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*The Kangaroo Farm*

ALSO BY MARTIN HARRISON

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Martin Harrison

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# CONTENTS

## The Kangaroo Farm

Eels	11
Red Tulips	12
Poetry and Paperbarks	14
Clouds Near Waddi	16
Saintliness	17
<i>Close-Ups</i>	
1. Sydney Harbour	19
2. Roadside Near Hillston	20
Grass Parrot	21
Tasmanian Tiger	22
<i>Icons</i>	
1. Prodigal Son	24
2. Return Visit	25
3. Lazarus	27
4. Portrait of a True Republican	29
Rainbow Snake	31
Rice Fields Near Griffith	32
Forest Kingfisher	34
Australia	36
A Studio in Prague	39
Leeches	41
View from Point Piper	43
<i>Images</i>	
1. TV At Night	44
2. Red Roses	46
The Platypus	48
Yachts at Scotland Island	50
Stopping for a Walk in Reserved Land Near Murra Murra	53
A Month in the Country	56
The Red Gum	59
Remembering Floodwater	61
Travelling Out West	63
Night's Paddock	65

**Moon Gazing in Sorrento Dusk**

Moon Gazing in Sorrento Dusk	69
------------------------------	----

**Fire**

Red Wattlebirds	77
Fire	79

SAMPLER

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The book as a whole is dedicated to my sister, Barbara Lewis.

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# The Kangaroo Farm

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## Eels

The mythos of peninsular light  
is that it drifts rich as snow,  
or turns itself to creamy rivers  
of cloudy sun in dusk-splashed trees,

Mornington winter sunset is  
a dove in lift off through orange air,  
glimpsed as you pass these well-stocked farms  
whose wind breaks move like fleeing deer.

Sudden clearness happens in this winter fire,  
brightening cold mist and diamond rain,  
where a thing is placed, bird-like,  
in the windscreen's single, whistling glance.

Myth gets us nowhere. The past is  
the past's dream, the mind's water fringe:  
lost, dead tracks, eel-trap creeks,  
the intent posture, flames leaping.

# Red Tulips

*for Ken*

It's only accidental things you just don't joke about:  
earlier, for instance, my sister phones about a death in Israel,  
the ABC announces floods upstream along the Clarence,  
and there was that sense of starting-up after a night's drunk  
with hard flat squints of dazzlement at morning light  
on a far off hill-line, snow-like, back of Surfers.  
It's only scholarship will give them form and figure.

Last night, the host showed us the purple candelabra,  
next, Spanish furniture in the pool-side dining-room:  
we trailed past bull-hide seats, happy to barbecue.  
Despite the purples, talk was funny – on books and history.  
Falling for it, the white South African bowled wide and long,  
till we moved to verities of wine and weather, then  
on to regional style – finally, again, the role of scholars.

It's what you said. You take the book outside, settle down,  
and find that flies and sudden wind and water change it all –  
impossible, that is, to read, take notes, think out the piece.  
The Spanish writers had this problem, too, with their siesta:  
the day's whole pattern suited only shorter fiction  
whereas big work came, ice-hard, from the North's refrigerator  
of Alpine places, cold castles, among a blue-eyed *Kultur*:

I too would be an indoors lover and an outdoors hater  
(with the minor reservation that I love to drive)  
sheltering a life-long project built from imagined pasts,  
querulous over details from the pre-Settler period,  
Cavafy-like translating fragments into innovative metre  
where a green-plush library invites me to sleep and work.  
On this reckoning, Canberra's the place to head for.

Today, though, I wake in a high-rise overlooking the Pacific.  
Mid-morning ocean's a blue wedge over a useless balcony.  
Outside, the beach curves northwards like a horse's mane –  
sand-dunes have the same soft bristles, the land's a neck –  
till one of the tropics' five minute clouds, quick as a space-ship,  
blots out the sun making a reef of moody mountain-dusk,  
and the water-lines ripple like an untuned TV monitor:

it gives me a headache. It's a mid-tone most dinner guests like,  
a patch where you needn't think past land and nation:  
working them out through a confessional mode,  
putting you in a given spot. There's a story here  
of time told in anecdotes, sans the wit of the bush yarn's flukes,  
becoming the first book, and the next, and the one which sinks:  
student poets react against this, copying Duggan and Tranter.

To write, you need the cleanest light, one overcoming sense,  
something to do with returns from a half-thought-out border,  
instinctive but not without the shape of a sharp, dry mind,  
(reading it, will that famous reviewer finally stop her gush?)  
with wide plains detailed in a zoom, yet taken at a glance.  
It's why, tidying up and sensing my mood, you place that pot  
of exotics, the Tasmanian flame-tulips, on the balcony floor

past which the waves clash in a Dame Edna of gladioli storms  
and the sea-dazzle becomes a wall of burnt-out stripes,  
provoking this recall of past and present, of light in dark:  
a twisted, woollen blue fragrance of the long-lost scarf,  
memory of blue glass around a once-glimpsed shark fin,  
a sense of radiance at the base of camel-humped clouds –  
this and more, caught on a red edge, both ways from the shore.

# Poetry and Paperbarks

*for Kieran Condell*

All down the street, paperbarks strip off their long brown swathes.  
Stunted lifters of pavements, peeling crevices for moths,  
the Harbour's wet grey dusk reaches them, piercing their clothes.

The light's familiar on them, but I wonder why they planted  
them at the back of King's Cross, sheepish and huddled,  
where restaurant-goers park their cars. On the corner, somewhere Thai.

They thrust out branches red as a desert's sunset pillars. I've seen  
this red glow on them, mirrored in flood-water at Myall Lake,  
as visions of dangling rags and fiery wood above a brackish sheen.

