

# Focusing Saturn

*The process of 'focusing' through language, which these poems attempt, is not aimed at arriving at a definitive view but, rather, at facilitating a kind of disentanglement where the ego may be distinguished from its circumstances. The desired outcome is not separateness but the disclosure of a differently energised participation.*

*The poems in this collection are attentive, in this way, to both the social and natural worlds, exploring present and remembered homes and landscapes, and the often stark cultural contrasts which are so much a part of the Australian scene.*

–Michael Heald

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*There is another way of seeing  
that sees through your love of this place*

— Rumi

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## FOCUSING SATURN

## Focusing Saturn

Gathering to watch the meteor storm,  
we fumbled with intangible fingers  
to pin down the tent a stone's throw  
from home, then warmed ourselves by quarters  
at the campfire, watching the sky  
around Orion, imagining a blazing rain.

No sign though, so we waded  
through the paddock's darkness to where  
the telescopes sipped primordial trickles  
of light, waited our turn as the others uttered  
amazement at where these ocular  
artificial limbs had taken them.  
I also couldn't help exclaiming, yet  
attended with a kind of frown, face bones  
tightening around the eye-piece, because  
what I saw it seemed I'd infinitely  
never seen. Saturn had resolved itself  
from the fat, cold spark lodged in my helpless eye,  
to the legendary sphere and hoop,  
neither jewel nor radiant machine, that lit  
the actuality of space, imperiously  
showing me how far there was  
to go, how far to fall,  
the abyss of the as-yet-unknown.

The next day I spoke in the brightness  
to a young Chinese, one from that multitude,  
who was anxious to tell me how the Tibetans  
make drums from virgins skinned alive,  
that the stopping of the Yangtze  
was in the people's long term interest,  
and that yes, he had seen Saturn,  
but that astronomy frightened him,  
put him in mind of death, seeing  
that we're so small and so alone.  
It wasn't the moment to argue, our paths  
crossing briefly and obliquely so that words  
distorted and grew strange shadows,  
but on the subject of Saturn, had I been able  
to fluke an alignment, I would have said  
that for all its distance and attendant

enormity, it felt like a crucial  
molecule of me put in place:  
its hieroglyph the dazzling correction  
of some stupendous error.

## Hanging Rock

Deep views through clefts and tree-veiled gaps  
draw us towards them. You say it's as if  
these rain smoothed paths and runnels we follow  
are made for our exploring — watery creatures  
finding the level of our interest.

Paddocks, roads, houses, fragments of forest  
look uncertain, as if still floating  
into the right design (or drifting  
down history's drain). Across the valley  
an outcrop beams at us  
with the cousinship of like-elevation.

Around the other side we find a hollow  
pinnacle with a porthole in it  
you can stand in, and be the rock's  
protean seeing, yet trapped  
more heavily, more coldly in perspective,  
in our peeping at creation.

Up here, where the wind's voice is  
foreground, obscure anxieties of duty  
are soothed, and in the presence of this event  
from a different order, the terra nullius of time  
that the industrial day has so vehemently  
occupied with its shrill imperatives  
is nowhere. I pass under

hanging rock unextinguished, stand  
and join the stocky spires toppling  
away from clouds, where no one moment  
catches, or lets you absolutely fall.

## Explosion

Something has burst,  
bursting, in its turn,  
people, buildings, routines.

Our representative  
hurls names at it —  
*senseless, despicable* —  
but he hasn't visited the underworld,  
and can't remember being the sea,  
a bird: his throat is naive

and can't speak of how  
this wreckage is not the source  
of poisoned blood, but is gathered  
in an ancient flow just like  
the fingers that trickled to their  
delicate, incendiary task.



## Maundy Thursday

You'd seen her, the old lady,  
hundreds of times,  
walking her little dog,  
and received, at most, the faintest  
acknowledgement. But on Maundy Thursday,  
in the service designed to avoid  
the animal intimacy of naked feet,  
she washed your hands  
with such competent care  
you wept: as if we have only

to rearrange how we touch ...

## African-American

The African-American opposite is listening to his personal stereo. When he first got on and carefully placed the slender tube of roses on the luggage rack, the elderly woman next to me remarked, 'A surprise? How lovely.' He shrugged and smiled: 'Hope she likes 'em,' as comfortable in romance as he is in cargo pants and polo-shirt. His muscular legs are spread, mine clamped between so we can fit, as if I'm to be re-absorbed.

