

## COLLECTED POEMS LESBIA HARFORD

Lesbia Harford (1891–1927) was born Lesbia Venner Keogh at Brighton, Melbourne on 9 April 1891. The daughter of Edmund Keogh and his wife Helen, she suffered from a congenital heart defect that affected her health throughout her short life. In 1900 the Keoghs fell on hard times and in an effort to retrieve the family fortunes Edmund went to Western Australia, where he eventually took up farming. Lesbia was educated at convent schools in Melbourne and Ballarat, but gave up her Catholic faith at a young age. In 1912 she enrolled in law at the University of Melbourne and graduated in 1916 in the same class as (Sir) Robert Menzies. While a student, she became heavily involved in radical politics, forming important, long-lasting relationships with other young socialist activists and intellectuals, including Guido Barrachi and Katie Lush. After graduating, Harford went to work in a clothing factory, where she became involved in unionism and joined the Industrial Workers of the World organisation. She moved briefly to Sydney, where in 1920 she married Patrick John O’Flahartie Fingal Harford, an artist and fellow I.W.W. member, before the couple returned to Melbourne. From 1921 to 1924, she worked on a novel, but did not publish it. She attempted to complete her law qualifications and in 1926 became an articled clerk to a Melbourne barrister but, suffering from tuberculosis in addition to her heart condition, her health deteriorated and she died on 5 July 1927, aged thirty-six. Little of Harford’s poetry was published during her lifetime; she preserved her work in handwritten exercise books. Her poetry is mainly known through the posthumous collections edited by Nettie Palmer (1941) and by Marjorie Pizer and Drusilla Modjeska (1985). Her novel *The Invaluable Mystery* was eventually published in 1987.

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# Collected Poems

## Lesbia Harford

Edited and introduced by

Oliver Dennis



— such a price  
The Gods exact for song;  
To become what we sing.

MATTHEW ARNOLD

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## FOREWORD

### **Our Poem of World War I**

A third of the way through her short writing life, Lesbia Harford, then still named Keogh, wrote an autobiographical poem titled 'Fatherless':

I've had no man  
To guard and shelter me,  
Guide and instruct me  
From mine infancy.

No lord of earth  
To show me day by day  
What things a girl should do  
And what she should say.

I have gone free  
Of manly excellence  
And hold their wisdom  
More than half pretence.

For since no male  
Has ruled me or has fed,  
I think my own thoughts  
In my woman's head.

It is possible that the poet's father, Edmund Keogh, played less of a part than his socially more advanced wife, Helen, in choosing their daughter's prophetic Christian name. It is also possible that, in the constrained atmosphere of 1900, a conventional man might have come to feel uncomfortable in a strong female household. His flight from financial woes to settle in Western Australia without his family has a look of escape about it, though one shouldn't speculate too far. Readers who discover Harford's poetry and delight in its ease with love affairs with either sex – so untypical of verse from the early twentieth century – quickly come to see that name Lesbia as a one-word explanation of her muse, but not of how she got away with her honesty. The answer

to that lies in lack of publication during her lifetime. Bisexuality, like lesbianism, was never illegal but, like other kinds of gay writing, it had to wait for posterity to furnish unconstrained readers, even in the grimly revolutionary circles Harford frequented.

I consider Ms Harford – I can't bring myself to call her plain 'Harford', as if she were a criminal – as one of the two finest female poets so far seen in Australia; the other has to be Judith Wright. The Melbourne writer has the greater range, with her sprightly pen portraits of fellow workers, her pictorial genius with subjects such as pruning flowering eucalypts, her piercing sorrow at the death of Australian soldiers at the War, her arguably superior ability to reason in verse, as in 'I'm like all lovers, wanting love to be' and several other poems on the traps and imprisonings of love. Her religious poetry, plentiful in one who had forsworn her faith, typically invokes the saints, while Judith Wright has mystical poems of most unearthly intensity. Lesbia Harford is typical of most poets of her time in rarely touching on set radical topics, such as the Aborigines; her idealism tends to be broad-gauged and conventional. She is perhaps to be smiled at for her loathing of fat people, whether or not named Fairfax. Judith Wright is kinder to physical stereotypes, and hardly uses them at all; she is also more awake to the mythic dimension, especially of bush folk. I do consider Lesbia Harford's 'Ours was a friendship in secret, my dear' the finest Australian poem of World War I. I can never read it aloud without choking up.

