

Classic Poetry Series

Martin Harrison
- poems -

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Martin Harrison(1949 -)

Martin Harrison (born in 1949) is an Australian poet.

He published poems and limited edition books in London and New Zealand before his first main collection, *The Distribution of Voice* (University of Queensland Press), appeared in Australia in 1993. In the 80s Harrison worked as a literary journalist and reviewer as well as a producer for ABC Radio, where he was closely associated with sound art, new music and experimental radio work. His 1997 poetry collection, *The Kangaroo Farm* (Paperbark Press) was shortlisted for the Victorian Premiers Award, and his 2001 collection *Summer* (Paperbark Press) won the Wesley Michel Wright Award for poetry. A selected poems, *Wild Bees* (University of Western Australia Press) was shortlisted for both the South Australian Premiers Awards and the ACT Poetry Prize.

Harrison has written extensively about Australian poetry. Some of his essays are collected in the internationally acclaimed volume "Who Wants to Create Australia?" (Halstead Press). This book was a Times Literary Supplement book of the year selection for 2004.

His poetry has been translated into Mandarin (*A Kangaroo Farm* trans Shaoyang Zhang, Jiangsu, Nanjing 2008) and into French.

There is a wide range of critical commentary on his work, principally in Australian and some UK journals. In the main, these views focus either on the detailed micro-perceptual approach to environment and natural phenomena in his work or on the self-reflective, time filled nature of selfhood in his work or they focus, more directly, on the metaphysical nature of many of the poems. British critic David Morley has defined Harrison as the writer of "some of the most brilliant metaphysical nature poems of our time." Michael Farrell, however, considers the subjective side of his work in the preface to the *Out of the Box* anthology (Puncher and Wattmann, Sydney 2009) describing his poetry as about selfhood caught in the process of learning, in which "learning the self and world are in alternation." [citation needed] Nigel Wheale captures a similar sense, reviewing *The Kangaroo Farm* in the *London Review of Books* (20:19, 1998), describing the poems as attempts to create "livable locales" and a form of pursuit for places where, in Wheale's words, "ordinary happiness might reside."

"Thoughts spoken out loud...."

Thoughts spoken out loud
breath impelled below in the tidal estuary, in the river

in crevice and crevasse both in delight and light
by love and longing desire's invisible fibre

incomprehensible longing searching for words,
words turning out later to be the simplest thoughts:

there on the table, a bunch of yellow and gold bottlebrushes
leaning away from each other akimbo in a grey Japanese vase

yet so connected in curve, wedge, spray arching
spinning in the suddenly dipping time-fold -

There, as you look, time's felt as real and physical
overwhelming at the point it disappears

turning, as it does, into one of the many times
fused in the regard of things

not unlike the point of breakthrough in
the struggle to be loved and to love

in which completeness and transparence (lucid, woven strands)
blend and flow in words and acts

Martin Harrison

A Lecture On Focus

All water is dusk, or light blenched. A mauve shade,
some water is so large it fills up the lens,
becoming mere thought occurring here or there
as if in a place which was chosen for it,
on a surface, in a container, inside an edge.

Close-up, green bars of water greet an eye blinking
as it turns transparent, partial, on moving skin.
Here a body lunges on, diminishing, in shocks.
Some water is a mask, the cover of a cave
which has no walls and which flows, unawares,

round points, indentations, grooves, visages.
Surfacing faces look out like people in a car
which has braked, swinging round, in a crash.
Other are caught wading, motionless like stilts,
while a lozenge shaped launch lifts in swayed water.

But the water is silent, browsing on itself:
only its frontiers are audible events,
as in weed-suck and rock's knife-cuts,
with a mechanism of hands and arms heaving
through it to striped buoys at eye-level.

One side you find dark patches, a house's old mirrors,
tarnished by salt wind. Midway, a white post soars —
the water swells past it, glistening, breathing,
as expectantly as a birthday child at table.
Further on, elbows flash from one blue ridge to the next.

For what is it here which moves to bright to see,
like a gang of rosellas, plummeting from a branch
into wispy, mud-cracked stubble? What moves in multiples,
consistent, winged, making involuntary
structures out of scattered, minimal beats?

It is water. Water under dryness. A plain of light,
now a series of retreating fringes,
or flanges perhaps, like a cloth held over a fire

which burns through at several points
and thus reshapes itself. First a net,

(the swimmer pulls himself through its white flame) ,
then a kind of membrane folding back and up
which twists out new slopes, connected hill sides,
of itself: dazzled ocean floods the mind's tombs,
linking them like shots framed in sleep. —

It's a dream sped up to unseeable quickness.
It's the kind of dream which a sleeper wakes from
recalling only a tone, or the muffled flight
of a thing, not the scene or the face's meaning —
whatever words there were slip by like a forward

darting glance-wise to the touch. You focus again:
sea-lion clouds peer up over a ragged ledge,
part of a cliff line which has no time for colour.
The place is now mandala, now perhaps montage,
where a bed explodes in its cauldron of ripples,

themselves suggesting a fish's back sliding under,
or a shoulder curving through sculpted cups,
or water becoming dusk, or light blenched.

Martin Harrison

A Patch Of Grass

The dark green, the light green,
the pale native rosemary flowers,
blue-grey like low rain clouds,
and, behind them, an intense spiked green
of boronia, seed-heads, meadow-grass,
thistles and thistle-heads —
a slope of them, a scarred bank,
held down by agapanthus clumps,
rambling grevillea, more boronia:
patches of bare, hard clay
exposed where the sun burns out the
surface, or where little run-offs
stop the grass from taking, offer a
tattered shawl of thin weeds, spires of fireweed,
a kind of parsley, twigs,
bark-litter from a gum-tree,
and the bake of a harsh, blue sky
reflected in quartz-hued
pebbles, a sandstone rock
not too heavy to lift, dwarf-sized
escarpments waving with
shell grass, dandelions, small groundsels
also flowering. There are slender violets,
too, which I thought had been
introduced, but I looked them
up: they're native — two-toned, purple
and pale mauve (like lilac)

interlaced with chickweed
and couch grass. The land slopes somewhat
there, giving that chance
of openness which some species need
as well as the chance of dead erosion
by rain, by heat which splits
earth — I mean, by motion
of soils as natural as the shifts
which hollow out slow changes

in any body tak-

ing on contours of age and use.
Taking on more, it's a
place for everything, allowing an
instant of transformation — of wildness —
as a registering
of greenness beyond the eye's
capacity (what does it see?) to
grade green as straw-coloured,

verdant, or shadowed. A
green re-mapped by swirls of firetails
on a seed-search. In such
half-seeing of the world, it's the bird's-
eye view which makes the tangle into a
fixed space for words, adding
once more that hint of pale
rainy blue, shimmering beneath
the network of grasses:
a phrase like "everything's
place" might be appropriate to this
lingering gaze — though that's
to say, "lost to its people," "no long-
er mantic," "not named in speech." Small patch
of earth. It stays like this
until you understand it
as light, unconscious flesh; and it
becomes you, as you it.

Martin Harrison

Breakfast

As early as this - it's just after dawn - you're overwhelmed by the glimmering of things.

The grasses, the rocks, the bluff and its shelves, inland hakeas, casuarinas, some sort of

mountain ash, I'm not sure which. Then the blue-veined, opalescent smear of lake

which fills up the middle ground, a long expanse of daybreak light on water.

Down

there, squalls of wind pockmark it, as if it's been scattered with grit. Up here it's completely windless, while, far away through the air's greyness, the opposite side's

wide blond plain starts coming clear - it's a shore of unfenced grazing country now

dotted with trees.

Dark cover which starts half way up those slopes turns out to be just more trees,

thicker, more dense. If this side's anything to go by, mainly storm-battered yellow box

and hakeas. Above them, along the ridge's tops a band of white glow takes the northerly skyline. Of course, distance across water can easily fool: those trees are

fifteen kilometres away.

...Something close to that.

The sky gets paler and paler.