Eyes closed, his feet tap, while I can't find the cadence: something falls, glinting, goes under my seat. I lean and pick the disc up by the edges so my hand feels like an eagle's, and the fleshy platter of his hand comes towards me as he smiles: I place the brilliant wafer of his music there, its rainbow sheen reeling on the silver like a dazzling, disoriented compass.

# 'Piece

A word:

gigantic; anarchic:  
word in proportion to the sun's  
eye, and the moon's;

word that glints with its own defiance,  
stylish signature of subversion;  
word unafraid to stay  
in the city's most ominous places,  
and to travel, unabashed, without a ticket;

taught, sleek animal,  
impregnable fortress,  
invulnerable chain  
of a word,  
jagged like the chanted,  
bulging like the chorused  
word;

that materialises in the night, and is  
dissolved, like a tenacious mandala,  
by the shire's caustic agents.

I try to read them, as if  
through air that distorts,  
coloured letters wheeling  
like that original illiteracy.

## In the Shack

*i*

We'd arrived at the shack via Balfour —  
or at least the few listing graves that are  
left of it — homeboy step-son, saw doctor brother-  
in-law, and myself, the doctor of philosophy  
shouldering each other in the front seat  
of the four-wheel-drive as it clambered  
over rocks and banks, as if enacting  
the jostle of our thrown-togetherness;  
then walking the narrow bush tracks  
that used to be streets, like odd remnants  
of a lost community, leeches like black fingers  
wagging at us for a general transgression;  
and then, on the journey back from that nowhere,  
hailed by relatives still more remote,  
the craymen, out looping and untangling  
in kaleidoscopic weather, and invited in  
to the shack for an illegal lunch ...

*ii*

'They've always had a shack down here,'  
my brother-in-law with the Aboriginal  
blood says.

Now, we're not supposed  
to be here, where the brawny Southern Ocean,  
restrained by a sandbank, is hassling  
the crayboat just outside the door,  
and beer and smokes are sucked on  
in turn without ceremony. If the ranger  
or the police came, and found us having lunch,  
saw the mattress in the corner, the barbecue,  
there'd be a fine.

'There's been some animosity,'  
I'm told, with a wry allowance  
for my educated delicacy,  
'between the Abo's and us,'

but most

of the talk is angled across me: about how  
they drive the Toyota around town  
with *Cruiser* prised off and *Grabber* written in;  
how they claim to know the land  
but tried to drive the new one  
through the creek with the swampy bed  
and it's still down there ('will be  
for fuckin' ever!') About how the surfies,  
my brother-in-law included, got together  
and rolled a big rock against the cave  
mouth, so they wouldn't get blamed  
when the paintings were disfigured: 'the Abo's  
do it themselves with paint that comes  
off later, and do wheelies over middens  
to get the whole place locked up:  
*abuse it, lose it, yeah, right!* And then  
it's so far to walk to the surf,  
and what if you've got kids?'

'It's our lifestyle,' they concluded,  
'that they're ruining.'

## At Ubirr

From a shelf of the escarpment, whose crevices  
shelter the dreamt cosmic miniatures, I marvel  
at the distance: glowing green,  
with the eye unsure if it's land  
or water that it's travelling over,  
and the next place just raw rock  
like this, not an end, as if  
the whole landscape is only distance  
variously manifest. On the far side  
of the plain, tiny, synthetic-looking  
colours, geometric forms: like a detail  
from those paintings vibrant in acrylic  
in the bright caves of Darwin. I find out later  
it's a cluster of marquees for old Bill Neidje's  
farewell party. He's seen so many of the elders  
die and miss the fun, he's decided  
to have his wake before he goes.

Earlier, a crowd of youths clambered  
excitedly past us having lit, or fed a fire:  
the ranger shouted at them: he's open-faced,  
zealous-looking, like a born-again ...  
He relates how these pictures on the  
unreachable ceiling of the cave were done,  
*it's said*, by the elongated Mimi spirits,  
challenges us for a better explanation:

but the silence that these stories have begun  
to reverberate in, the silence  
of the land's massive, archaic continuing,  
of the creatures' cheeky, oblique participation,  
of the elders'esoteric reserve,  
is not this silence he corrals us into,  
from which that tourist's answer —  
*there was a tree* —  
laconically releases us ...

