

Classic Poetry Series

J.S. Harry
- poems -

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J.S. Harry(1939 -)

J. S. Harry (or Jan Harry; born 1939) is a contemporary Australian poet who has been described as "one of Australian poetry's keenest satirists, political and social commentators, and perhaps its most ethical agent and antagonist."

J. S. Harry was born in South Australia, but soon moved to Sydney where she has remained. She has worked as an editor for Radio National and has held a residency at Australian National University. A recurrent character in her work is Peter Henry Lepus, a rabbit who name-drops philosophers such as Bertrand Russel, Ludwig Wittgenstein and A. J. Ayer while popping up in the midst of topical events such as the Gulf War. His satirical "clear-eyed vision of the world, and the humans that inhabit it, is that of an Everyrabbit, with its endless simplicity, trepidation and curiosity."

Among other accolades J. S. Harry has won the Harri Jones Memorial Prize for Poetry, the Poetry Society's Book of the Year, the PEN International Lyne Phillips Poetry Prize and the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry. Her most recent work is *Not Finding Wittgenstein* (2007) a 'collected works' of Peter Henry Lepus.

A Preface?

Peter Henry Lepus is not fond of "Prefaces"; he says that though they are the
"face" you
see before the "face" of the other writing, he feels they should more properly be
called
placed-first tail notes, as they are done after the longer writing.
Peter Henry has one paw resting
on a fat volume of Derrida;
he can't lift it but someone kind
has copied one whole paragraph out
in BIG letters
& pinned it to a broad-trunked tree.
The trunk is covered by the writing
which is on white paper and easy to read.
What it signifies he had no idea
but he likes to run questioningly to & fro
& nibble on a sentence's
"possible meanings".
Some of it will sink in
in time he thinks . . .
He is older, now, than he was
when those poems were written.
It is later now than it was then, whenever then was.

Between one line & another there is white

space, between one live trunk & another,
there is an opening . . .

J.S. Harry

A Sack

When Peter wakes, it is night again.
Joshua has returned. There's a radio
& a full sack of barley
on the floor. Josh says he found both
in a house where there'd been fighting.
He has walked & walked.
He has not found his wives.
Peter hops towards the barley sack.
It is very dark where it is on the floor.
He finds the end that's open
& begins, quietly, to chew.
The radio is playing news:
Peter hears John Howard's
unexcited voice announce:
the FA eighteen Hornets
have returned to Darwin,
There will be parades
in the Australian cities...
for those returned
from the Iraq War.

It is May fifteen, two thousand & three,
Joshua says.
He continues more softly, the War has ended,
but these streets
are occupied by people warring
for the food & water to live on,
or for things to trade,
or sell, for profit.
Around five point three million people
lived in Baghdad, before the war. Now, who knows?
Is it possible
to find fifteen people – among so many –
where it is dangerous to move about on foot;
no public transport, or City Hall,
gangs of shooters, & looters,
& a lot of city to comb. Where might his wives
have gone? Where could they go?
He is determined

to keep trying to find them.
Peter in a corner is digesting barley
& pondering how he
might get to Baghdad University.
Joshua begins to build a fire, to boil some water
for drinking, & later, to cook...

J.S. Harry

Extract From "a Perspectived Report On An Australian Menace" (Soon To Be Published By The Asylum Of The Rabbit Press): The Hairy Rabbiter

On the first fleet
were several silverish
grey haired rabbiter.
On arrival they bred quickly.
Like a silver-greyish human blanket
the hairy rabbiter spread across Australia.
Rabbiter were distressed.
In the year of the Federation of the Rabbit,
the government gave unprecedented amounts
of electricity, money & fencing materials
to help rabbits build fences
to keep the hairy rabbiter out. But the rabbiter had
sharp teeth
& having bitten through the fences, then used to bite the sheep,
at first eating them raw but later setting bushfires, to barbecue
the sheep in large numbers, which irritated
the colonial-imperialist
aims of the foxes. Parts of Australia
could never be the same as England
once the rabbiter had arrived.
They were such a pest to the multiplication of sheep
that the Government of New South Wales
gave a bounty of five cents a head
for the scalp of each rabbiter collected.
Children killed rabbiter on their
way to school. Carts pulled by
compliant horses
hauled away
the carcasses of the dead rabbiter.
In 1888 there were millions of wild rabbiter in Australia.
Before refrigeration,
the redblooded ones were canned & sent to England as food.
Sometimes cans of these dead rabbiter
exploded in the Red Sea making it
even more red than ketchup
on corpses in Dolby Digital movies.

