

## J. S. Harry

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J. S. Harry was born in 1939 and lives in Sydney. Many of her poems have appeared in journals and magazines, and she has had five collections of poetry published. Harry was awarded the PEN International (Sydney Centre) Lynne Phillips Poetry Prize in 1987. Her most recent publication is *Selected Poems* (1995). The works referred to in the essay following this selection of poems (with abbreviations used given in brackets after the full title) include: *the deer under the skin* (D), 1971; *Hold, for a little while, and turn gently* (H), 1979; *A Dandelion for Van Gogh* (VG), 1986; *The Life on Water and the Life Beneath* (W), 1995. A full list of J. S. Harry's published works appears in the Select Bibliography.

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## THE POEM FILMS ITSELF

Down the slimy rope into the impossible!  
 The insides heave somehow they got the camera down inside  
 the alimentary tract  
 The poem as a historical drama or epic  
 by shakespeare or a drunken lamington by somebody french whose  
 names  
 our memories 'd glided over (elision marked by ampersand:  
 digestion omitted)  
 will be filmed in prose our new technique (perfect  
 for moribund structuralism) The costumes  
 will appear to be modern, say crudely  
 early modern ashbery or o'hara (we will not know either of  
 them well enough to differentiate)  
 with a few loops of pointlessly-picked-over intestine (It would  
 be 'hard'  
 to establish a particular crow was here)  
 Though our techniques are the shirts we are betting  
 our horses' lives on, their bloodlines (techniques', shirts', horses')  
 like those of the abused, & fictive, 'crow',  
 'derive' from the ancients & cannot be said to be authentically  
 'ours' yet still the pace carries us, into the  
 future with a marvellous momentum We are like  
 the élan about to drive a gothic cathedral  
 upward into havens of print /sky-high!/ happy? heavenly?  
 (exit arsehole as might be  
 expected) the mixed  
 naturalism, & the absurd, trade-marking the content local,  
 a few flashes of unparrotlike  
 environmental realism, yet to be added, for the risk . . .  
 Notwithstanding  
 dead animals rising on our tongues (soap, soup,  
 the leather we've been chewing, round the holes  
 in our spirits' feet where the thaw, as a  
 melting joke leaves gangrene green as agony)  
 what sincerely gets to us is : a kind of food-poisoning  
 : that we are still here as if saving cents for a 3rd row seat  
 where  
 we don't want to sit & are already . . . too close up . . .  
 from a  
 3rd row seat, the soundtrack-roar  
 's quite deafening . . .  
 (& peering) : the screen immense in front of us

(Mute Nausea saving up to pay  
 to be itself & dead?) while from the backrow stalls we do  
 not have the bread for, they say you can almost  
 see, & hear, from there . . .  
 it could be little boy blue or hamlet who was the one . . .  
 by the needs of the drama managed . . .  
 to get the shiv dug in himself: right  
 place &  
 job well-done . . . the real, irrelevant bagpipes wailing  
 frail but true, outside, (us liking them—but better:)  
 next role will play us into death

## FRAME

soft as chamois  
 paperbarks' white torsos  
 rise out of water  
 like sleepers caught  
 in a dream by degas  
 there is no wind music  
 and they do not dance  
 on their  
 white arms  
 black streaks are cormorants  
 the brown  
 soft splotches ducks  
 ears paint  
 what they cannot see  
 in the varied shapes of frogs  
 rain crickets and cicadas  
 play the movement on  
 a wet cormorant  
 stretching to dry  
 is a dancer's  
 old black sock  
 briefly hung  
 on the air above a  
 bough  
 paint blurs line  
 as the sock wrinkles down



the ripples of the carp  
 throw rings that glide on a water-stage  
 slow silent at  
 a particular stand  
 of paperbarks there is no approbation

the willows trail  
 their green hair  
 into the blackened stage  
 and do not talk though they are inside  
 the carp's language

the moon is in its first third  
 low off centre  
 lighting the way  
 mute misty of face

