

# *Wild Bees*

*Also by Martin Harrison:*

**Poetry**

*1975*

*Truce*

*The Distribution of Voice*

*The Kangaroo Farm*

*Summer*

*Music*

**Essays**

*Who Wants to Create Australia?*

MARTIN HARRISON

**Wild Bees**

*New and Selected Poems*

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### **Acknowledgements**

Many of these poems have appeared previously in my collections *The Distribution of Voice* (University of Queensland Press), *The Kangaroo Farm* (Paper Bark Press), *Summer* (Paper Bark Press) and from two limited-edition books, *Music: Prose and Poems* (Vagabond Press) and *Truce* (Hawk Press). I am very grateful to the publishers of these collections.

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## PREFACE

Not many of these Wild Bees will be known to British or American readers. With a few exceptions, it culls from books published in Australia after 1993, *The Distribution of Voice*, *The Kangaroo Farm* and *Summer*. Inevitably the selection reflects where I am heading now as much as where I have been. There are ten previously uncollected poems and the pieces from a 2005 chapbook *Music: Prose and Poems*. Perhaps, taken overall, this single book is the book I always meant to write over the last decade and a half. My poetry is described by reviewers and critics as to do with seeing and the senses, with momentariness, with the integration of things in a world of change and flux—and that account has often seemed appropriate. It is a delight too when readers take pleasure in the recognition of the poetry's local circumstances since I think that, in the main, we make local paths wherever we are. The same is true even with the most wide ranging of materials and styles. I am fortunate to have seen some of my poetry discovered by a number of ecologically conscious readers and critics who are concerned with how we live our lives environmentally, including at the most intricate and micro-perceptual levels of awareness. Lucky, also, to have so far escaped from being classified in a movement or a generation—new or old, innovative or formal. Finally, the limits of our experience and understanding of the world are the limits of time and of our senses, and not just of language. The provisional nature of our selves, our own temporary glimpse of the world's tragedy and loveliness, is at the heart of the matter.

M.H.

## An Elephant's Foot

No cool place on the verandah  
and, once again, the half-thought of fire:  
even the metal ticks under the heat's weight.  
In trees, up the back, cicadas are noisy  
as electricity in a transformer.

They burn through you, can't be avoided.  
They're too close on the ear, too amplified.  
Thousands of them hiss from the slope.  
They buzz non-stop like a jammed CD.  
Occasionally, one close-by sprays out

its clicks, mid-pitched, a barber's shaver  
(trimming sideburns) on the skull; while way over  
the predicted top, the heat's now powering up  
its empty hot-plate—its main purpose being  
erasure of depth, to be a destroyer

of whatever's peripheral and delicate,  
as totally as an elephant's foot. By  
mid-morning, the temperature's a blood storm,  
one signal (there are hundreds) of life-change  
in the way trunks, branches, even grass-stalks

have got glued with tiny, wrecked mandibles  
and paper car-bodies. Black Princes, Yellow  
Bakers, Greengrocers keep unzipping from them,  
flying off, giving 40° its voice;  
till they throb an ear-splitting, dry sea-swell

raking long messages through heat  
no-one can be out in—rasping more consonants  
and Bushman clicks than an ear absorbs,  
flittering out to an insect-horizon  
whose sounds blaze, build, then counterpoint

in a chorus of football fans who chant  
and sing across a stadium. It's said  
these sound-curtains can bring on heart-attacks.  
They take over, stimulate the pulse too much;  
they make environment. In fact, though, who was it

invented the phrase 'wall of sound'? Containment  
is practised first in the ear, in what you trust;  
then in unheard voices no-one resists.  
It's why, for a second, a stray temptation  
about how, in town, the supermarket's

corridors of packaged goods stay cooled  
nudges into mind like an absent wisp of cloud:  
fresh passages, cold hums, cool music float  
on a surface whose deep features can't be tracked  
consciously—a transparent fire-front lodged

in the cicada-air. No choice but to take  
it on, be philosophical, or make  
humour out of these shadowy desires  
even for air-con, for shade, for surf;  
after all, a phase where singularity's unmarked

in an immersion of machine-noised air  
is one where *is* and *was*, like ripples of  
water, die on arrival. Noise is always  
more complex than speech. Cicadas blast voll-  
eys. They're precise. They deny transcendence.

## Grass-Parrot

Two days later, I see again  
long hectares of white plains bristling  
the other side of the road's verge:  
blue marks flutter, opal showers flash,  
becoming grass-parrots which leap up  
from bleached waist-high grass, then back again  
in tiny rocking-horse movements  
of springing curves and perfect falls.  
Foraging, they twitter a hundred miles.  
Out there, heat-blurred across paddock glare,  
dark trees float along the horizon's line:  
bushes are wallabies, swivelling their ears.  
Through my hair, hot wind's flooded creek.

Cloudless sky moves, without seeming to,  
in an eye-blink over the Silver City Highway.

## 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.

## Spring Song

Its odd system knows something we don't.  
Lucky, then, that our air-dropped swallows did,  
moving house from the back, starting drab mud-cornices  
along the front verandah, taking a chance.

Out of nowhere, they'd come back to *la niña's* cold wedge.  
Over our heads, coastal weathers, icy inland dries,  
fought it out invisibly like a stock-market war,  
like a play of digits, a group-force running through.

Their shimmers were the bent light of holograms  
as they screeched, flickering, under the tin roof  
in a behaviour which looked random, landing on a ledge,  
then on the rail. Hovering. Uncertain. Shifting place.

They checked and changed with what was still unseen,  
building a pocket inside the land's transparency.  
Its record-breaking mood surrounded them with cool  
and programmed them, like sleep, to guess its drift.

In one week's blue loop, they modelled no-thought, void, *nada*.  
Again and again they skimmed through that same place where  
a driver (screaming at it) misses a car, or a nerve-end throbs,  
or where the flame-tree, by the gate, smoulders up with fire.

## 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 go to 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,  
and the air's cinematic forest jangles its symbols of light—

while, incessantly, new worlds tempt you with 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.  
In the film, it's the desert which gives the sense of distant clouds.

Myself, too, I usually work my best 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.

## 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 mahoganies;  
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 a backwards and forwards tennis-match;  
while under the swamp mahoganies, 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 the 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.

## A Dog Barking

Some things are beyond talking.  
Not the mind, not emotions,  
words will always come for them.  
Perhaps the mind lives in this barrier  
entirely of its own creating. You  
see it the way it is, it looks back the same.—  
The fence, the lake, they're just there.

Some things, though, can't be spoken.  
I don't mean sex or family strife  
which, fast enough, have silent words, their looks  
black as emptiness through the kitchen-door  
at night. Sex, anxiety, secrets—  
that's what stays hidden when the wife's  
still washing up from tea and her husband

stomps off to bed. It's money really,  
or too much work, brings them down.  
While the thing which is beyond talking  
is beyond their strangeness too.  
What's left unsaid is mostly what is known,  
a dog barking, embers when the sun sets,  
a tree's late apples stained a deeper red.

That, too, isn't much to say. The wording  
of anger, fearsomeness, family ghosts  
drowns the brain in its non-stop TV.  
Neurones buffer up like dodgem cars.  
Birds swoop down through invisible nets.  
But something suddenly must rescue you:  
the darkness of crickets trilling, shining.