Pushy, they're chopped back down by city workers.  
Along the gutter, roots shake earthquake tremors through tarmac.  
Up top, they're pruned into sky-holes for power lines, their sides shaved  
for cars.

Dappled paperbarks, they're out of place in this phased-out dusk:  
making an oasis for a passing glance,  
they trace an underground watercourse in the earth's dry dark.

Like remnants at a paddock's edge, they fringe the Cross's swamp.  
They greet me as I turn the corner looking for the place we meet.  
It's the bark-effect which strikes me, that damp, unfolded wrapping-paper

with ham-fisted waxy leaves sprayed in air. I can't ignore them,  
knowing how, for weeks, they'll distract me with their oddity.  
Traditional, bush-verse paperbarks they speak a country theme

mixed up with axe-talk and the city's view of their soft, burnt filo.  
In Melbourne they'd dig them up to put in flickering London planes.  
For a second, they're contrast with the horizon's bone-white halo

like I was out at Hay a few days back, or finding the Murrumbidgee  
ditched beneath the plain, winding south-westerly  
in its dotted nature strip of dusty trees. Not quite paperbarks, it's true,

but with this same impact, this same sense that after arid space  
you must once again look at sky through trees.  
Through paperbarks even a clustered street is anchored in the mind.

Now tufted, underwaterlike, they catch the last sun's greenish splash.  
Really, they're unimaginable, hard to place,  
flourishing with no model apart from National Parks. As if to say:

you must not lose your local touch, specific to how your senses work.  
True, some Australians still live in imported European fantasy,  
and we've writers who'd rather live in yesterday's New York.

I too use images as linear as TV's and don't insist upon the past  
or on the way the land intrudes its myths of ownership,  
but you must not lose the way time floats ancestrally into your eyes

just because it's November, or just because an ocean of flashy evening,  
polluted and unstable, gives off a whiff of Jakarta-style haze.  
It's now familiarity. It's old light breeding invisible, touchable things.

## Clouds Near Waddi

On looking up at the elephants  
you could wonder where you were.  
They were hovering on a chain  
like Hannibal's in the Alps:

elephant shapes, bulging, linked together  
crossing from north to south,  
visible as a desert fantasy  
of warnings, pillars, God's truth.

White narcissi, they came from nowhere  
along the edge like sky's debris,  
intruders in another medium  
like stage scenery painted on that blue,

painted so you forgot Springtime hordes  
of yellow daisies conquering new wheat,  
or Paterson's Curse in purple ribbons  
flickering either side of the road

and forgot those huge Egyptian prow  
unmoored, two days back, amid green –  
the Grampians, Mount Arapiles  
drifting on the Wimmera's plain.

As I drove, earth was paradox,  
flat for miles yet curving into clouds –  
sensed like a rear-view mirror's glimpse  
yet always opening up, leading onwards,

through skylines' endless replacements  
which fixed each farm's chequerboards,  
with Time measured in gum-tree tops  
floating backwards on far horizons.



## Saintliness

Like saints, they're clichés. They pass. They're moods.  
Poets, like analysts, make money out of them, though  
they're also how novelists set characters in a scene.  
No-one quite expresses the mood, no-one talks of it.  
But the whole action takes it on, dramatic,  
lucid, full of those undercurrents like hidden threads  
which make for richness. It's the classic moment:  
war veteran at the small town's obelisk. Not a poem,

it's a moment so complex you'd rather forget it,  
there's more there than you could possibly write.  
No single image holds sky and earth together.  
Wordless, it tears you apart. It's a blade of grass  
picked out in the paddock. It's a sort of madness.  
It's the blades of black swan's wings on shining water,  
a bulky fragment floating where you loitered  
watching time go by: yes, in that *sepulcrum*

*mortis* of what was fair or good, of what should have  
worked out or of what X did to Y. No-one imagined  
it. No-one could have thought it would be so bad.  
All this occurs like a speck, a flash of light caught  
on something bright, unmemorable, half-thought,  
already swirled away like a red leaf in a run-off,  
knocking you over in a thousand moving waves –  
words, thoughts, laments. Thus: you've been forgotten.

Or: you're very old, go into town from time to time.  
You've had the same neighbours now for years.  
The lawyer phones sometimes to modify the will,  
most often, though, to chat about poor winter-rain  
and how the town's sinking without the train.  
You wonder about those arty folks just up the line,  
building their sheds without a permit. The Symes  
would spin in their graves to see their orchard gone.

Each mood's a scene. Things don't change they just disappear,  
like a street one side of which is taken down.

A vast white skyline stretches behind a scrubby fence  
and who can tell the distance now in "everything"  
in "no-one" "now" and "all?" Age is perving.

It's about the mind's long journey and your fears  
of frailty. It's about sunlight on the kitchen table: years  
of taking its Eucharist..... So it goes. On and on.

Even chatterry moods erect their marble tombs.  
Saints spin around in them like whirring dynamos.  
Other moods fix the attention like frosted glass:  
the restless mood, the angry mood, the mood  
in which you wonder if you've ever been loved –  
everyone knows that peevish sense of longing –  
the mood where sounds occur just beneath hearing,  
like heavy blue clouds behind a lemon-tree in a yard

in an old city you've dreamed about but never seen.  
Like someone phoning round to say goodbye  
moods make themselves known before they fly away:  
till a moment arrives where all their torture ends,  
all their rearing and pulling like horses, all the bent  
backs straining, all their earthquakes under your words.  
as if a voice breaking the billowing rococo shrouds  
says This now is what you must do. So you do it.