Finally, I would point to her lyrical gift, so plentifully illustrated in Mr Dennis's splendid compendium. It is said that Ms Harford at times sang her poems aloud, memorably on the Manly ferry when she moved to Sydney; if so, this was one of the few public airings her lyrics got. In the great wealth of short texts she composed, she is occasionally twee, but a great 'unstraining' effort to think freshly bears frequent treasure, as in 'The Invisible People' ('shut in the silent buildings at eleven / they toil to make life meaningless for you') or the rare mentions of her lover's child faraway in Hungary, or of her sometimes violent husband who 'wasn't Pat last night at all'.

LES MURRAY

## INTRODUCTION

Critical recognition can be a long time coming. Lesbia Harford (1891–1927) has occupied only a small place in Australian literary history – for decades, she was utterly forgotten – yet when she died, at thirty-six, she left behind three notebooks containing some of the finest lyric poems ever written in Australia:

Ours was a friendship in secret, my dear,  
    Stolen from fate.  
I must be secret still, show myself calm  
    Early and late.

“Isn’t it sad he was killed!” I must hear  
    With a smooth face.  
“Yes, it is sad.” — Oh, my darling, my own,  
    My heart of grace.

The flavour, though distinctly local, is hard to pin down. Quiet yet firm, direct yet ambivalent, Harford’s writing is striking in its refusal to please, to be anything other than itself. It looks both forwards and backwards, blending Pre-Raphaelite influences and plain-speaking with unusual subtlety. At the same time, Harford was bound inextricably to the period in which she lived: war in Europe, changing attitudes to religion, the suffrage movement, and widespread social upheaval all helped make her one of the first truly modern, urban figures in Australian poetry. Whereas many poets of the time – Mary Gilmore or Banjo Paterson, for example – wrote with an eye to establishing an Australian literature, Harford clearly never gave a moment’s thought to abstract notions of culture or nationhood – hence, perhaps, the years of neglect. She instead found her place out of view, where she was free to articulate a distinctive brand of pure, incidental song.<sup>1</sup> Her sole aim was to be true to her own experience, and as a result her poetry resists classification: neither simply ‘literary’ nor ‘popular’ in conception, it operates somewhere between the two.

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1 Harford is said to have sung her poems aloud, memorably on the Manly ferry.



The seeming slightness of her writing has not helped its cause. Harford had a keen aesthetic sense, but no real belief in the importance of art, as such – life and feeling mattered more to her. She enjoyed brass bands, and was content to remain on the fringes of Melbourne’s literary circles, through her friendships with Frank Wilmot and Nettie Palmer. What is more, Harford did not try to build a reputation: she kept her poems to herself as a rule, and was better known for her social and political activism. She published very little in her lifetime, apparently never quite regarding herself as a poet – only as someone who wrote poetry. As she explained, late in life, to the anthologist Percival Serle, refusing permission for one of her poems: ‘Your anthology will be read in many places for many years. I would not care to be recalled to the memory of distant friends by the poem you have chosen ... You see, I take my poetry seriously and I am in no hurry to be read’. In 1941, a small selection appeared, assembled by Nettie Palmer, but another forty-four years elapsed before the publication of a more substantial volume, *The Poems of Lesbia Harford* (1985), edited by Drusilla Modjeska and Marjorie Pizer. (I am indebted to Modjeska and Pizer, who first researched Harford’s life and poetry, for the biographical details that follow.)

The available material is enlightening, as far as it goes. Harford, the eldest of four children, was born Lesbia Venner Keogh, in Melbourne, into a fairly well-to-do Catholic family (there were distant aristocratic connections on her mother’s side). Her father, a financier, was declared bankrupt and disinherited when she was nine or ten. He began to drink, and after he left the family to work as a labourer on Western Australia’s rabbit-proof fence, they rarely saw him. By all accounts a strong and resourceful woman, Harford’s mother ran a boarding house, and took on a variety of jobs to keep her daughter at convent schools until she matriculated. Harford went on to study law at the University of Melbourne, becoming one of its first female graduates.

