets  
with decibel crucifixion.  
A firework bomb shatters  
and cracks against the bricks  
where the pigeons perch.  
Deafened, they scatter like grape-  
shot; riddled raiment;

last-listened of miracles,  
last rainbow abandonment  
of fugitive, fig-lipped man.

## **From *Inside Out***

### **Kangaroo Island Sketches**

#### **I The Ferry Arriving**

Quick lines of sketching in a book  
push like veins, pull like wires,

until the puppet shape resembles  
the breaching manoeuvre of arrival;

then the ferry berths tied to its match-stick  
jetty, and fixes into a toy of itself:

slips of sight your study reassembles;  
a painting perhaps lopsided on a hook.

#### **V Near Windmill Beach, Cape Willoughby**

How sunlight is varnished by moist sea air  
late summer day dying gathering grain  
as of planed pinewood, the solid, the doomed  
earth, how floating, roaming in sky it is;  
frail seeming its boulders of inflated  
bladders, cliffs of collapsed cardboard boxes,  
how like cinema sets, illusion blink-  
ing just in the eye of the beholder.  
Space appears stasis yet all is action,  
orange rust on rocks, engines of ocean  
pounding tunnels into coasts, fireworks foam.  
How tenuous, trifling, this my life-time:  
human story expunged like esplanades  
of stars, mutated from four elements ...

**IX Antechamber Bay**  
*(for Christopher Koch)*

We took the graded road that slides  
by spartan farms and mallee bush  
to Chapman River where surf-tides  
year about disturb the tannin

ti-tree water and brackish bream  
trapped like time from Lashmar Lagoon  
to the beach (where it's safe to swim)  
which arcs the bay for five white miles.

We walked the short northern end  
from what should have been the river  
mouth. Child summers you used to spend  
at Swansea many moons from Wales

were texts redrawn by the placid  
lines and hues of Antechamber's  
shores which passed your subtle acid  
test concerning littoral beauty—

sin-filed sea; bushes, grass and trees  
in jigsaw patterns to present  
the total ranges of greens with ease  
gripped or smudged by tawny russets.

You named the landscape parallels  
with the East Coast of Tasmania:  
the mirror air, the sand-dune swells,  
and splashes here and there of wine;

delicacies to paint in soft  
watercolours' true elusive  
tones rather than, as from aloft,  
with assertive impasto oils.

It seems inevitable now  
we should have stolen from that scene  
something rare like a golden bough—  
something more than sheer impressions.

So it was. We dug from the beach  
strange florid tubers you planted  
later in my garden sand. Six  
weeks have passed, soursobs roam, and yet

two of three still live. We wonder  
if they're toothbrush Calothamnus,  
and chance a hunch—come spring plunder—  
these plants will flame their name at us.

**From *Dedications***

**Night Attire  
for Sudesh Mishra**

Not the moon's curiosity  
nor the mopoke's spondees,  
not the field mice switching and  
fornicating in the straw ceiling  
nor the bedroom's naked windows  
(who wants curtains with twenty  
acres of privacy?),  
require you to put on night attire  
if you step out of bed  
for a most ordinary reason.

But when an emergency  
hauls you up from coral reef  
slumber, that's a clothes-on-job:  
you may have to read the child back to sleep  
with *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night*;

or, dire likelihood, the pressure pump  
or the other for the septic tank  
has had a coronary after midnight.  
Then you need your night attire,  
your tracksuit, sockless Reeboks,  
and your tool bad of tricks;

then like a surgeon pulling on gloves,  
your face a farce mask,  
you prepare to cast your footprints  
in the dew as you approach your task:  
restoring health to a house in a coma.