Air's already dry, resonant with the months of drought we've been having. Overhead, two streaked vapour trails broaden into hastily brushed scumble - gigantic

scribble marks crazily laddered across vacancy. It's as if someone's leant them there,

knowing they'd make an optical illusion, puzzling to work out. They can't be Sydney

with its curfew. ("Melbourne to Darwin, Melbourne to Singapore," I'm thinking.)

And

over here: a steep dropp down to a fishing-jetty where the camp-sites are wrongly

?

A crow sheers away in the trees beneath this slope. It knows its caw-caw's have been heard a thousand times before. So common I instantly forget it. I'm not trying to fix the two crimson rosellas, either, which have been rough-housing inside a gangly, smashed tree directly to the left. Their presence easily slips beneath awareness, too. They've quietened for a moment into typical chitter-chatter of high pitched half-squealing. The sound's "sweet": glistening like a stem of blood-red berries.

?

The entire memory of waking, a quarter of an hour ago, might also be handed back to forgetfulness, incurring no loss. Together with its other pristine sight: the long-limbed grey kangaroo stretched out on the grass with her two young. (It's a while before I see them). The dry white grass where they're lying is beaten down, as if this is a regular sleeping-place. The mother's reclining on her flanks, the joeys are hunched over grazing. When they see me they don't panic but get up slowly. They're eyeing me. Very carefully. Ignoring me, as if they know the speed with which they can vanish into air. Right there, a "vanishing act" is exactly what they do. I look out across a turquoise braid of water for a few seconds. When I look back they've not been fooled. Quiet as noiseless wind, they've left

?

Too easy to say that could be the day's excitement.

And the results of dawn twilight's scattered happenings?

Why fix them unless there's some pressure, some disturbance?

Isn't it enough just to be a hunter of images, a hunter of things?

Is it the scale of this water which dislocates?

Years after it's been put here, it never quite fits.

Will it never accommodate this double valley's contours?

Are its pearl-blue acreages shore-nibbled, spread-eagled?

?

Hard, then, not to fit in what's over there on the left, two or three kilometres away. I

knew it was there. Of course. But it shifts the drama of the moment like a sudden cut

in a movie. Every motive, every gesture has to be re-examined. It's the rear view of the

half-exposed dam wall and, past it, a spur jutting out into the lake: a drowned quarry

abstractly chopped out from what's left of a hillside. A sliced half of a hill, cut apart as if

by a sea.

So now it looks like an enormous mass of water is bearing down on the rock face:

every ripple carries weight, every windrow blusters towards it. The sense it gives (the

half-thought-out link) is water piling up before an island's vertical cliffs. The whole

movement pressures an immense oceanic space, but then of course there's the wall of

the dam, saying: No, this is not an island. We're far over the Dividing Range.

This is

inland, not island.

The truth is: the lake's being human, humanly made, offers the viewer a hugeness not that different from transcendence. It dwarfs any thought of it.

Only a

dream-fragment can be kept in mind. Floods roar down gulleys like a front of wild

horses. Natural lakes are (bad rhyme) the sky's eyes. Was I dreaming that?

When? (A

line close to one already in another poem might be: This lakes's wind-blackened surface
now winks back. Or: It is and always was a decision, and could be error). Yet the effect's deliberate, not casual or dreamlike. It's light on water. It's like a balance,
like an equipoise. And then, no, it's not. A rippling lake surface, the water can't conceive that it's here or that I'm looking at it or that it has any connection with desertification, salinity, river silts. For all that, it has to be said that reality doesn't
arrive as a lake. It arrives as an angel knocking on the door, pointing out how many
things make up a world. Waking up, what it pointed to was this drowned valley, the
yellow-box, the ash, the still night-covered hill, the weight of wind and water. The
weight of design and engineering. What it lit up was a complex moment in perception
where to conceive a dam's bearing towards human nature requires the same skills as
the resolution of any ethically knife-edge, historically many-sided issue. In our time, for
example, some Israel, some country in the Middle East. It's exactly at the point when I
realise how each dropp of water, hanging in these hills, is gathering to fruition that I
realise, too, how far the night's behind me and I'm fully awake.

Martin Harrison

Bronzewings With Lightning

The bronzewings
come through, fossicking
in the pre-storm stillness, pecking
at the car tracks, drilling the dirt
under trees —

choosing such silence —

napes as blue-grey as the sky,
their faces that striped flash
which might happen anytime now,

in the wind-free lull pecking,
then motionless, camouflaged
in the grass,
merging invisibly
in tumbled bark's dry litter, dead leaves,

until they're disturbed
not worried enough to take flight
(an edge of the mind issue),
still walking ,
with an irritable glance and
mechanical jutting neck
as if someone's pulling puppet strings
through backbone and breast structure:

they pause, then they make off
into further, deeper
middle distance, a farness
which stretches westerly under trees,
across half-cleared paddocks, wispy slopes
where dry declivities become watercourses,
under hill sides scarred with rocks —

again to rummage nervously, then freezing,
making sure they're not seen
(indistinct, earth coloured rubble),
and when they are seen

drawing attention, like children,
to their own mimicking stillness,

such being the quiet which lets them melt
into pale straw, grey stone, fallen timber,
inexpressibly at home in tree-scattered country,
country with no edges
stretched with broken, rusty fences —
a delicate, traipsed through, low grade patch
in need of losing its melancholy,
of being restored, re-thought, re-lived —

the two bronzewings are voyagers here
hurtling through time,
held in mind for a second
under the sky's bowl

both now evaporated into
the grass and leaves

yes, two of them

*

Things. Marks in the ground. Things tracking bare stony ground. It's what the machine's whirring sound seems like — a bare place with stones, pebbles, small hand-sized rocks. Car noise, plane noise. In fact, planes pass over so far up that they hang inside their own envelope of silence, like white tubes passing across a soundless screen. Sometimes you glimpse the triangular tail-fin, a flash of blue or red.

Striations. Marks in the ground. Pock marks on stone — weather spots, rain crevices. Not the same as the broad marks which late light throws in streaks across dead grass: grooves, stone-rot, revelations of sedimentary lines

Each mark has its own mind, its own reason for being. Each of them lock into invisible structures of word and thought — utterances, humming, stray thoughts, learnt thoughts . . . that thing I meant to say

that thing which could be said

Gaps, in a sense. Though there are no gaps. Closeness, though there is no

distance. A full, perfect moment: but some would call it empty.

(two people not aware that they love each other)

(the sky god saturated in blue)

(two people attuned to each other)

(the give and take of love making)

(my body immersed in you)

This thought between things

*

until the thunder comes back, after a five minute rainstorm seemed to have ended the matter. The birds had gone by under the trees half an hour ago, almost as if in another world. A few minutes later, we ran back to the house, even though the clouds, becoming a single thunderhead, never fully darkened the air. The storm fell in diamond strings, fleshed with light, and then in long scattered drops, darting by, in a pattern of flashes and strips. Enough rain to soak the tin, but not much more. It had come through, moved on, as if it was wandering the country, scavenging, looking things out. The air hardly cooled: it stayed thick as a thermal blanket. Later, afternoon started shifting its light, shadows clustering on branches, down the sides of tree trunks

dull thunder noise:
it ripples somewhere —
northwards.

*

Later, too, intense whitening heat would be over for a few hours, a cool interlude lasting through the night, cooling things down, cooling the touch of wood and earth, cooling our bodies, cooling our touch, cooling caves and crevices. Everyone hopes this is what our night is like. Didn't you feel the space then, right then, like the edge of an imaginary darkness? Didn't you wonder at the trailings of steps and voices: across time, yes, but more across your mind. Across you, across the glimpse opening up in you

Did you remember how absorbed we were, lost in the birds as if we could

drown in the blended dust and leaves

bronzewings dancing, fluttering, in the glare

dust and twigs formed, perfect, like a hearth

you leaning forward, thoughtful

while, momentarily, the cicadas start up again their wave-banks of sound, like one enormous drawn-out breath, one after the other lapping, overlapping, linking, one with another. And right in the middle of the aquamarine sky-clearing which the rain burst had made, a one-off final reminder: overhead, a last thud, a last clatter tumbling out of empty, clarified blueness as if someone larking around, laughing, inside a timber house knocks a chair over on to the wooden floor with a cracking sound we can hear from outside Yes, like a grenade exploding, a single thunder burst smacks the sky

Martin Harrison

Cine

The shirtless young
man pushes (blue tint,

brown) a hand back
over his beard:

and with the other,
steers a lawnmower

over the strip,
stones sputtering.