Her early poems explore themes of independence and free love, openly referring to her bisexuality; her two most significant relationships during this period were with Katie Lush, her philosophy tutor, and Guido Barrachi, a fellow law student and Marxist. In most of the surviving photographs, Harford, small and dark-haired, has a determined, knowing expression. She suffered from a debilitating heart condition that made her lips appear blue, but she was strong-willed and

had a powerful social conscience, choosing law as a matter of principle. As a child, Harford had shown an interest in the work of her mother's ancestor, the social philosopher Benjamin Kidd, and grew up keenly aware of the arbitrary nature of class distinctions. Despite her physical frailty, she set out after graduation to experience ordinary working conditions, and worked for a number of years in clothing factories and as a domestic servant: even in a climate of bluestockingism, the extent of her practical commitment to social justice was unusual. She joined the socialist organisation the Industrial Workers of the World (or 'Wobblies'), and ran anti-conscription meetings, risking prison with hard labour. When the I.W.W. folded around 1920, she chose not to follow other members into the Communist Party.

In 1918, after her affair with Barrachi had ended, Harford moved to Sydney to live with the wife of a jailed activist, and undertook teaching and clerical work, possibly all her health would allow. She was then briefly married to Pat Harford, a working-class war veteran and amateur painter, with whom she moved back to Melbourne. He could be violent when drunk, but it appears they were intermittently happy. Around this time, Harford wrote her only novel, *The Invaluable Mystery*, about the treatment of Germans and radicals in Australia during the war (the manuscript disappeared for more than sixty years, and was first published in 1987). By 1925, Harford was again living with her mother, the marriage over. She was articled to a firm of solicitors the following year, but found the work a strain, and her health deteriorated. She died from the combined effects of pulmonary tuberculosis and a bacterial infection of the heart on 5 July 1927, at St Vincent's Hospital. It was a painful death, according to her brother.

Harford's earliest surviving poem dates from 1908. The startling, unguarded simplicity of her voice is evident from the outset, and in a few years finds its full range:

Tall trees along the road,  
I never saw you  
Last year in summertime.  
He came before you  
With his blue eyes.

Warm wind along the road,  
I never knew you  
Last year in summertime.  
We could outdo you  
                    With our hot sighs.

This year, oh wind and trees,  
We're friends together.  
Else should I be alone  
In this sweet weather  
                    Beneath fair skies.  
                                    (1914)

Those must be the masts of ships the gazer sees  
On through the little gap in the park trees  
So far away that seeing almost fails.  
Those must be masts, — the lovely masts of ships  
Stripped bare of sails.

There's nothing here to please the seeing eyes, —  
Four poles with crossway beams against the skies.  
But beauty's not for sight. True beauty sings  
Of latent movement to the unsensed soul  
In love with wings.  
                                    (1917)

The lyrical mode Harford chose to adopt is especially remarkable in the context of a nation still striving to fashion itself. Her verse is littered with folk elements and lyric conventions (repetition, symmetry and antiphony). Yet colouring the whole is streetwise level-headedness that makes the Victorianisms seem incidental. At different times, Harford's poems recall those of Shakespeare, Keats, Emily Dickinson and Edna St Vincent Millay, among others; never grandiose or overblown, they are by turns passionate, prosaic, and faintly 'antique'. The poet's evasiveness, her feeling for life's mutability, directs much of the phrasing, resulting in non-linear, lacunae-filled poems that seem to hang in the air.

Twinned with Harford's love of truth and freedom was an attachment to wildness and undeformed beauty: her poetry often situates some personal drama against a backdrop of elemental forces – sea, wind, sky and rain. The form of her poems sometimes reflects that romantic inclination: just as she tried in life to avoid being pigeonholed or fixed in place, Harford seems not to have wanted her work to feel too finished. The early verse in particular can be made up of disparate strands that refuse to coalesce. Not simply lack of judgement, the effect was apparently deliberate. Note the intimate, yet resolute, quality of Harford's voice when it switches, abruptly, to her own point of view:

Today they made a bonfire  
Close to the cherry tree  
And smoke like incense drifted  
Through the white tracery.