## Poster

In the poster, the kids are all gathered  
under a giant tree, and focus  
the entreaty mystic-mischievously  
out at me: *STOP JABILUKA*  
*don't dig the heart out of*  
*the knob-tailed gecko dreaming,*  
so I can only join in, thinking  
yes, for godsake leave that dreaming  
heart where it is, pumping out  
those scuttling, scaly, beady-eyed  
stories: at the same time sensing myself  
in a dumb and desolate place,  
this gnomic banner flexing  
in a blustery gulf.

## At Oenpelli

*to determine what is alive and permanent and what is circumstantial*

— Octavio Paz

At Oenpelli, images of the dreaming  
languidly wake, amongst puddles and litter,  
and are exchanged for money which has  
gathered obscurely elsewhere,  
and here obscurely disperses.

At Oenpelli, the cultural centre  
is a large tin shed with gruesome  
concrete verandahs. A white fella  
who works there tells of how, last night,  
a man with a club came at him  
out of the dark, but was easily scared.

At Oenpelli, the car rests grimily  
after suffering the corrugated road  
on which the four-wheel-drives and road-trains  
brandished gritty tails, the windscreen tense  
for coarser grains, and remembers how  
the Alligator River nudged it  
towards helplessness as it nosed,  
revving shrilly, across to Arnhem Land.

At Oenpelli arguments kindle, blaze  
and gutter around the cultural centre,  
the ashen-defeated drifting off quietly ...  
At Oenpelli the Arnhem escarpment  
is not *a slow fastidious line that disciplines*  
anywhere we've ever been.

At Oenpelli, you notice how ugly  
and irreparable holes in fibro are.

At Oenpelli, the elder who knows about the music  
is coaxed out from the back room  
to blow a few half-hearted notes  
for a Swiss couple wanting to hear  
this proto-alpenhorn before they buy it.

At Oenpelli you can't go anywhere  
except the cultural centre,



but they don't mind you  
taking their picture as they stroke  
on the lines and dab on the dots.

At Oenpelli you're not warned  
that the guard dog is fierce, but *cheeky*.

At Oenpelli the new map will tell you  
you're at Gunbalanya,

and in the gallery  
there's a recent picture  
of Nakarrmon, lightning man, in which  
he's clearly still alive: yet  
all we see here is a dark impotence.

## Chinese Graves in the Blackwood Cemetery

Volatile weather as we leave  
the car's still warmth, push through  
the stiffly-sprung gate of the cemetery,  
to graze on history and mortality —  
a few sheep here already, bright  
and oblivious. Mostly time-gnawn  
headstones, rusted iron, but one  
tall black obelisk, Italian marble,  
stained cherubs at each corner and a  
kookaburra watching from the top:  
the local magnate, general-store-owner,  
who obliged his employees to purchase  
everything from him, master  
of the spiral path to wealth.

As we walk in unsteady sunshine  
a noise stops us, a clattering or hissing,  
until we see the white blur  
and a tree that looks seized by a fit,  
the hail shower moving slowly our way  
with a vehement thoroughness,  
and we shelter under the stricken  
tree's flinching roof. When it's passed

we walk out on a brittle scree  
of vertebrae and knuckles which squirm  
away to nothing like a cloud  
when held between finger and thumb, until  
we come to the unnamed graves,  
whose occupants you have to search for  
in the records, the lives as flattened  
now as if fed to the stamp-battery idling  
in the Progress Association's reserve:

and yet the names  
so strangely familiar as those of my  
international students, snappily dressed and  
confidently on their way to an all-  
but promised place in the technocracy:  
names I cram into the short-term memory  
each year and that leak quickly out as soon as  
the rows of faces disperse — that this place

seems never to have known, or else  
remembers in caricature, as *thieving*  
or *preserving strange rituals* (that Daylesford  
erased with a lake, tourists peddling  
frivolous craft over their drowned gardens).

I savour the morsels of knowledge  
I have of them: that they dug, for instance,  
their mine shafts cylindrical, so evil spirits  
would have no corners to hide in,  
but I feel no better than those schoolboys  
stealing food-offerings from the grave-site  
as soon as their grieving backs were turned.