**An Exchange of Islands**  
*for Yasmine Gooneratne*

Surf everywhere on the planet  
shares the same instrument  
to give its music a local  
name in the throats of bird, beast,  
fowl, and magpie human being;  
a habitation in squeezed magic boxes  
of harmonium secret tongues  
and notation systems—as if that  
is all black and white keyboards need  
to negotiate the scales of each other's  
waves crashing on rocks, liberating  
life and death on mucous beaches  
where the sands bless graveyard and birth canal  
equally, the worst and best that can  
be expected ... as any night spent under  
the stars in passive contemplation, or  
active meditation, will confirm  
with the muscled uncertainty of water,  
the certain irregularity of solar surcease,  
while we spend eternities of thinkings,  
of pledging hearts in the cause of love,  
imprisoned in finite bodies, bluebell minds,  
and (dare I say) infinitely finite souls.  
When we reach these conclusions,  
our first temptation is to flick  
the memory pages of quotations to find  
something someone said that says it all  
in a language of metaphor, a soothsaying  
rainbow wisdom of vowels, wherein all  
books when opened show pages presumed  
holy because the lights of sun and candle  
say so, and the frost hues of other stars  
our eyes patrol like crunching boots daresay.  
But the books that shun the hubris of the sacred  
also claim the loyalty of my fragile faith  
in truth; though unprevailing, yet not yet  
denying the gardens that drift in the sky  
like spermatozoa escaping the tyranny  
of space. Nor the free exchange of islands  
across seas of ceaseless salts and sands.

**From *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy***

**Illuminations in a Lemon Light**

The sky is in your voice;  
the pregnant moon gives you  
sideways illuminations,  
lemon-scented maybes.

I wonder how you canopy  
your nights.

Outside in the first mist  
think of us as nothing more  
nor less than the possibility  
of dew moistening  
silk petals

as the sun, like a cat,  
licks the morning into being.

## The Stone Egg

Beyond mind,  
this warm stone  
like a hawk's egg  
educates my hand.

These crooked fingers,  
love's believers, doubt  
however my son's  
testament of creation.

He found his egg stone  
on an ancient beach  
before the sea was there.  
He says he saw  
it in the sky  
before the sun was here,  
before the blue was there:

this stone egg proof  
in the desert hollow  
of my palm  
lined with heresies.

Yet I must adhere  
to his infant myths  
despite autumn truth,  
hard as a peach stone  
stuck in my throat.

**From *Under a Medlar Tree***

**Stiff Nor' Easter Across the Derwent**

*In Memoriam David Harrex*

2.6.1929 – 31.12.2001

*O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,*

*Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red ...*

—Shelley

Reading the wind, your eyes are treading  
over and over across your home turf,  
your childhood's mist-singing hills and seas;

those near and distant vicinities  
your fingers read by sifting light from shade,  
darkness from reflections in mirrors

no matter whether you are stuck in dunes,  
or espying from a peak, or sketching  
Balmoral Road ducks along Brown's River

as if to say each ink stroke or brush smudge  
is a syllable or word, a wisp of sound,  
shimmer of a hush, in a painted poem:

the water-colourist's language of precision.  
See what the black rain gift reveals about  
lightning and thunder, truth and deception;

fathom the intimate spaces you cover  
and uncover inside the frame with the heart-  
step tools of trade of the long-distance lover;

ecstatic now as your stiff nor' easter  
sows tumult, skiffing on white caps to Storm Bay  
in a climax of all your red-hectic energy.

But the aftermath is there as well, your  
signature's skeleton in the south-east  
corner, the serenity of a final calm  
as you release the brush and rest your arm.

## About Islands

There where dodge tide tempests strafe the stubborn  
girth of cliffs, flute fractured, earth disappears  
so slowly only a life-time detects  
the difference, and yet these vernaculars  
of destruction—nouns bashed beyond recall,  
verbs sliced by holocaust waves, crushed shells  
of adjectives—only glass-mask the eyes  
of the beachcomber who re-invents each  
morning the grammar of the sea, footsteps  
in quick damp sand, tablecloth imprints of fog  
and dew grass where despair fluctuates  
when the going gets tough until a hut,  
simple on the sawed horizon, beside  
a highland stream to nozzle in your throat,  
beckons you in another direction  
towards the island of an inland lake,  
the deflections of glassed-in surrenders  
the oceans of carnage hunger to destroy.  
Here the territories of the starlight  
Are near as infinity ever gets,  
the last of our final destinations.  
Although life is a bitch, bloody mess,  
death in the afternoon does not deny  
the illumination of a coy mistress.  
New legends spam in the greening grass.