I film his stride
thighwards, in sun

on broad shoulder-muscle
linked to the handle:

his pale jeans
dinted by light.

His shout's roundness
is as shiny as

a car top which
repeats his eye

and bareburnt
surface — his

elbow thrust
skims at grass.

There, shadow is
his white's humour:

his sportshoes measure
the lawn's growth.

Getting lost in
an uncut patch as

later (now carrying a
filled hutch) he

enters the gully,
snaps off withes

of still pink-laden
springy oleanders

with an upswing
throw that goes

outwards in a
pelt of pebbles,

ruck of clippings.
That green cloud is

thrown into the branches
like rain dripping —

next, his hand returns
so that he may

steady his heel's
glinting catch.

Martin Harrison

Cloud

Smaller than gnats, almost imperceptible, glistening flies
hovering in their edgeless clusters
shaping and reshaping sideways through winter sun's white light -
mid-air thrips emanating between shadow and light-ray -
thirty centimetres above damp long grass, matted weeds, cool earth,
visible and invisible as they swarm and float,
dots and instants one moment, noiseless aircraft the next,
homing for a place at sunset where they can land,
bubbling molecules escaping yet returning as flashes on
the eyes when staring at brightness: all of them exploding into an event
because they're seen or because, momentarily, they're intersected
by a slanted glare-effect which now races from the sandhill world
back here to temporary green depth - the flies coiling and startling
in soon-to-be-dusk air,
evidencing themselves as minuscules,
as splits, splinters, glints,
dots of grit between shadow and amber spandrel
tubed - no, framed - under branches of turpentine and applegums
and in that way, quite possibly meaningless, quite possibly
microbes of non-significance suddenly there in the bare world's
sinking warmth:

microbes below significance as is any sense
of being that's brought into prominence when the context
seems lost, non-existent, a flicker darkening
in which (no less instantly) you remember details too terrible to
bring to mind of, say, a car-crash or a house-fire
(even of a murder or of a child drowned in the dam),
details a person will never fully remember, never accepting nor forgetting,
for they're details too tragic to narrate, too instant and cloudlike,
moment of shattering micro-second which your mind still scans:
thus, the 8 mins 19 secs which it takes this light-blip, this hillock
of incandescence, to arrive and settle measures a tranquillity
never to be borne - like the provocation of virtual particles dancing -
though it occurs every day in a glance, whether in grief, or even ecstasy.

Martin Harrison

February Night Song

You, the world, the house,
but tonight you're not happy.
No-one can sleep this month.
Across the park, the lights are sultry.

So we lie in our dark bed,
naked on a blue sheet,
under shadowy indoor plants —
we're woken by the clock, the street.

Outlined in the buzz of haze
your dancer's body:
still half-awake I categorise
your alarm of self and place.

For when at last we turn to sleep
in the end of summer dark,
I'll see you as the white heron
flapping wings of glittering water.

Martin Harrison

First Glance At A Walking Party, Barrington Tops, C.1895

As in a photograph by a small town artist
regional, unknown, whose sepia wandering work
fetches up in libraries as support
against myth-made progeniture, or, as here,
is caught again in April's stencil work and glints
against the wood panels of a tourist lodge,

so there's more to its choice than just the eye.
What the eye sees, plate glassed or not, is mostly learnt.
A leaf-rustled, bellbird solitude calls to them,
they whose sense, toggled up, was of getting-far,
never the first time quite, yet intending a newness
raw as sawn log ends, timely as a wheel's sprayed sand.

Held under breath, their words are dark ice-blue
like a pool flooded with late, upland snow —
you see their long-awaiting, intense eyes,
fixed in a spacious, brown-varnished frame. Looking back,
we're watched, fresh-faced by spivvy, statuesque
men in ribboned boaters, and crushed Panamas, and by plump

middle-aged women, firm-necked in pleated tweeds:
only the youths have that hair-parted look,
modern, steadfast, self-conscious,
soon able to fly planes, or pick up the telephone.
Front left, someone's tulle-bloused daughter,
fulsomenely caught between home life and an idea,

stares out past our future — being perhaps the
same age as my wife's grandmother, "first female student
at London's Slade", whose own Victorian mother transported
thirty portmanteaux through far-flung vicarage worlds,
looping Jamaica, Teneriffe, India, out to here.
This photo, though, tells nothing of unlikely

provenance, back of flower arrangements, deathly memorials,
or last-minute wills bequeathing razored paddocks.

A cloudy stillness, a hand nervously blurring,
deprive them of a lack of origin,
some of them dressed in graziers' touring duds
but all of them defined in a balletic idiom

of bird and breath, of cream-gauze sun-up
intently glowering on a wire. In their minds' Sydney,
blue-brick memories, hazy, pinnacled, flow
into a glance, carrying out its introduction —
a thing soon checked by polished boots, starched collars,
heads askance with Ma and Pa. So, they wait.

They wait in order to recall themselves —
glazed, shimmering, like lakeside reeds —
within a glittering transformation, a beatitude,
now about to exit in a photograph,
shining like the bush's cut-out veins of light.
Dated, they'll walk away by car and telegram.

Caught in this rainy air, they're indelibly faded
on a rucked-up backdropp of negroheads,
conjoined warlike among 19th Century
parsonage sounds, about to break ranks and stretch their legs,
till they glimpse our future mood loading up the Commodore —
towels, camp-smoke, Ampol, bursts of shellac-bouncing sun.

Martin Harrison

Isfahan

That half-open amber eye fixed on you,
the woman in the kitchen half turning to you —
drowsy tonight, you take in the angles
of chairs, walls, old photos, a painted vase.

There, a heron's stillness helps it vanish,
wading by a wind-flecked lake.
Outside, car-noise glistening after early rain.
Night's silence builds its inner ear.

So birds croak from a cracked, green bush,
the mouth's distortion roars into an amulet,
but nothing distinguishes each memory,
solidified into a white-domed zone:

a set of blocks along a slope, a fossil trace,
kitchen clatter acquires a blinder shape.
Its time is ridged like wind-blown sea.
Suddenly lit up, cat's-eyes down a moonless road.

Martin Harrison

Ode In April

Moments of connection,
of intimate attention to the nooks and crevices
of how mind and body fit together,
of the melting and blending of imaginary and actual flesh,
of sensation, impulse and dreaming all caught in the same mode,
of broadness and the long sweep of emotion
out into the air
in a gasp

of true surprised pleasure
plus some level of bemusement at what is happening
while your mind acts automatically
in supposing vistas, inclines, plains stretching towards lakes,
both real ones and instant ghosts of wideness, spaciousness, outstretch,
and every nerve achieves a precise quantum
of intensity's
needle points

are moments when events
happen for themselves thoughtlessly, intuitively, with
that in-the-mind, out-of-the-mind energy
of kicking a ball, wheeling a trolley, greeting someone on the street,
or of touching, holding, kissing, playing with nipple or ear,
getting closer in love: all and any actions
which instantly
out of the

blue are just now what you
feel like doing. Sure, they're impelled differently when they
are everyday behaviour on the street
from when they're the urge for love-making, drawn from deepest wells:
but both are instinctive behaving and, if free, are sincerely
part of the repertoire of what's best in
human nature, what
makes it (so

to speak) "tick" effortless-
ly without stressing the pursuit of a shared well-being
which is also requisite in well-run

worlds where the natural movement is towards what's fine, towards the light.
So when thinking that the fridge needs re-stacking, that it gets so
quickly messed up, or, seconds later, that the
sprinkler should be turned
on the tired-

looking mock-orange by
the gate or that the eaves need repainting (some boards broken,)
these thoughts (gliding black swans on shining water)
are like some quick desire for you, your body and what together
we can do by way of love and energy, pulsing, throbbing
with it. More than just "sex in everything"
this wholeness which comes
from what con-

nects is the moment's
life, its refused dark. Each individual breathes this daylight
of the self's own breathing. Each place is like
a glance of brightness. Someone sees it, someone touches that moment.
And war? War's for sellers of war, breeding apology
for the way each moment's bombed, bruised, torn apart
while the body shrieks
out its pain

as it's dismembered, cut
to shreds by machine-guns, or carved into body parts
by mortars which turn people into flesh:
mangle of bleeding viscera, torsos chopped out, headless remnants
scattered among those still conscious who grope amongst the blood
like rocks exposed in surf, or like blinded ones
struggling in a marsh
which drowns them.