I think the gardener really  
Played a tremendous game,  
Offering beauty homage  
In soft blue smoke and flame.

An unnameable quality in her writing resembles that found in the poetry of John Shaw Neilson, in many ways her nearest poetic relative. To an extent no longer possible in England or America, the work of both poets remained largely untouched by sophisticated external influences, and operated within a tradition of song-making, though, intriguingly, Harford's poems have something of the disjointed or 'between' quality that T. S. Eliot diagnosed, at around the same time, as a symptom of modernity. Harford also shared Shaw Neilson's gift for examining small, forgotten subjects in a way that lends her poetry an unusually well-developed sense of continuity – her choice of subject matter was, to some degree, simply a peg for purity of utterance. Over seventeen years or so, she drew material from whatever happened to be going on in her life at the time. Certain themes recur, prominent among them being the various conditions of love:

I lie in the dark  
Grass beneath and you above me,

Curved like the sky,  
Insistent that you love me.

But the high stars  
Admonish to refuse you  
And I'm for the stars  
Though in the stars I lose you.

(‘Girl’s Love’)

Her poetry frequently plays on conflicting desires of wanting to be wanted and wanting to be strong and apart. Harford often portrays love as an agony she longs to escape – Shaw Neilson’s references to ‘riotous spring’ and ‘the unfreedom of spring’ describe something similar. The phrase ‘riotous spring’ also turns up in one of her own poems, suggesting a possible familiarity with the older poet’s work. One of the many similarities between the two poets is their traditional use of floral imagery to symbolise emotional states: Harford tends to refer to the lilac when evoking experience (‘The lilac is companioned by the gale ... Mine are the storms of spring, but not the sweets’) and the lily when evoking purity, although to some extent this oversimplifies the many-sided aspects of her symbolism. There are spiritual affinities as well: both poets abandoned formal religion in favour of a freer poetic mysticism. Harford makes use of religious imagery, but in a characteristically agnostic way. Like Shaw Neilson, she developed a spiritual appreciation of colour:

Green and blue  
First-named of colours believe these two.  
They first of colours by men were seen  
This grass colour, tree colour,  
Sky colour, sea colour,  
Magic-named, mystic-souled, blue and green.

Harford, however, was a grittier and more direct poet than Shaw Neilson, who could never have contented himself with lines like ‘I went down to post a letter’ or ‘I like my kitchen with its pots and pans’. The unusual habit of making affectless statements somehow resonant and allusive is typical of the poetry in general, as is the hint of a defiant

adolescent narcissism. Exploring everyday subjects in factual detail, Harford remained true to her egalitarian principles, while managing to produce poetry that speaks to the reader at another level. Thus she evokes the keenly particular atmosphere of a vanished Melbourne, shown here with a characteristic instance of her knack for dialogue and exemplary use of the Sapphic docked line:

“I used to have dozens of handkerchiefs  
Of finest lawn.  
I used to have silk shirts and fine new suits.”  
He’s like a faun

This darling out-at-elbows Irish boy.  
“Those were the days  
Before the war  
When money could be earned a thousand ways.

But now, — last week I had a muslin bag  
For handkerchief!  
No socks, no shirts”, — but wiles and smiles and gleams  
Beyond belief.

Naturally, Harford also documented her experience in the factories, and wrote satires on oppression and inequality (“Every day Miss Mary goes her rounds, / Through the splendid house and through the grounds ...”). Her work, like Beatrix Potter’s, intimates a longing to escape constraints. In many poems, she seems to see herself as a kind of secular visionary, who has transformed the pain and loneliness of her father’s abandonment into a radical intellectual independence: ‘I am no mystic,’ she explains in one of her last poems, ‘My every act has reference to *man*’ (emphasis added). In ‘Fatherless’, she writes:

I have gone free  
of manly excellence  
And hold their wisdom  
More than half pretence.

For since no male  
Has ruled me or has fed,  
I think my own thoughts  
In my woman's head.