to fade  
 stand  
 and move out

STANDING IN FRONT OF A WOMAN ARTIST'S  
 PORTRAIT OF A PELICAN

on the lake  
 the pelican  
 stands on a black sodden log  
 half of which is anchored on the bottom  
 half of which is balanced on the top  
 the pelican stands like a balance on  
 your mind halfway  
 between art and life

lost legs apart faintly luminous

like the subject  
 of a Drysdale painting  
 of a heavy lady: Drover's Wife:

it is a very solid pelican  
 and its squat body  
 and wide apart legs  
 give it ballast  
 balancing on the log

its beak is working hard  
 bringing something down or up

you can imagine  
 the drover's wife  
 working on a colicky baby

with just the same  
 even effective strokes

most of what happens to it  
 is beyond its control  
 in the black water beneath its legs  
 food ebbing and flowing  
 the lake of its life  
 drying beneath it  
 like a great salt expanse  
 that time is wasting into death

ULTIMATELY

ultimately  
 you come to be found  
 in the holes you have made  
 where before  
 there was only emptiness

ultimately  
 a crow  
 flies low over the people  
 walking the gravel  
 summer-track  
 between the lichen and the  
 snow tussocks  
 in case those people might be edible

ultimately  
 your bones are older  
 than you ever  
 expected them to be  
 with you still on them

ultimately  
 in the summer gale  
 in perisher valley  
 a boy climbs a big old  
 white branch of the dead snow gum  
 when  
 the wind gust strikes  
 the branch breaks  
 the boy falls

into the creek  
 and a rock tears his  
 underarm hair out  
 flesh with it

for sympathy his father  
whips him—for falling—  
all the way alive  
back up out of the creek

ultimately  
a dust blizzard  
roars down the valley  
at noon  
the high thin air  
is pink  
trout rise and the wattlebird  
is feeding its babies

ultimately big significance is a load of shit

#### THE IMAGINARY SHE

I

Somes spirits  
prefer the reality  
of imaginary demons—one  
demonscene—

to the realities—many sites—  
of imaginary nits.

She has had,  
in a medical sense,  
nits

but the demons  
itch her mind  
harder.

Is it ridiculous  
sometimes to prefer  
to *choose*

to imagine  
something like a mind  
which can only be observed  
as a gerund writing  
its crawly tracks in words/deeds,

rather than to be chosen to imagine  
a body

twitched over  
by an imagination  
charged by the tensions—& twitchings—  
of *its* body?

Imaginary demons'  
demons  
crawl  
over her skin

She scratches incessantly.

2

/does not need  
to apologise  
to Grace Cossington Smith's  
*The Sock Knitter*

(Socks?)

(Sox?) They  
to this point  
had not seemed

to be related

—*The Imaginary She*—  
otherwise known as *The*  
*Nit Picker*—

Socks . . . Knitting . . .  
a kind

of nitpicking

with the hands

set

on automatic pilot

She/  
is talking of the  
hands of  
*The Sock Knitter*—*not*  
of the hands  
of the Grace  
who painted them

#### WIND PAINTING

lake birds in wind  
ride a bucking  
saddle of water

afghan dogs  
float in the wind  
their tresses laid back  
like the hair of the willow

they are dancing under  
the wind's water



like a film of themselves-  
in-slow-motion

the wind buckets  
the lake's surface

slops tilt  
over the brim

the coots  
ride it out on the slant  
sliding & riding  
in the sunblack light  
which pinks the skin  
of the pelican's  
beak membrane round  
the lump  
of the frog he is swallowing  
—there—in the lee by the willow—

hawk makes the high hill  
over the tossing pine trees  
spire of his hunting site  
& the redbrowed finches & little birds  
evanesce in the short grass  
blown on screams of panic  
thin as grass seeds

entering the invisible

there is one fat gold  
dandelion for van gogh  
tethered by its own sap  
in the black damp shade  
by the clump of horseshit

#### TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE VANISHING

*Tell me what you see vanishing and I  
will tell you who you are . . .*

W. S. Merwin

1

I went to the place of two years back:  
that shell was under the sea.  
Only a mailbox  
stood above the tideswirl.  
I choked on its singular cry like a gull,

but swallowed  
its angular pour  
of the letters written by fish.