On a bridge at Nasa-
riyah, a group of women and children caught in crossfire,
cars burning (one with a corpse inside it
which, the report says, gave off "a hissing sound"), are pulled aside on
the road: these blanketed hummocks are the fire's rubbish.
Later, after a truck carrying soldiers
suffers a direct hit,
one Marine

carries a "huge chunk of flesh,"
a friend's remains so maimed he could not be identified.
Consciousness is obliterated in
a wall of fire and blood. No-one, alive and well, can imagine it.
No-one who loves another forgives what's let loose here. Whether
gas-haze strewing people to the ground or this
bridge's dreamlike scene
of death and

disintegration, mind
and body fight off the day-lit, subconscious nightmare. It
skews seeing like an hallucinogen:
now a toddler, moaning, proffers a bandaged twig which was his hand, while
the next image shows a young woman, seemingly, bleeding to
death under a sheet. These close-ups wither you.
Anger, prayer, aren't
sufficient:

we dream of a future
where waging war's illegal, where there are means to linger
by that woman's, that child's bed. Connections
span the gap. I ask you: re-live an Easter car-crash, a street fight:
how much must heal, knit, grow back, like wilderness after fire.
But those bland faces (Bush, Blair, Howard) on our
television screens?
They blaze truth.

Martin Harrison

On The Traditional Way Of Painting

A sea-leaf is laid across the bark:
I've given up talking
save through the world as it is.

But the leaf is no philosopher.
It's just an edge, a flare-mark,
and not a thing in itself.

The light moves in with the colours which it gives,
it's used here as an instrument
in a pattern of camouflaged stones.

Here I see the way I walk,
here I become the shadow,
the bleached crab-shell among pebbles,

and I notice how a thin sheet of rock slants into the sun.
Everyone lives and hunts and fishes,
everyone lives and is well.

A hot wind bursts in my face and round my neck,
drowning out the glare of the beach's multi-coloured shells.
Blue surf topples under the ledges of my ears.

Like fire in a grate the flicker of the sea-wrack's leaf —
while the red-daubed wooden fish clack against each other
with bark twine threaded through their tails.

Martin Harrison

Paddock At Yengo

When he walks towards them they come up
for the sheaf of long grass
he's holding out. They've been
left alone far too long. What he notices
are flakes of fire —
diamonds of rain drops —
scattering from the grass blades, a
mix of green stalk, clover, unripened
seedheads. So they move up
across the paddock, the smaller horse loping
sideways, the mare crossing over
as if something's filled the space,
wordless, expectant:
the man just waits,
half-focussed on the day's brew
of thunder, rainstorm and lightning an hour ago,
the wreckage of last year's fires.
Today it's all humidity, grass rain
turning the surface deeply green.

This moment's distractedness is
nothing to do with lack or
failed inclination. It's just that the
air's stillness — utter rain-ceased stillness,
clean as an empty white bowl — has led to another dark,
another breath, or seethe, of darkness:
a single dove whooping from the trees stays hidden in it,
a half-registered burst of cicada-noise, like a blanket
down the ridge, billows it up,
curves it into waves.

It's just, too, that the horses
trotting over have
sized him up in glance which itself
travels, like a shadow, across the air, across the grass,
within its own unmeasured horizon, its own sputter
of diamond light. As if she's someone famous at a party,
the mare looks out over the man's shoulder.
The cicadas, the cuckoo-dove, are interrupted by a butcher bird.

What he sees is how densely the rain front
has anchored the horses,

heavy bodied things, satin-
bright with wetness,
dark bulks grazing this fenced in place
amongst the new-grown feed. (Electric thinness, sharpness,
humid thickness: air builds its surrounds, soon passing them by.)
Presence being masklike (a face in glinting water) the horses
wait for words maybe, or company. Then they
go back to cropping grass, rough manes the colour of a
cloudy moonless night bent forward to the ground
in a space green as a billiard top beside the trees.

Martin Harrison

Red Marine

The meaning of that movement must be found,
in the collapsing schema of red sails,
though it happened out there, in dwindling light,
upon the edge, half-seen, a mere detail.

More total, more for the body than the eye,
it turned dusk's wind into a flapping hinge
while the gulls, alarmed, skimmed up across the bay,
suddenly caught in white again, wheeling

seawards, changing places in a relay,
until their veering made a dream of depth:
blind memory rising in a flickering wave.
(Its house is death. Its window is a hearth.)

It was as if, just then, a river shone,
as if, behind that wave, lost voices spoke —
voices heard after they had gone away.
The burden left is trivial, instant, black.

And yet you see that movement as it is,
crossing, like tide itself, through mobile space:
on the sea edge a sail topples, a red
tulip-flame twists in wind. The bright sea's

glitter, with people bobbing in it, swallows it up
like interference blizzarding a screen.
There was a moment of cloud shadow, more
nostalgic than squint-eyed, orange sun

where fixed, half-noticed things remain as glints,
leaving behind them latency in time,
a spectral body stretched from shore to shore,
gulls in perspective, spindrifts of white sperm.

A sailboard's red sail folds into the sea.
No substitute for fictions of a mind
which searches an exacter entity
in blind, green light over the harbour's tomb.

Martin Harrison

Remembering Floodwater

Back of the mind, it's the white sliver which is
neither misty trace nor meaningless: it probably
isn't snow, nor that glare effect of a white line
which the sea's horizon can sometimes have
on days when the air's clear as untouched cellophane.
It's a particular white sliver, or smear of white,
like a patch of sand bursting through leaf-cover,
held forever, remembered, from some walk years back.
It's the stripe of light on sandhills towards dusk,
caught just once, recalled, seen again somewhere else.
Or it's untouchable shadow on the white metal of the roof
of the house next door, a shadow that's also a silhouette
of a bougainvillea, cascading red flowers
down the walls, overgrown round the drain pipes -
and, above the roof, three pelicans hanging in the sky
as if they're boats moored in wind-slopped water.

This is the brightness I usually wake up to, or
which wakes me, after a night of dreamless sleep.
I slept like that last night. After weeks away,
I wake up once again in a house tranquil as summer,
a house full of things (lamps, sinks, chairs, doors)
which do not need to sleep. Just for those first
few moments, after I've come into the kitchen,
everything's as calm and cool as the fridge.
Then it hums, quietly, and the lazy, gliding pelicans
flap their wings. It could be once or for ever,
like a particular sensation which arrives and goes,
before it's anchored, then felt again. Getting back,
I've that feeling that somehow things
have changed, when really they haven't:
perhaps they should have changed. They haven't.
You're still asleep. The neighbour's roof offers
back a little ultraviolet to the unsmudged blue,
while I'm thinking of the time away, the journeys,
the days and days on arid, high-speed roads.
It could be you're dreaming of it right this moment, curled over
like a slope of land. Nothing changes. Or perhaps it's country light
that's burned itself behind my eyes. Now the trace

becomes that sliver. Like a shadow getting through
the lids, I remember spilt-out glaze on flooded wetlands
with their dead, grey trees still standing there
and ibis cruising down to land. A string of fence posts
wades into the water's middle, before it drowns. Up close,
two swallows, scissoring, vanish across the sun.