Thousands of snakes were bred & released in
rabbiter-infested areas such as deserts & swamps.
But snakes
were not good at catching the rabbiters.
They preferred to hunt & strike
small mammals & birds
which were easier to paralyse & swallow.
The snakes soon grew into huge feral monsters
which terrorized the sheep by
striking them from underneath.
Rabbits have used all kinds of gases and smells
to try to drive the rabbiters off the continent.
But the rabbiter has never been a lemming.
Rabbits resorted to mixing imported oleander bark
in the rabbiters' beer and billy tea.
But it was a slow way to kill them & innocent
insects, European wasps
& birds drank the lethal billy tea & beer. Today rabbits use
four-wheel drive vehicles
& hunt the rabbiters with sharp-toothed ankle-traps –
& guns. Trucks with freezers carry the
skinned & dissected rabbiters to market. They
make a tasty delicacy on table d'hôte for tourists.
A factory makes thousands of hats from rabbiters' epiderms.
About fifteen rabbiters' skins are needed
to make one Akubra hat.
In recent months a form of AIDS which only affects rabbiters
has been introduced. Rabbits reject this as too brutal.

J.S. Harry

Far From The Shatt-Al-Arab

Peter wonders if pigs could fly
& thinks, yes, they could, pink & squealing,
if someone put them in a helicopter.
He doesn't know it's NOT
"all right" to fly around
with PIGS
in a Muslim country.
He's heard planes overhead all day –
he's somewhere on the outskirts
of Baghdad – there is, it seems,
some kind of "war" going on.
What is "war"? He hears the Flowerbed Rabbit's
anxious voice in his ears, though she is far away –
something she'd wanted to understand, when they
were sampling fresh ears of seeding autumn grass,
after the two thousand & two
Australian drought'd turned
parts of western New South Wales
into desert; other parts of Australia, too,
he'd mused, then; they'd been out west,
wild pigs around . . .

the seeding grass
'd come after the rains . . .
Where is rain, now,
in this Iraqi desert?
He couldn't answer the Flowerbed Rabbit.
He'd arrived in Fiji after the coup . . .
& anyway, that wasn't a "war".

He is drifting into sleep, without shelter
on the flat
dry gritty sand that's plainly not
greybrown like rabbit's fur – he's aware
of nowhere to hide . . . Dreaming of Arctic
animals whose fur
's, mistakenly, stayed dark
when the first, Arctic snows came down,
he sees, on the sand,

the small troubled figure
of the philosopher Alfred Jules Ayer
crouched under a rock. There is a
scratched drawing of a tree
with the letters "Bo"
scrawled under it.
The philosopher's paws are clasped
round the pages of a book
with LANGUAGE, TRUTH, AND LOGIC
emblazoned on its spine.
It seems he is struggling with RE-
VISIONS to this work
which he first finished
 i n n i n e t e e n
 t h i r t y
f i v e.

Putting out a shaking paw, Ayer says, in less
or select file tthan confident "voice", I am gaining a sense?datum
of fur, long ears, & round, brown eyes,
the sense?experience of what
in language, I'd likely call a rabbit.
Ayer cogitates. (Has
his remark, his "locutionary act",
given the impression
he is "impulsive", "hasty", "rash"?)

Peter thinks about the Flowerbed Rabbit's head.
He can imagine her plunging headlong
down a burrow. When she's scared, it's what
he's sometimes seen her do.

Ayer worries. He thinks he's been accused,
by another philosopher, of making
"too headlong
expositions" . . . (Were John Langshaw Austin's
counter arguments
right?)
He has, he says, been teasing out
his most famous book's
arguments,
& themes – perception . . . knowledge of "the past" . . .

knowledge of "other minds" . . . for most of his life.