*Wong Chung Gat, Chou Zaun Sing,*  
*Lee Phon Sai, Lee Ah Ho,*  
*Young Ah Chee, Lee Ah Tin,*  
*Wong Wai Kung, Chan Jin Ye,*  
*Wong Kwong Leung,* the crenellated,  
steaming bush, that undulates away  
in all of the directions, glistens  
like the visceral knowing of a stilled mind,  
and the kookaburra laughs from the obelisk  
with a heartiness as resonant  
as your rotund monk enjoying *the deathless*.

## Wiping the Smile Off the Face of the Buddha

*let my footprint be my only monument*

— Gautama

Hauling themselves by their bootstraps  
within range of it, the tanks

adjusted their muzzles for the right  
trajectory to it, and let fly,

rocking back with the force  
of their shies at it: then bulldozers

went in, scooping up the debris of it,  
dumping it in trucks,

to be lugged far away  
from any hands that might come

to gather and repair it ...

\*

*riderless elephant*

*empty throne*

*parasol shading no one:*

cliff-face uncarved ...

## Husk

When I wake, deep in night, the room  
is tinged with green like ethereal moss.  
All weekend the mist enveloped us, repeating  
bird-calls with preternatural care,  
yielding sunlight briefly yet  
intensely late each afternoon.

Our child isn't born yet —  
the last few weeks of a confinement  
from which its fidgetings bulge fleetingly,  
the two of you, in your interlocking sleep,  
in the middle of our merely double bed,  
placing me on a thin foam mattress  
that the old lounge suite's wooden paws  
only just avoid, aligned between  
the glass door clenched coldly  
on a black sky barely flickering,  
and the heater holding wood in flame  
as slow as a hand grasping and  
ungrasping. To return to sleep out here,

where the microwave's green numerals  
gleam and the fridge snores  
in half-hour breaths, a husk  
dream-sloughed from the marriage bed,  
what more needs to be relinquished?

## Pear Tree

Because I've been learning how to hold  
my child — adjusting as he changes  
weight and shape — I remember  
the pear tree I used to climb  
and stay in: the way it held me,  
one branch under my legs and one  
across my back, never quite secure,  
the sloping cylindrical limbs, as I  
looked along them, alien  
to the whole idea of holding:  
it was I who had to fork and cling  
and stretch for the freckled pears,  
themselves ill-fitted to the hand,  
ballooning heaviness wanting to drop.

## Poem for Jim, on his First Birthday

Jim! Your movements are still jerky  
like those anachronistic dinosaurs.

You smile so much, and laugh  
at the ordinary, like my friend's  
description of his Zen teacher,  
though up in the wattle tree  
with the gang-gangs munching  
seed pods is where I've seen  
your joyful equanimity before.

Jim! Your head on my chest  
is a heavy warmth, unfathomable,  
like that sphere of pure compassion  
the meditator is supposed to let  
enter his heart and radiate ...

And in these times when armies  
are marching from the shadows  
cast by luminous books, can I say,  
with Mohammed, that I too  
would let the worshippers stay  
flattened like spear grass  
in a knock-em-down storm  
while you finished your game.

## Dream

My sleeping hand was cupped  
and a dream gathered in it  
of my cradling your small head:  
but you were not my son, you were  
an orphan, lying on a stretcher-bed

like a casualty of war or epidemic,  
not far above the malign earth;  
yet your father's pain, as he  
left you, was also mine, as was  
your own indistinct agony

of loss: and when I woke,  
my hand still set in the rictus  
of not having you, it was as if  
I'd woken from the myth of fatherhood.



## Remembering the North Sea

A more robust tribe, reputedly,  
that I was sent amongst, their barren exile  
having blossomed into fertile niche,  
a cornucopia that filled our tins  
and butcher's shops; while I,  
enclosed in the dark pens  
of an industrial town, only recently  
warm enough again and adequately fed,  
arrived slight, small-footed and pale,  
ridiculous until proven worthy.

On the beach run from our school  
in the suburban dunes, my feet  
were scalded on glittering pavement  
and pierced by the tiny horned skulls  
of double-gees, my whiteness with its sprays  
of black hair scoffed at as a shameful,  
indoors phenomenon ...

Running somewhere amongst us were  
the dark twins, but I could never  
race them as I had the rivals  
of my english childhood: chasing, level,  
out in front, year by year, as my timing  
flourished in the neat green lanes.  
It always seemed a different route  
they took, finding short cuts between  
glare and shade, levering their steps

against unseen contours. They were forever  
already in the surf, already back  
in the gloomy change rooms, loitering  
as we laboured on ...