Martin Harrison

Seeing Paddocks

*

across the slope, emptiness like a tide sweeps everything away

*

Dry wind grazes like fire in the middle height of trees.

If there's a cloud it's in the mind not in the world.
If there's a trace or hint of it, it's a thought not a thing.
If there's an edge, it's made here along the slope.
If there's darkness, I bring it with me like blood.
If there's more darkness, it's exposed in the tree fringe.
If there's a distant zig- zag, it speeds like a snake.
It runs down the sky like an upside down tree.
If it delivers an idea of change, it hits, it strikes.
(Rain smell, memory of wetness on strewn bark litter,
sound of rain, markings of rain on the ground.)
If it strikes, it brings fire, air, water.
If it breathes, it undries the mind like waking from a dream.
If it remembers, it gives back the dream's clear outlines.
(Today no-one remembers the earth dream, the land dream.)
(Over there, a car goes silently by in its wind-river.)
If it's too hard to get back there, leaf clusters parachute down.
If you want to look, you must look in the corner.
If there's a play of shadow and untruth, bright wind still glares.
The surprised stillness of earth powders into dust.
The wind too is a leap a jump from one look to another.
If a root system drops from a swollen purple cloud.
One strike brings fire, air, water.
Three strikes brings gaol, mostly over nothings.
If you look you must look in the corner of the eye.
If there's a gash of granite boulders, the flesh clefts them.
If the breath's elements (soul elements) have dried like a dream.
(Rhythmed by the fence, a car goes silently by.)
If we place death somewhere, we will start forgetting it.
If death is placed here, it will start remembering.
It happens instantly.
The wind too is a leap between two views, two looks.
If — even if — there's a dry place the past still weeps there.

When the wind trowels the sky, it leaves blue hints of thunderheads.
Over there, the paddock gazes out with its blond, bare contours.

across the slope, emptiness like a tide sweeps things away

Martin Harrison

Songs And Verses

The white table, the white chairs,
there under the casuarinas —
flies circle it, buzzing, zig-zagging:
the eye's blood-red cotton vein.

*

Back there, a small room's packed up life:
silence reigns in this house. Street-sounds
wash in like ripples, lapping a fallen log.
Beyond them, tree-clouded lakes murmur.

*

We are on a journey,
a journey which is ours,
made of figurative moves
asking who made so many souls.

The journey goes on,
though you and I stay still:
mosquitoes swarm the dried-up creeks,
ghostly herons stalk bronze reeds.

*

Here a grub hammers away
at its world of sky and wood:
there's day sheen, there's day glimmer,
while warm gusts glint on bark.

Martin Harrison

Stopping For A Walk In Reserved Land Near Murra Murra

It's a stop-over on a Spring day
when, walking through the bush, I see them.
Bees. Wild bees, already clustered,

already swarmed. A galaxy of living honey,
they hang on a branch
in a swollen, brown gourd, a primitive shape

caught on the move. All gouache, clay, and bubble,
it's hard to fix it for what it is,
frightening to imagine stumbling into its pelting dust,

having just landed from the horizon's blue planes
of Spring light, dwarf ti-tree, red earth.
Pummeled soil, hanging, between sky and ground,

it takes on a flickering, gold-dyed sheen,
gold as in a strand of hair
that's threaded, quartz-like, in that ochre mass: bodies, heads, legs,

writhing on each other, pinioned there.
It's as if each is already a future cell.
Or as if the air has opened up a hasty, war-time grave

where corpses, tossed into the pit, drown each other
with their awkward, rotting limbs.
This swarm is that exposed. That stark.

A wattle-and-daub affair, compacted
in a furious swerve
to a taller tree's white branch, the swarm hangs there

sandstorm-brown,
a haze of movement
and molecules. It's as sharp and deafening

as if all the body's sensations arrive

at one go, or as if a life-time's
thoughts are suddenly, spontaneously, recalled

by someone moving, at the very edge of life,
when the mind's
sky-white with memories, swelling with

the fruit of experience, swarming
at death,
yet holding all feelings together;

or as if, veil-like, it's summed up later (generations later,
after the earth
has soaked up spilt blood and honey-streams)

by the philosopher who says:
Things are not things,
but groups, sets, swarms, flux —

playing their music of ant
and bird. The swarm
is light. It's energy. Fruit of the desert's edge.

Fruit, indeed, is fruit. Yet, whether
in grief or orgy,
these bodies pile on top of each other:

they're a huge brown pear,
they're an outsize bobbin of unwashed flax,
hanging from a yellow-gum.

It takes for ever to focus on. It swirls.
It implodes in the branches,
hanging like a wind-harp

of silk-glitters and half-dried mud
with outriders taking off and returning,
like flies to a carcase. Not beautiful,

dark, full of anger, full of sting,
it changes shape
like a pot spun between invisible hands,

slowly growing bulbous, then tapering to a narrow neck,
in danger of falling apart
or attacking like a Mongol horde

yet still clustering, still forming itself
from Spring's exile
and the struggle of poisoned virgin grubs —

till it steadies its larval magic
into an Earth-Mother drone
of particles, dynamos, ancestral flight.

Martin Harrison

The Past

The drive back from Melbourne is a patchwork of histories. Back home, after three days on the road, the paddock's new grasses are wind-free, still. At last green. "It's as if it's all making up its mind," someone said to me day or so ago. Yes, I thought to myself, it's true there's a kind of tremor in which this return to green is conducted. Much of Victoria was green, tentatively so. But as we cross the border, the blond dry quality returns: the slopes are straw-coloured, silvery blond. When we turn off to the beginnings of the high country, we skim an unmarked frontier back into green. In the journey's speed, there's both stasis, no-change and, at the same time, there's constant change. In the larger world, there's tentativeness because no-one knows how long these conditions will last. Rainless years, die-back, dry dams, swarms of roos, crop failure, stock reduction, fires, mice plagues - the list is so negative, the particulars so "bush", that you can't help but smile. Can it get worse? It seems - well, how to put it? - that there's a weather of things, as well as a weather of prevailing wind, rain and pressure patterns. There's a weather of the mind and of personal senses, a weather of this other psychological "world": namely, a weather of intimate feelings which change and sharpen each person's idea of the world. If it weren't like this, everything would be equally noticeable. Everyone, for instance, would have registered the news of locust swarms far west of here and seen the handful of scattered, windblown outriders flittering across the half-way-between-ankle-and-knee high grass in the back orchard here. But, no, they're here for a few days only. Not many people see them

~

I wake up with a heavy sense of - already the word I want for this feeling has gone back into sleep. Anxiety, a sense of inextricable failure, a heaviness mixed with guilt about something I should have done and could never have succeeded in doing: all of these are part of the name I'm searching for. A single word to name the feeling... "What have I done wrong?" is what I am feeling, or, more exactly: "Where have I gone wrong?"

Some deep internalisation's occurred and, momentarily, a rift, a wedge, of embedded emotion stirs up, like a swirl of sand from a fish disturbed in the creekbed, which then filters through the first few hours of the day. I'm a child again, waking up to the electric, tingling sense of negativity - of anger and resentment - which my parents wallowed in for weeks on end with each other: irreconcilable difference, fret-saw of irritability, slur and sneer, moody non-

speaking! What a life! Did they ever make up, forgive and forget? A burdensome, bruised cloud pressed into the back of my mind: that's the name for what I've woken with. And the pathetic, doglike sense (only children can be so abject) of somehow having to make it all right, to make up for it.....