Peter's ears turn
to catch every bit of what Ayer is saying.
He asks, What
is your most famous argument about?

Ayer has been eating dates.
Spat-out stones, bone pale & sticky, strips of the darker
date-flesh clinging to them, rest on the sand.
He has placed Language, Truth and Logic at his feet.
He does not speak. He is remembering finishing
A Concept of a Person and Other Essays,
which Macmillan, London, published
in nineteen sixty-three.

Peter is remembering the Tigris & Euphrates, how he
threaded his way through some marshes
to get to where he is now.
He has been reading The Middle East Review, & realises he is
now south-west of Baghdad – a long way north of
Shatt-al-Arab, where the two rivers have one mouth.

He remembers seeing
estuarine wildlife die, after the oil spills
during the Gulf War. He was in Kuwait, then.
He also remembers the fires. He did not see the war.

The sky is black from smoke plumes somewhere beyond them.
Parts of Baghdad seem to be burning.
Ayer is muttering about his criteria of verifiability;
Austin seems to think he got it wrong.
Peter says, Parts of Baghdad are on fire.

The Kurds need a state of their own, Ayer says.
Peter looks at the newspaper in Ayer's shaky grip.
It is one of Rupert Murdoch's. It affirms:
STATELESS KURDS
NEED HOME.

Peter thinks of the pictures of mountains he has seen on the
map, to the north, pale brown, a lightish tan . . . once part

of the Ottoman Empire . . .
Perhaps that coloured place with the
"three thousand metres" marks is where the Kurdish people
want their home-land . . .
He's heard
they've wanted one, for over eighty years.

A little round to the side of the rock,
Professor J. L. Austin is not thinking about the Kurds.

Austin thinks about all the ink he has spent, examining Ayer's exposition of
the Argument from Illusion.

Was it a WASTE?
Austin is a Professor of Moral Philosophy.
He believes in fine discriminations in the use of words.

He has been thinking all night, re?creating
the argument of a paper
he wrote in nineteen fifty-eight –
Austin is very precise.
His nineteen fifty-eight paper
is about "action".
He does not show it to Peter. What he is holding in his hands
has printed on it: THREE WAYS OF SPILLING INK.

Peter thinks there might be four ways – if you
splashed it north, south, west, & east. He thinks of
the map of Iraq.

The Kurds want an independent state to the north, Ayer says.

Peter hasn't met any Kurds yet.
His tummy is rumbling.
Perhaps there will be grass, dry or dying,
away from Ayer.
He hops closer to the base of the rock, exploring, moving
around it. It is very large, & seems to have some carving –
strange faces, lumpy raised & sunken bits that look like words,
It reminds him of the language/s he couldn't read on the Iranian
stones.
Professor J. L. Austin is peering at the carvings.

Peter has seen him before – in a photo
on a desk at Oxford. He remembers reading:
Professor J. L. Austin . . . worked in Military
Intelligence
during the Second World War.
Austin is looking at the vertical lines on the rock,
imagining
how something
might flow down them, & how one would, or might,
describe it.

J.S. Harry

On The Outskirts Of 'War?'

Plink! plink! Polluted water drips from a rusty pipe,
onto something in a dark corner.

Peter wakes to this sound.

He remembers entering the city
seeing a construction, a building
Picasso-cream, & tall,
with a rounded top
like an onion.

It is plainly not a mosque.

He has seen human sacred sites before.

Part of this building's side has been torn away.

It is like a big burrow open to the moonlight.

He remembers going inside . . .

It is where he is now. There is nothing to eat.

No sacks of potatoes or vegetables.

The earth smells mouldy; there is a glint of light
near where the water pools & spills,
but nothing grows.

To his right,

above a date palm with half its top blown off
he sees two tiny points of light.

Against the wall that's closest to the moon
there's the outline of a man.

A voice questions softly:

Joshua, why don't you try & find them?

Why are you still here?

The voice seems to be talking to itself.

Peter Henry Lepus can see no other human there.