While Harford was critical of polemic in poetry – and tried to keep it out of her work – she can sound strident occasionally. A note of assertiveness in her voice became more persistent over time, as she grew in confidence as a poet. There is also a loss of freshness in some of the later poems, coinciding with marriage and the period when she was working on her novel. Around 1922, her poetry begins to make greater use of religious and mystical material. Harford always knew she would probably die young, and it is hard not to conclude from this shift in her work that the reality had begun to seem inescapable.

The question of what she would have written, had she lived, remains tantalising. In a letter, Harford looked forward to revising her poems in old age (she might also have gone on to devote more time to fiction). Possibly, her best work was already behind her when she died. Hers is somehow a poetry of youthful joys and certainties, sorrows and enthusiasms – Harford didn't live long enough to begin to question them. She can be an easy poet to dismiss – the best poems are sometimes hard to find – but read with the uncritical patience of a child, her qualities slowly come into view. Of course, her distinctiveness as a writer had its origins in her contradictions; Harford's was the natural idiom of someone who wanted to sing to the depths of her experience – and of its surfaces – but couldn't find the words: 'So much in life remains unsung', as a late poem has it, 'I'd like a song of kitchenmaids / With steady fingers and swift feet'. As happens sooner or later with all true poets, her poetry's faults have come to seem less important than its qualities, which are at last very much to the fore. In some of her loveliest lines, Lesbia Harford described something similar:

This year I have seen autumn with new eyes,  
Glimpsed hitherto undreamt of mysteries  
In the slow ripening of the town-bred trees ...

OLIVER DENNIS

## A NOTE ON THE SELECTION AND PUNCTUATION

In preparing this edition, I have set out to collect all of Lesbia Harford's poetry of value. Of the nearly four hundred poems in manuscript, just over half that number are reproduced here; of these, a third or so – excluding a small selection made for *PN Review* – have not, to my knowledge, appeared in print previously.

The arrangement of the poems is chronological, spanning Harford's all too brief adulthood (the first poem in the book dates from August 1910, the last from January 1927, five months before her death). Harford's output and poetic development over this period follow a natural arc – like most poets, she tended to write well when she was writing a lot. Her most productive years were 1915 and 1917, the former notable for a number of poems in which she mourns the loss of a soldier to whom she had been close. Significantly, in the same year, Harford produced some of her purest and most representative poetry. After 1917, her productivity steadily decreased until her death.

A word on punctuation. Throughout her notebooks (held in the Mitchell Library in Sydney), Harford uses a comma and dash together to indicate parenthesis, a pause or an abrupt change of thought (she seems to have picked up the device from Keats, and, interestingly, Millay used it as well). Where previous editors dispensed with the comma, I have preserved Harford's usage on the basis that it meant something particular to her. Indeed, her use of punctuation was on the whole deliberate and sophisticated – she knew what she was doing. The reader has to remember, too, that, although Harford may have had an eye on posthumous recognition for her poetry, she was not immediately concerned with how it would look in print; inevitably, a handwritten dash and a printed one do not quite mean the same thing.

In other respects, I have adhered to Harford's manuscripts wherever possible, making only occasional alterations for clarity and sense. Inconsistencies, when they appear, are the poet's own.



## **‘I dreamt last night’**

I dreamt last night  
That spring had come.  
Across green fields I saw a blur  
Of crimson-blossomed plum.

I’ve never known  
So fair a thing.  
And yet I wish it were a dream  
Of some forgotten spring.

Today the sun  
Our workroom blest  
And there was hard young wattle pinned  
On our forewoman’s breast.

## **Little Ships**

The little ships are dearer than the great ships  
For they sail in strange places,  
They lean nearer the green waters.  
One may count by wavelets how the year slips  
From their decks; and hear the Sea-King’s daughters  
Laughing at their play whene’er the boat dips.



## Hero Worship

How glad the windows are,  
When the dear sun shineth.  
They strive to reflect the sun,  
To be bright like the sun,  
To give heat like the sun.  
My heart too has its chosen one,  
And so to shine designeth.

## Geisha

All the pretty poplar trees have robed themselves in silver,  
Like the clouds and like the waves they've clothed themselves  
    with light.  
Now they're singing songs to me. Maybe across the river  
Sister trees sing just such songs for Katie's ears tonight.