2

Now we have come to gut & scales, & turned  
with a killing-intent, to the shoals, to prey,  
perhaps we will find our letters . . .

Those people from whom the letters  
do not come must be somewhere within our reach . . .  
unless they are behind, fishing us, on the last tide  
in the place towards which we can never  
swim or fishing the ocean, outside the reef,  
or in some hole we have forgotten, which formerly,  
we used to dive, for them . . .

If it is true we never wrote  
to them or they to us  
without sign we have exchanged ourselves endlessly.

Somewhere on an unvarnished hull with the paint  
peeling from our eyes like skin,  
we are waiting for them to grow tails, to rise . . .  
for ourselves, to sink . . . for continents  
to begin . . .

The lost continents continue. Whales like dead armies sing.

#### BETWEEN THE SAND DUNES AND THE CATTLE

Going  
in the direction  
of the bending grass-stalks  
between the whitesand patches—windblown, driftspread  
wide and smooth  
across the bones of thirstless cattle  
old and soft as ancient wood,

you may walk  
across the path  
of the one-inch  
long red ant  
where it forages  
translucent  
amber-red as if the light  
had climbed behind  
the bodyjuices inside the skin—

two hundred million years of insect  
behind its travelling—It is going  
in the direction of the wind that bends away  
from the ocean spray tossed upward, over dunes.

Five hundred yards inland  
small green blowflies fire themselves like buckshot  
from the body of the cow we stumble on.  
The legless maggots have no distinct head.  
Vertebrates in the live stage  
being somewhat less than useful  
they do not notice us at all.

A sound or a scent starts the  
dull sudden thudding:  
the two kangaroos that startle  
into noon.

Late a golden whistler  
moves across the stillness  
putting sound-pegs on his holding.  
There are wildflowers on the hills.  
Coffee velvet wildflowers  
come one hundred times each century.  
Roots pin the dust-dry twiggy shrubs  
to the boneholds between these dunes.

After  
the sun has dropped  
its compass point—  
how far there'll be no telling  
north south east or west of here or there's  
the dark we'll walk as now  
stumbling, over roots and into branches.  
In the spaces of the sky, five hundred years  
or now  
our eyes hunt stars.

#### LETTING THINGS WORK VARIOUSLY TOWARDS DEFINITION

loud through blackness  
the feet of the roaches  
crackling the empty biscuit papers  
at the bottoms of boxes  
at the backs of cupboards  
lust dry as taffeta wrinkling crumbed greaseproof-  
wrappings of the mind's old layered bread—

know them by touching if you can without writhing  
the skins of old loft-apples where they move  
like silent hairs

glimpse them at midday scrambling darkly round the boiler  
hidden heated hating  
daygrey winter-air

clearly themselves yet fiercely  
evasive, blind-  
ed by techniques of  
electric glare—

independent (defined-at-night  
by a torch-eye focused obliquely)  
curiosity quiver-legged whiskered  
intensities,  
burnished queerly-  
shiny like greed  
glistening over dark surfaces feeling everything  
with the feet—

hard-backed scattering; scuttling cracking loudly:  
dangerously loud for Illusion's feet—  
sometimes things at the backs of cupboards  
rustle louder with the lights off

sometimes  
roaches can be caught  
by the intellect pulling a switch

#### THE LITTLE GRENADE

The little grenade  
wanted poems that explodexplored  
or pushed candles  
inside the pumpkin people  
to make flames sputter and drip  
where their darkness bulged.

The he that was a friend of the little grenade  
liked poems that sat fatly in the middle of stillness  
waving their feelers.

The poems the he wrote were lumpy mattresses  
stuffed with kapok. Or flock. (The little grenade  
wouldn't lie down and think in them—didn't lie down  
and feel one—ever.) They had the kind of stillness  
that goes to museums on sunflecked Saturdays  
to be glazed by the marbly stares behind glass.