So let's say that the nameless mood is a key element in the breaking down of anxiety. Nobody can be so sure of things, so in control. No-one can expunge, in every regard, the daily sense of living a life divided, of having another life which, always accompanying us, goes into shadow as soon as we turn to look. It's as if we carry in us a forgetfulness the other side of a rift beyond which memory works without connections. We try to recall and immediately we are wordless. We read the character and then we guess - -

(two pears, two small pears, still hard - hanging in their pale-green leaf sprays of old wood)

(a gash of fruit across the mind)

(the poet's words about his mother's death: those hands, that face, the gesture of a life which isn't any other life but exactly this one)

(the sense that the others, the dead ones, never lose their intimate link with us)

(how much love is tied to their presence)

(a chipped stone flake)

~

Along the road winding beside new green paddocks, the already dry dust spurts blowing away quickly, like words just out of reach -

"the past will always exceed the everyday"- much as if, in an abandoned house, a phone's still ringing

~

Yet the green keeps on expanding. All the wreckage of dreams, fears, complex constructions floats through it like abandoned machinery, rusted by the sky. Fences and cars go down in it like holiday makers on a beach entering the water, slowly, inching their way, with a hundred different gestures of surprise, a

hundred different screeches and laughs. The sound of so many things sinking into time never ceases to fill one's ears: for at a certain point, things only remain visible because they are half-eaten, half-formed, half-vanished (they're all the same process) in time. The simplest impulse reaches from one end of consciousness to the other, from one moment at the remembered beginning to the on-going moment of immersion. I wake up, for instance, with a single feeling of concern and with the parallel sense that the feeling is, itself, a signal - like a sail trajected between water and sky, like a plough skimming between surface and air

Martin Harrison

The Red Gum

A camera could catch it. Or a video. A painter can't.
It's October's first dry wind, blowing in across the Harbour.
Rousing, irritable wind, with the feel of flat country out west,
it thrashes the red gum with its tentacle flowers, its blood-red new leaves,
whose images will never be finished, never held, even
by the best of visualists. The reds of this red tree
dazzle and blur, both cochineal and stain of flying-ants.

I'm stuck with this red tree. These blue waters. Everything's primary.
Gusts and gusts of invisible wind shake the branches
into horse-heads neighing and rearing into shoals of silver -
let loose, they're mares floury with dusty evening light
under trees, in a paddock, back of the mind. Spring wind blasts them,
turns them back to main-street bunting rattling, triangular, overhead.
It crackles the leaves like a fire that's burning up too fast, too dry.
Against grey-blue water, the red gum's sinewy branches shine.
Behind it, yacht masts and yellow water taxis cutting their wakes.
Across the bay, particles of cars glide by, silent as a museum's dust.

I make coffee, think of the washing. I'll spend the day looking at pictures:
slides of someone's work. There'll be lunch, maybe an hour at the pool.
All the while, the red tree flickers and threshes, an image from a shaky aerial.
Against the blue, its curtain's like a crimson smear, a fishing-net of shadows.
All morning the flat is full of slanting diamond light and sun,
probing, like a philosopher, this side and that. A wall, a bit
of floor, a bookshelf: and, then, again the tree,
like a gigantic window-cleaner, looming at the window. No Oak
of Dodona, its variable upsets pure prophecy. Its clouds glitter,
promising richness, quite other than a tranquil view
taken in across the land: a prospect of water-meadows,
a few cows. Or a portrait with brilliant drapery. Who was it
said the wind is "boneless?" This ghost's rattling its maraca,
making words impossible. For all the time, this storm-tossed red gum
burns its way into the mind, under thought and reference,
like a premonition you can't tease out:
its own forest of sun-lit fire, taking over everything around it,
whether neighbouring roofs, or the gulls battling to the Heads,
with rain-storms of flowers hanging out, dryly, for heat and bees.
Just for a second, it's static under cloudless light, golden as a haystack.

Martin Harrison

The Witnesses

At first I think that they are someone else,
the blond woman and her fair-haired daughter -
it's the car probably, a station wagon
pulling up on the grass, white like the teacher's,
and the profile's the same. But, no, they've found me,
driving in despite the gate's nearly lack of sign
and washed-out entrance turn, and twenty yards
of scratching, noisy wattles. Pretty soon
I know what's afoot or what's likely to be,
greeting them on the edge of the verandah -
surprised to see them, but guessing everything
as I watch them walking up towards me
with the pamphlets. "It's a beaut day," she says.
"Yes," I say, " how're you going." "We haven't
been out this way a while," she says, "but we're here
to talk about God's message." Just like that:
and me, I'm thinking how not to ask them in,
and of how many times this has occurred,
and how many seconds to close the door.
They stand there in the flooded morning light -
the woman with her opening lines, the daughter
glancing nervously at her, embarrassed
perhaps by the whole event - and me absorbed
not in what they say but in the fact they're there.
I let her talk on after I buy The Tower .
She talks of her earlier life, what's she's found,
how she now trusts only in what she's found,
how she'll spread the word while the vehicle lasts -
there'll be money to fix it when she needs it.
She talks of a convention down in Sydney.

All the while I watch her daughter looking on,
making the link which holds me, as I wonder
what's gone wrong, and how many phases
this sixteen-year old's been put through to date:
I can't help but think of small town poverty,
a broken marriage and - guesswork this -

ex-commune life, aging, a late start. A
past's dark stream flows in her new-shared faith.
The daughter waits as if the day is long.
Behind her, I'm watching the half-full dam,
a silver coin shining at birdless sky -
it's so blue and bright, the first day like this
now that the heat's over and there's cold.
Listening, I find the woman's motives too frail to break -
I scuff a plank and mention how the neighbours,
unemployed, stay at home, happy at how
talking outdoors has usually got some purpose.
There's no clear way to tell the truth, or lie.
There's no way to shut out clean winter light.

Martin Harrison

Two-Part Variations for Stuart Cooke

1.

The palm tree frond
flaps
a flag-like wave
across the dampness -

across the sky -
twice my height,
high above,
a deep green frond
paddling grey air. -

In the marina
a thousand wires
clink and jostle - rattled, jingling -
playing their forest of pullies
as old-style radio masts
and angular semaphores:

I could live here
between the moisture and
that sound -

or in the moment
recalled just now
when I'd left the plane

and was walking
across shallow dusk-lit puddles

arriving at Nadi after
the afternoon downpour

*

The palm tree frond
swirls its loose curlicue
across the sky -

its many fingers
stop the wind tearing it:
a lattice-work, an ocean,
a furtherance
all seep through.

A scent of diesel lifts
from glistening concrete.

2.

Don't forget to hang on
to the arching green spire
of that wind-tossed stalk

in the forgotten verge, unmown,
next to pungent tarmac laid
on the approach road:

the grasses have shot up
in a couple of drizzly weeks,
spear grass, wallaby grass,

many too hard to identify -
perhaps that's red grass -
and the tangle, what is it?

The bending seed-head,
its shepherd's crook,
is about to ripen

and scatter invisible
golden particles into
undergrowth's rubbish

*

Follow along the inside
of the curve: there are tiny seeds
still about to ripen

on a trajectory more
certain than persistent weather
from the west over there

despite all its storms, rain-fronts,
even its monsoons pushed down
lower through the arid zone.

Mostly, the sheep ran off,
thousands of them,
long ago in childhood -

into sleep, through fences,
through wooden gates,
slats, stiles. Yet the fragrance's

not sheep. Have you ever
stopped in the desert mountains
of Southern California?

and, after rain, have you smelt,
when walking off the road,
those sweet gardens of creosote?

3.

Don't forget, too, Australia's native rose
there on its Dutch paper.....
Delicate, not rose-like at all.

It has lasted a while,
Boronia serrulata,
watercolour by Raper,

flowering on a two-pronged
spray, picked somewhere
from sandstone rocks

circa 1790....Inked in its frame,
a long-dead instance trapped
in the particulars of blossom.

In the taxonomy of things,
a thing - but also no more
than a trace or capturing:

drawn from this order
to another one, observed
but thereby made border-

line, special for some people:
a diligent amateur's work
that's cute and imperial.

A colonial picture, it snaps up
the land, the names, the space -
it plays its part in the game.

You look across the amber air
which is what is left
glowing around the flower,

immersed in its silence,
its wordlessness, its muteness,
its precision in the dance.