He listens. It seems the man has built
the house for his fifteen wives, that he is one
of the over-five-million
believers in

the Church of Jesus Christ

of the Latter-day Saints,

who are scattered throughout the world.

His wives scattered out through Baghdad,
leaving him behind

when the bombs began to fall.

They are all called "Smith", like him
& they came, with him, to this place.
Each one
had a separate
apartment, within the rounded building, so he did not know,
till he went to find
one, & then another . . . & another . . .
that, finally, he was all alone.

His voice goes back, he is reminiscing
as Peter has heard
Ayer do.

He had left Ayer in the desert, with a group
of hiking phenomenalist philosophers,
each trying to receive a "sense datum"
of a big pool of water that, Ayer said,
wasn't really there. This had puzzled Peter.

He had thought,
when you hopped towards water,
you could drink it.
After rain, it was what he'd seen
the outback wallabies do.

Ayer'd said:
gaining a sense impression of seeing water
was an "optical illusion"
that people in deserts sometimes had.
It happened on hot days
when the sun was shimmering on the sand.
He has described groups of people, in desert,
who think they are seeing water,
& there is no water there;
they are correct
in perceiving something,
but deluded
in what they think it is . . .
Peter'd hoped they were carrying
big pouches of water with them.
He has not seen Ayer since . . .

The soft voice in the dark space
is still talking to itself: Joshua, are you
being punished
for having fifteen wives?
Or, for building this big house
with the top windows shaped like onions?

He'd not wanted a house for them
that looked like the others around it –
houses, mostly, of Arabs,
who went to mosques to pray.

Had he built a needle-spire on top
it might have looked
like a Mormon Church.
They'd not wanted
to draw . . .
such false attention . . . to themselves . . .
in Baghdad, while they stayed . . .

yet needed a cool house, for a hot place.

The pale, whitish-green-tinted window-glass
was anti-glare, locally made . . .

He'd planned
the high dome roof,
to span an unused sunless room,
& give them cool
beneath it – the windows,
to catch the breeze.

The onion . . . a simple food object . . .
How could it
've cost so much –
few labour-intensive lead strips (unlike stained glass)
the design
mostly done in weather-proof paint?

Coming in, Peter'd noted
the small "onions" inside the bigger one,
& puzzled about them.

In the past, he's not
been overly fond
of onions. He is trying
to overcome
his dislike . . .
From the outside,
he'd seen fine lines in a deeper green
curving up each small "onion", to the top
where there was a slim
darker green stalk.
It's the memory of the smell that makes him tremble.
These "onions" have no smell.

He's been reading his book
on the "Philosophy of the East",
& wonders if Joshua knows
in some accounts of Daoism (& Buddhism)
the onion's used as a m e t a p h o r
for the i n s u b s t a n t i a l i t y
of human bodies . . .

Joshua has begun rummaging,
making paper rustling sounds, looking for his passport
& those of his fifteen wives. They did not
take their passports with them, he discovers,
pulling one passport after another
out of a slim black case.

He has travelled with his wives "disguised"
as "sisters", out of Utah.
At first, the sixteen Smiths 'd been looking for the place
where "the Bible's Abraham" had lived.
Peter remembers the "cradle of civilisation",
ancient Mesopotamia,
's been linked to the "Garden of Eden" myth,
& that the name, "Abraham",
was connected to this site. Peter, who has been studying widely,
is in Baghdad to collect data
for a rabbit History of Philosophers, though he has not,
yet, received authorization from Cambridge University,
for his proposed "research",
nor reached Baghdad University, to do it . . .
due to "war" . . .

Was Abraham a philosopher? he asks Joshua, eagerly. Joshua
does not seem to hear.
He had two wives, he murmurs,
so, there is a precedent
for plural marriage . . .

It seems the sixteen Smiths
've also been searching for
"The Divine Authorization"
inscribed on two golden plates.

There were other authorizations, Joshua mutters
given to Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, & Solomon.
Perhaps he is secretly hoping
to find some reference
to the Joshua Smiths? . . .