## Dieter at the Wheel

*Waves are nothing but water. So is the sea.*

— Sri Atmandanda Guru

(frontipiece, Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, 1960)

*Doesn't the world revolve like a magic wheel?*

*Isn't Brahman the hub?*

— *The Bhagavadgita*

transcreated by P. Lal, 1965

India brought us together  
but we never met there  
—that's India. We met  
in its hearsay meta-spaces  
in Frankfurt and other  
planetary places, and heard  
the sounds of the Arabian  
and Bengal Seas, the Indian  
Ocean in each other's eyes.

That's the foreign gist  
of my festschrift homage, mate,  
*Kumpel, Junge*, and to elaborate:  
*Mensch, Bursche* (notice my initials  
enamelled in the supra text).

But, of course, this rhetoric  
of reminiscence feebly awaits  
transcreation into tropes of flame and snow  
that correspond to the coastal music  
of Malayalam, the pinnacles  
of Sanskrit, and OM tissue-layered.

I see a book, an Orient Paperback  
(I swear it's Anand's *Untouchable*)  
open in your upright hands,  
paragraphs poised between East and West,  
and I see the bleeding soul  
of the text bring a frown to your heart  
and anguish to your tongue:

‘how  
can such injustice be tolerated  
by this society so admired  
for its toleration?’ And there  
we have it: the paradox trap,  
conundrum clouds in *maya* sky.  
Matter of spirit, spirit of matter.

And before we know it, philosophy  
hangs like meat in the metaphysicians’  
butcher shop, and though we escape  
to drown our hermeneutical sorrows  
in *Bitburger Pils*, the fact remains  
that the infamous game of dice  
was not the right solution, yet without  
it the long-run of the epic would not  
have secured victory in the long run.

So what do we see in the super myth’s wake?  
— War that fails to fail, rife with secondaries  
as the surgeon says, imploding our  
pock-marked globe trapped by  
a sun, the Wheel of Life, programmed  
to explode eternities before  
infinity itself ...

Hence we share ideas,  
knowing consolation must be stoical,  
and that our minds are, perhaps miraculously,  
too small and too large to contain  
waves that are nothing but water.

Meanwhile, I don’t see you now in a dhoti  
in your new ashrama of Retirement,  
but rather (voyeur-wise) I detect  
sarong shapes on your washing-line  
on a Pakeha Tasman ledge down under:

the salt syllables of a sacred song  
echoing in the mouth of the Roaring Forties.

*Aachen, Germany, 31.5-1.6.2000*

## Four Haikus

A black and white storm  
punched an umbrella dome  
crimson in the rain.

Euclid and Newton  
showed there was more to apples  
than lust in Eden.

Like a Chinese scroll  
the willow of Lara's bat  
unfolds boundaries.

Watch Li Po, friends, flex  
his kite's finger string, and palm  
poems out of skies.

## **In a Japanese Garden**

*for Karen*

Stroll in from the sun.  
Camouflage of leaves  
pasted together will shade

you. There are grasses  
like combed hair, petal  
ponds & carved shrubs.

Be detached from service  
to East-West dialogue  
& resume your *self*.

A fish flaps  
into air & for  
the instant skis  
on its tail,

just like a haiku.

Here is a fair place  
for smiles to flower:  
green sphere for memory  
to let in scents of wattle;  
venue of farewells  
beside the toy waterfalls,  
the miniature steps,  
of Japanese eternity ...

## From *Dougie's Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*

### Feather on Foolscap

On the back of a foolscap envelope  
I draw an oriel for no good reason  
(an echo from childhood perhaps); green door  
threshold into a fourth dimension.  
But my high window squats shut, so with brisk  
lines I open it to the firmament,  
close my eyes, and sense a starlit mist settle  
on my face, induced by ripples of air.  
No one's permission but mine, so it seemed,  
was needed to enter this embrasure,  
for here were time and space I wholly dreamed  
subject to instant birth or erasure.  
I thought I saw an osprey up-lift in  
and find on my sketch a featherish fin.