*

Wake up, wake up! Daybreak
down the beach,
past those sentinel outward-leaning coco-palms,

opens its white singular eye
over the grey waters
between clouds dark as berries

water-laden to the point of burst
but which will drift away
like a line of dolphins

now the warm atmosphere's
building to its later shine
of eye-strain white on dark.

So, wake up, let's go walking
through the water sluiced on sand,
tossing it from our feet like feathers:

watch out for things that sting.
The orange and lemon streaks
are in our blood. The moisture's

what that blood must carry.
(The rose's pink and dark pink blushes)
The skin's permeable as the sand.

We're in the world, we have no choice
in how its transience is mine and yours.
Our shadowed gait's top-heavy as the palm.

Let's get there before the sun does.
We are in the world, we give it everything.
It hides itself, will soon be far too much.

Martin Harrison

Walking Back From The Dam

It leaves in my eyes the image of a
pearl-grey lake fleshed with blue, rain-clearing clouds,
the awakening scent of rain-wet grass, sharpness of
amber light through a clump of swamp-gums;
brighter than an hour back, it's dusk after
a day of steady, soaking falls ("no-one
can complain," the guy in the store tells me
earlier on.) Good weather floating through,
front after front, from the west.

 In this pause,
swallows, scissoring fifty feet above,
skirt across the neighbour's paddocks. They're like
sheepdogs rounding up an invisible,
panicking flock - insect-sheep which never
form a mob or head to the gate. So the swallows
fly round and round, swerving, turning in air
which is still and lucid. They vanish, crossing
like space-probes before the sun, flickering, zipping,
in their backwards and forwards tennis-match;
while under the swamp-gums, that amber glow
settles ochre puddles across bare ground.
Then they're back again, working the area,
but now it's like they're picking threads from off a cloth.
It's that dense, this thick, this feeling of time -
this feeling of walking back alone under
the trees. As if somehow, the whole world's in
another tense. Or as if you could still be young,
striding back, shadow-flinging, across the grass
in light sharp as a knife-blade, pools of it.

I've neighbours never moved away from here.
They're what's left, when a place is just enough:
a family, a house, the sister moves in too -
with a first child after the husband's baled out.
They're one side. Down the road, an ex-muso
and his wife - both out of work though perhaps
they live on savings anyhow. Sometimes I hear
them shouting at their dogs. Otherwise, there
are these moments, never quite catchable,

which could trick you into thinking "This is how it is, this is the way things always look." Like a swirl in a flooded creek, the braid of things is plaited tight, floating, moving, never repeating the same glitter, the same hillock of twisting water. Nothing, in short, which would not be particular - and tricky, addictive, not to be too much believed. For that's the killer: there is so much already gone through - 'so many star-shows since the 70s' - making it possible to read back the stages of anybody's life, here, today. So much life, too much of it: detritus, memory, phrases. (I live, I'd say, in the age of biography.)

Holed up by a day of rain now that long dry spell's ended at last, I've been reading Ian Hamilton's engaged "period-study" of Robert Lowell - American, private-incomed - who made his work bigger than life, his own life monstrous with its breakdowns, after winter, every year: manic depression, lithium, mornings started up with vodka and milk, students, protest-readings, Harvard, Italy, London, chain-smoking and partying, carrying that mix of aggression and weakness so attractive to women. It hooks in. It brings nostalgia for an older generation I knew back then - who wanted their everyday life to perform a universal act, a freedom out of politics. It seems another world, a rich world gone today. No-one stopped drinking, working only on vacation (six months) whether in Maine or Suffolk. Back in New York, you could die in taxis. Fame, too, was serious, personal, mythic: an image captioned in the heart of things. As if you lived, hovering, in the sun's eye. And when it was sunset, there was Rome and cocktails. Everyone met everyone - stuck, anxious, suicidal - dreaming themselves, frantically, to death.

White Flowers

The air the wind the outside and outside
of what's possible and imaginable
clear and clean endeavour into the atmosphere
of light on dark and glittering spaces
where crimson rosellas swerve sideways
into cascades of down-hanging white flowers
they land whistling in that snowy down
that galactic spray of weeping branches
now revealing themselves in an entirety
of whitenesses for a few days in a
suddenness which takes my breath away
because the enormity of the thousands
of pale-yellow-hearted four-petaled flowerlets
is an act of exposure on so huge a scale -
and to what? the wind, the next moon,
the rain-streaked winter light? the sun? -
and because the suddenness is
what suddenly and surreptitiously
strikes you (invisible, unthought
awareness) as the same naked revealedness
of your lover beneath you, beside
you or above you caught there
where humanness itself is flowering light
ecstatic with joy in the act of love

Martin Harrison

White-Tailed Deer

The small thump from nowhere, someone turning
a piece of tin, a door's buffeting noise closing across the gully,
a neighbour - what are they doing out there? - dropping a trailer or a drum
in a paddock where damp grass's been drying out these last twenty minutes
in a final sun cube whose shattered gleam just now has
flooded through sprays of half-grown bluegums
traced on the shed-wall -

it happens - where? -

closing in mid-air between two never identified twigs
six metres up, or caught behind a bird song (was it that?
or just some other sound) caught the thousandth time
from outside the kitchen door, magnified for a second or two
then forgotten just as many thousand times. Like the thump,
it's forgotten so intensely that we all hear it as an event
not really known as an event, one which shifts
the breath, the blood-surge, and how we see,
back into shape. For a moment you understand
startled ecstasy - it's a squawky wattlebird landing
(no, that's a dream half-merged with a memory)
or it's the elbow's jerk with which the car boot slams,
happenings which aren't noticed or which can't be,
how the shopping brought home brushes the passage wall,
how events change time's flow beneath perception.
Really, you've no idea what's going on. You hardly grab a thing.

Networked. Transformative. Yes, the world glimmers.
The flash lies in the grass, is something and is nothing.
The yellow-throated bird scrabbles in the rangy grevillea.
A great ocean withdraws into perspective over my shoulder,
in the shadows of untended trees. A hum overtakes the orchestra
and a striated sense of inevitable time surpasses each local thought.
It's as if you can be fearless - a second or two - about
what is inextricable in feeling and movement and mood.
A dance becomes a fight, bodies tangled, then a dance again.
The light goes down like a glittering dark boulder buried in the soil.
An aurora flares in the half-heard resonance around the thing -
the thump, the door closing, the click that passes you by -
while intangibility takes a serpent's shape of wind-brushed molecules.
And how will it end? this half-traced ecstasy at merely being here.

Could anything be heard other than the after mode
of how we got there, made it out? Suddenly you realise
you're hearing a night-time forest floor, a twig snapped -
not this last light with its thin, gold trees and ragged openness -
but a moment's hesitation one night in a foreign country:
I was in up-state New York, there was a house in the woods,
there was indoor light of a dinner party, good people, drinks.
I'd stepped outside to get a sense of things, their loitering depth.
Earlier I'd seen startled deer leap a stone wall tumbled into bracken.

Martin Harrison

Winter Solstice

A vague mood, a sadness, a feeling as when recovering from illness,
a kind of “whatever it is which is going on at the time” mode —

a defile bulldozered between trees where the powerlines go through
on a ridge top, their suspended wires as out of place as a street’s tramwires
would be,

while, momentarily, the cut-out shape on the skyline (a trough shape on
the crest of the hill) flags with deep, saturated blue, an intense L-shape of it, and then

the opposite shape occurs (the reversed? completing the hill-top cut),
visible powerlines threaded down the middle of it, from ridge to ridge;

and yes, I’m thinking who lives out here anyway, who needs these wires
to be put through across somewhere, nowhere, out of town . . .

and this thought instantaneous like a shadow reaching out from black
depth under rotting leaf-fall, fallen timber . . . no, it doesn’t matter to
work it out:

we’re in the car (talking, silent) driving at the end of a winter’s day
through empty hill country west of Sydney and there’s this specificity

of light and time (itself talking and silent) (murmuring and flashing)
bounced off the scoured dirt road, aimed at us in the leaf-shine

and in the chatter of endless white against black, black against white
on silvered fence-posts (rusted wire making dry-point sketch lines)

or turned towards us in the immense approach of a gulley side of bush,
with its runnels of dark green against mid-green and its broad dividers:

there, where a paddock stops beneath it and, again, where the skyline
is plumed with eucalypts which the light makes see-through like ferns.