## 'This year I have seen autumn with new eyes'

This year I have seen autumn with new eyes,  
Glimpsed hitherto undreamt of mysteries  
In the slow ripening of the town-bred trees; —  
Horse-chestnut lifting wide hands to the skies;  
And silver beech turned gold now winter's near;  
And elm, whose leaves like little suns appear  
Scattering light, — all, all have made me wise  
And writ me lectures in earth's loveliness,  
Whether they laugh through the grey morning mist,  
Or by the loving sun at noon are kissed  
Or seek at night the high-swung lamp's caress.  
Does autumn such a novel splendour wear  
Simply because my love has yellow hair?

## A Grown Up Sister

I'm lying here in bed thinking of you.  
You're away dancing.  
I wonder who it is you're talking to,  
At whom you're glancing.

I'm lying dreaming here and smiling too.  
I need no pity,  
Yet I wish I were there looking at you.  
You are so pretty.

## In the Public Library

Standing on tiptoe, head back, eyes and arm  
Upraised, Kate groped to reach the higher shelf.  
Her sleeve slid up like darkness in alarm  
At gleam of dawn. Impatient with herself  
For lack of inches, careless of her charm,  
She strained to grasp a volume; then she turned  
Back to her chair, an unforgetful Eve  
Still snatching at the fruit for which she yearned  
In Eden. She read idly to relieve  
The forehead where her daylong studies burned,  
Tales of an uncrowned queen who fed her child  
On poisons, till death lurked, in act to spring,  
Between the girl's breasts; who with soft mouth smiled,  
With soft eyes tempted the usurping King  
Then dealt him death in kisses. Kate had piled  
Her books three deep before her and across  
This barricade she watched an old man nod  
Over a dirty paper, until loss  
Of life seemed better than possession. Shod  
With kisses death might skid like thistle floss  
Down windy slides, might prove at heart as gay  
As Cinderella in glass slippers.  
Life goes awkwardly so sandalled. Had decay

Been the girl's gift in that Miltonic strife  
She would have rivalled God, Kate thought. A ray  
Of sunshine, carrying gilded flecks of dust  
And minutes bright with fancies, touched her hair  
To powder it with gold and silver, just  
As if being now admitted she should wear  
The scholar's wig, colleague of those whose lust  
For beauty hidden in an outworn tongue  
Had made it possible for her to read  
Tales that were fathered in Arabia, sung  
By trouvères and forgotten with their creed  
Of love and magic. Beams that strayed among  
Kate's fingers lit a rosy lantern there  
To glow in twilight. Suddenly afraid  
She seemed to see her beauty in a flare  
Of light from hell. A throng of devils swayed  
Before her, devils that had learned to wear  
The shape of scholar, poet, libertine.  
They smiled, frowned, beckoned, swearing to estrange  
Kate from reflection that her soul had been  
Slain by her woman's body or would change  
From contact with it to a thing unclean.  
Woman was made to worship man, they preached,  
Not God, to serve earth's purpose, not to roam  
The heavens of thought ... A factory whistle screeched,  
Someone turned up the lights. On her way home  
Kate wondered in what mode were angels breeched.

### **'Ay, ay, ay, the lilies of the garden'**

Ay, ay, ay, the lilies of the garden  
With red threads binding them and stars about,  
These shall be her symbols, for she is high and holy,  
Holy in her maidenhood and very full of doubt.

Ay, ay, ay, for she is very girlish,  
Fearful her heart's lilies should be stained by sin.  
Yet will I bind them with rosy threads of passion.  
Surely human passion has a right to enter in.

### **'Oh hall of music, promise fair'**

Oh hall of music, promise fair,  
No memories yet to thee belong.  
No ghostlings hover in thine air  
Of nights made sweet with song.

Oh stately hall in coming years  
May harmony, the heavenly norm,  
Here ever sounding in our ears  
Rouse us to world reform.

### **'I must haul up prettiness'**

I must haul up prettiness  
From the depths of hell  
If I'm of a mind to make  
John love me well.

I must pull down holiness  
From the heights of heaven  
If I wish that unto me  
Johnny's love be given.