### Time's Timeless Art

So perfectly lazy is this windless  
honey-smooth winter's room that the crows' cries,  
normally belligerent as saw screams  
in a mill, are slipper-quiet like slow  
motion images in a sky-blue day-  
dream when the most leisureful place on earth  
is the Australian bush; its charade  
silences, its bird palpitation, the  
insect treks like corpuscles through the veins,  
delivering a solace message short  
as a telegram used to be, yet long  
as ancient day or night in a haiku  
read in the glow of a full moon, and rain  
splintered sun-signs, hieroglyphed in stone.

## From *Five Seasons*

### Parallels

The chrysalis hatches.  
It abides its meaning, 'golden thing.'

White wings ascertain  
the breeze in spasm flight.

Across the tennis courts  
orange and black butterflies  
compose another choreography  
than muscle, racquet and ball.

Moths with peacock eyes  
stiffly suck the wall next morning.

We meet.  
We could not be otherwise  
than lovers forsaking the street.

We shadow each other's vision.

'Oh, when will my hands  
once more be you adorning?

Only the butterfly's one-day  
duration of existence  
makes the parallel fallible,  
as you hatch in my heart  
again and golden still.

## **An Orderly Riotous Departure**

*(please, no cosmetics!)*

Countenancing (yes, rather pallid)  
A solo recital of one's inevitable  
Demise; grey rag skies and grotesque

tumour-shaped clouds in squid  
formation bagpipe and drum this hearse  
of menial verse into static finitude

which put like that does seem like hell.  
But I don't subscribe to that, nor  
its tedious counterpart, caricature.

Lucidity is all! Grab its fruits  
When and if you can from the groin  
of reality (but gently please, gently).

Time, then, to reconsider Insurance  
Policies, but also ever-salient  
Things like the heart's delicacies,

the brain's intricacies – that so-called  
icon: the found, lost, so-called soul –  
the blood-pressure of a lapsing mind:

metaphors ticking in the prestigious  
Grand-Father Clock, collapsing, collapsing  
As it lets you know it is time to go.

## Dejection Dream Song

Sleep depraves me & daylight dreadens.  
Alcohol's no use. Nor the beauty  
of this willow yellow time of year ...

Someone has arrested my heart  
and sent it to purgatory.  
Occasionally I visit it. The usual scene.  
We face each other across an ink-stained table  
in the presence of a suit-stained warder  
with a blotting-paper face.  
After commonplace enquiries,  
we soon succumb to quarrelling,  
especially about love that forbids death  
& responsibility that forfeits love ...

In a candlelight and waning moon age ago  
you who were flesh of my unfamished bride  
subside to wax before my exiled eyes ...  
The stupidities of Juliet's tomb  
offend Love's nostrils as always ...

Remember that slanting odour  
in the hillside graveyard?  
the carved caricatures of biblical sentiment?  
& that ridiculous sign EXTRA DEPTH £1?  
Perhaps death is a callous sexual joke ...

Through our tread we felt frost  
in the underground bones,  
and held hands heatingly.  
Afterwards, at the stoic ruin of your ancestral  
home, surrounded by yellow willow weather,  
I kissed you in the shadows of your past,  
leaving autumn to decide the future.  
Bullion or rot, as always.  
My kisses falling on your face.

O break to live this heinous heart.

## Back in Tassie

Seagulls swoop again in shivering light  
exactly as they always did, at this same beach,  
where my child's fingers levitated, desperate  
to fly and glide with these miracles of flight.  
Their 360° spontaneous choice  
of navigation options – flying, flouting, fossicking –  
returns to me now as I shuffle through the sands  
of epiphany; a childhood instinct  
for the art and craft with which life's poems  
have telescopic origins in the eyes of those  
seagulls of long ago; the other side now  
of the surfaces and sounds of your private anthems.