So yes, we’re driving in this momentary enclosure — if that’s what it is —
which names a stillness in the air expanding upwards, outwards;

and now glimpses, too, of shadows among untended white filaments
where saplings have shot up along the road, randomly exposed

in a forgotten, unstudied patch of ground along the roadside.

It's as if someone wanted to fix it up after clearing it — or a fire's gone through -

and then forgot it, letting it sow itself back to haphazard thin trees

in a barrier of staves like ripples in a white curtain, like a concertina's

box; ~~Even~~ like this, because a flashpoint of daylight has struck right th
ere

— seeped, watered, fallen might be just as possible as struck or pierced —

at the exact time that we too could take it in, glancing as we drive by.

(It's a revelation, this light passing, transient, intensely here then gone.)

Of course, no thought's quite like this: so detailed, so hurriedly well-

drawn. Equally, no thing's simple, jotted down, a crude visual instan
ce of itself.

(Each frond evaporates in the sun's crucible of melting, tidal light.)

(The junction is something stray wandering out of glass and motion.)

It's how I come back to myself for a split-second in the car, shadows
blinding the windscreen as we drive down tree-tunnels of winter fire:

then a space opens out for a half-kept dairy farm, for sagging sheds
near blackberry patches, for spires of thistles tattering lumpy paddocks.

*

Taken in a glance, the power-lines are there forever on the ridge.

No-one sees them again like this, startled, picked out at dusk:

And the loneliness? that mood? Not true to say it's from the ridges

even if cold vacancy's brews up over them from the sunset's last-minute light

like a sensation half-identified, half-made into a word or thought.

Besides, is the feeling made more clear, pausing to think it out?

That cold light flickers. Everything about it has wildness, rawness from damp air,

hard to capture like a shift in tone, like a sheen no word has,

leaving you vacant, ecstatic, impatient with time. With its passing, with its fall.
We must get back home, that voice says. Or: just look at that sky!

Then something occurs beyond imagining, beyond capture:
a juncture standing out for a minute glittering in darkness

as if the moment's a wing-beat (crimson rosellas swerving from a
branch) or wind creaking in a gulley's trees (a ripple knocking anchored
boats.)

*

I'd say the fire-break gets bulldozed every year or so —
under a winter sky like earlier today, hard blue immersing the world.

At the back of this thought (we're still driving) something so sudden, so random:
a mere sight of saplings grouped round a dry creek's shallow curve.

Phrase after phrase things rise, half-form, fall, turn, restore themselves,
words billowing in overhangs of leaves, words blown from the earth's bare

dryness,

loneliness at the core of things becoming what we are,
loneliness not like the pebble in the road but the track itself

over-grown with the flash of day-stars, with half-memories, with things
glittering, with the moment's provocations, unweeded, random like the Milky
Way.

I've no idea why I suddenly think of it . . . some token of return and rescue . . .
I'd walked up to the gallery the painter Miró commissioned for his work

in Barcelona and they were showing installations by the American, Calder:
mobiles, sculpture, drawings, there in that day-lit, garden space.

The Berlin wall was down, Europe was filled with headlines from the past,
all the buried questions, all the borders, all the powers being recalled.

I was away for a few months, writing poems in a village in the hills,
caught in silent argument with what, if anything, a poem might be or hold
together. But there in the Fundação they were showing a remake of a work
from '38,
the Calder black mercury fountain made for the Republic's Exposition:
it would have been lost in time — all the energy to maintain, restore, re-build,
quite lost — had someone not thought to re-install it, tracing its flowing
vortex back through
□ those years of war.

For a second (just now) the spectrum's shadow on the hillside is like liquid
mercury: its surface flicker's almost mauve. Near it, misty slopes fill with
hazy dust-sheened
lacquer: on the ridge a fountain burns up in the craggy, sky-bright defile,
e,
with the sun etching it, turning its light into a flare, a cascading storm.

It's what catches my eye, half catches it, (tricking it, blinding it)
as we're heading home in these last sticks and shadows of light,

all dusk's colours turning and gleaming, linking up, springing out,
while dark coverlets of shadow float among the roadside trees.

Martin Harrison

Yachts At Scotland Island

For Marcia Stewart

After a day of Greek references, lunch, and Freudian puns
the mythoi aren't appropriate to the dapple and sting-rays
any more than to a brain verbalising everlastingly
on its right-side stones and its left-side waters. But, no less,

the TV, modernity's end, the abolition of craft in networks —
all those roadways through intelligent starlit places —
are short meeting-spaces with cartoon characters
hanging in trees, or just the other side of the bay.

I read Soundsite, Leonardo, Fanzine and MLA.
Outside, water noise ripples in flickering rosemary bushes.
Inside, the modem chatters in its own drifting sky.
Sometimes it's a frog by a creek. My hand glides with its mouse.

Smart theorists, like hang-gliders, call this sensory geography
which maps travel through the texts which build it, a place
of fire in which the passageways are infinite yet framed.
There's no closeness. Or too much. A pack of cards, a street vanishes.

Appliances are light and portable. You need nothing.
Not just the heat, you dress in sleeveless shirts and go barefoot.
Even to work is to study fragments which are locked, submarine,
while the air's cinematic forest jangles its symbols of light —

tempting, though, to invent new worlds through patched-up bits,
floating in a medium less real than water. Names are tags,
which once were metaphors, for views down the road,
for the boss, for the book or the sea: or rather, for rags

weightlessly falling as in the last scene in that Antonioni movie,
where the whole house explodes like a flight of birds.
What's left is its owner's first risky choice, a Mojave Desert view.
It was the desert there which gave the sense of distant clouds.

Myself, too, I usually work my best far away from water.

I prefer it as one element among dry-country scapes
which here only the pathway's European rosemary reminds me of —
like a mallee sunset over a plain of yellow-flowering rape

whose sharp, flat skyline becomes a shimmering lake and burns,
or, air-borne, like the sense that an ancient tide's exposed the Olgas,
sculpted by sand storms and the air's weight. Residues which repeat,
this use of drifting, underwater images is a sign of our times:

that is, until a slow-building change occurs towards mid-afternoon,
shifting the glare in the grey gum overhanging the verandah
and spilling out pale blue hammerheads over blunt, green slopes.
Perhaps I get up to close the windows. Somewhere, a minah-

bird starts to fret. There's a tropical stillness. Then branches move.
Briny, the heat comes on moody, heavy, grey as a porpoise,
inclining the yachts in leeward wind as if they're random shapes,
abstract triangles like styrofoam chips, fleeting, behind glass:

you see them caught in a bar of choppy wavelets — it's like a wedge —
or frozen on a water-shelf, dark as the Sargasso's and as strange.
Now, as the wind whips up, they make their way to the channel,
where the ocean they engrave slops about in a white meringue.

It was Plato (that dramatist) who first distinguished place from space,
granting the latter its deathly power of giving, mapping, taking away,
imagining it as a sieve sifting the threshed Just-Nows —
a wall of brightness landing across stormy, green-chipped wakes,

or a fruitful, black bulb of laden sea-cloud about to burst its charge.
The yachts sail away under it like ducks gliding on a shooting-range.
Conscious of the change, I shift the pointers on the flowing screen
and log instructions for a letter which needs ten seconds to Brisbane,

half-catching only the suspense of the quick, unnoticed tuning
by which the wind's simplest shiver across the grey gum is a voice,
still whispering as it once did: Yes, I wait at the known world's pillars.
Or: A boat of flowers bearing you, I am the old man's winnow.

Martin Harrison