Peter thinks Joshua's U.S. leave-taking
was, perhaps . . . a trifle late.
He's read, on the official website
of the Church of Jesus Christ
of the Latter-day Saints,

t h a t i t i s o n e h u n d r e d
& t h i r t e e n y e a r s
since President Wilford Woodruff
advised that the practice of plural marriage
should cease . . .
furthermore, that, in nineteen ninety-eight,
Joshua would likely have been
excommunicated from the Mormon Church,
& in violation of the "civil law"
of the United States, a virtual outlaw, had he stayed.

Peter has looked up "mirage"
since he left Ayer. He wonders if the plates
might be some kind of "mind's illusion",
shimmering gold in humans' heads,
comparable, perhaps to . . .
creating "illusory water" for them,
as the sun seems to,
shining shiftily
in desert,

on sand?

Outside, in the moonlight, he can see the bats,
swooping out of what's left of the date palm's crown.
Though,
from where he squats,
on the uneven floor,
he cannot see
the small high "onion" windows, he suspects
the bats are flitting in & out up there.
They do not look at all
like the Sydney fruit bats he has watched.
He has read, in *Bats of the World*,
. . . some bats eat fish, birds, other bats . . .
or frogs. Perhaps these Baghdad bats
are catching moths? They do not tell. They make no sound.
All Peter can hear is the quiet voice of Joshua Smith
telling himself, in bits,
the "story" of how he came to be
where he is now.

Joshua has always believed the plates are real,
that they contain
the prophecy of a "primitive American",
named "Mormon", who buried them
at Palmyra, in New York state, in A.D.
eight hundred & twenty-seven –
a thousand years before
Joseph Smith
dug them out;
Joseph Smith
was led to them
"by revelation". It's rumoured
the plates, which've been . . . in hiding . . .
for one hundred & seventy-odd years
have, comparatively recently,
been re-discovered
under the bomb-crumbles
of Baghdad.

Joseph Smith, it seems,
was the only human

who had
"insider" knowledge
of the one-thousand-year-dead
language, & so,
was uniquely able
to "translate",
"Mormon's words",
from the plates into plain,
nineteenth century
"American English".

Is a language
known only to one person
a language at all?;

Peter remembers

Wittgenstein, pacing restlessly
in his study at Cambridge, asking
for clarifying objections,
counter-arguments, from his students.
He feels sure
Wittgenstein would say
that it was not.

Joshua has one date,
left, to eat.
He eats it.
He believes in "the simple life".
Abruptly he heads off, barefoot, into the
now day-lit Baghdad streets, to look for any
of his fifteen wives.

Peter wanders off, stopping, to sniff
at empty doorways – the "burrow" leads back
to Joshua's many-roomed, main house. All
the kitchen cupboards are open,
with nothing inside. He hopes
Joshua will return,
perhaps with some spare
ears of wild green barley – or carrots . . .
He is dreaming
of eating autumn grass
with the Flowerbed Rabbit

when he falls asleep.

J.S. Harry

They

They use a pronoun called I
all the time. It seems to hop around
with them.

But you can't see it properly
not all of it. Not like you can see
ears or whiskers,
or paw or a sun shadow.

This is what Peter tells the flowerbed rabbit
who lives deep in dark leaves
that grow straight to a sky of apple-red flowers.
She can't read.

He shows her the straight line
her paw scraped
on the rained-on damp
green-growing ground: that's "I"; he puts
two short, stiff twigs – one each – same length –
at the line's
head & foot: that's their
Capital I. But it doesn't MOOOVE,
she objects: those twigs, that scrape
will NEVER hop.
Peter's ears twitch – but he has to agree. Goes on.
Struggles – how to explain: "I's written representation"?

It's a picture,
he says at last, it's a stand-for
what lives in each of them, it's common
to all of THEM – as the earth beneath our paws
is common to all of us (including them)
who run, hop, walk,
fall, lie, or die on it.
She doesn't know what die is. It's a word,
he says, like I is: nobody knows what it's like
inside it.

I die, you singular die, he dies, she dies, it dies,
You plural die, we die, they die –

He's given her a lecture

when all he wanted to do
was follow the white
bobs of her tail
disappearing
into the scarlet flowers.

J.S. Harry