When we reached the ocean, bodies  
were flung as vehemently into it  
as missiles in the classroom:  
I trod cautiously in the foaming blue,  
remembering the North Sea: how I'd had  
to cross a littoral of tawdry, calculated  
amusements to get there;  
how it had lifted me  
in its numbing brown swell, assuring me

the pulse of cold is the stronger.

## An English Migrant Considers the Detention Centre

I remember my stocky, red-haired, fiercely  
independent new-Aussie father  
rattling even the negligible bars  
of the migrant hostel, that temporary cage  
with the sunshine-of-the-future pouring  
into it, and the gate ajar. And yet I'm to believe

these improvised weapons (just like those  
the diggers came up with in the trenches),  
this damaging of one's own flesh,  
refusing to swallow,  
this rampaging-in-a-corner —

I'm to believe they are the products  
of an altogether foreign,  
undesirable breed of dignity.

## Room

The hotel room's hot,  
welcome at first after Melbourne's  
stone chill, but as we settle  
in the plush dark, only breathing,  
it's too viscous an atmosphere,  
and the blankets, which could have been  
a cloak of separation,  
are unbearable — only a sheet left,  
not even drawn up to the shoulders.

Coffee, sugar and alcohol revving  
my heart, I stay awake  
until their movements begin  
to have the raw abruptness  
of reflex: reminding me of my  
son's recent pushings and stretchings  
in the womb ...

and then the noises start,  
for which *snoring* is too homely  
and undifferentiating a word:  
the wheezing, groaning, the sighing  
that slips over ratchets, and then,  
as if these sounds had been straining  
all along towards expression, a burst  
of vehement speech: 'shut it!  
you you've shut it' and my mother  
slapping his arm and hissing 'be quiet!'

and I drift,  
bones, flesh, mind

## Conjunction

The face is supposed to decay  
around the eyes' enduring opalescence:  
mine are dissolving first,  
succumbing to an action more particular  
than the gravity dragging all expressions  
back to topography, those features  
and blanknesses earth shows  
to its sun-juggled, reeling neighbours.

Irritation closes my eyes  
against landscape and artwork, friend and mirror  
equally, and the vibrant inarticulate  
companionship of pain comes  
gently into focus.

# The Messenger

*after Bill Viola's Messenger*

as he oozes, mercurial,  
towards breath, air moves off  
in a squadron of jellyfish  
from a face so inward and yet  
the hair up on end

something like a penis gleaming  
against the turbulent left thigh,  
both legs a scree of continents and  
archipelagos, but their stride  
not entirely crumbled, and the right hand  
brightly convoluted and joined  
to what could be another's  
like an archaic prefigurement of greeting,  
the left a wizened cloud ...

*O melting, O dispersal, but*  
as much as if light has changed  
into flesh, as flesh into light:

this is not refinement, it is  
refraction, showing us  
how even with the universe moving  
at the perfect speed to unfold our being,  
we remain so tenuously untorn.

## Cricket Season

Such a strange net  
to have caught these guys,  
with their ferocious cars,  
brutal humour, and thirst  
for the blurred elsewhere:

gruffly calling out to each other,  
white, across the green;

bustle and hurl, the fidget  
of a blade, encumbered scurry;

and the cry that reaches our verandah:  
triumph or agony?

# Sunflower

Hoisted itself,  
hand over broad green hand,  
to the height of a man,  
then imagined the sun,  
green eye tight shut,

until yellow flames hatched  
and blazed at the rim  
like an eclipse: at its zenith  
for some radiant days, but soon  
spine-weary, weeping seeds ...

Why would anything  
clamber so vigorously  
to its own grief?



## The Wrens and I

Perhaps it's my wingless shoulders exulting  
at an airy feat they can only dream of  
as a group of wrens lift and settle  
in opalescent undulations  
over this morning's moist, leaf-strewn ground:  
though having watched sensation as it's  
split and named — what lends a bird's song,  
for example, its edge, how it's lit,  
what it moves like — I hesitate  
to attribute source or locus  
to this enjoyment: analysis  
might be as incapable as when  
I have to match a bird observed  
with pictures in the field guide:  
when memory seems a child who can't yet  
properly colour in, so the red drifts  
from cheek to throat to breast, and leads me  
out to stare again and fix the borders;

and the wrens themselves rise and land,  
like the hammers of a piano, according  
to an impetus hovering at and touching  
only the periphery of their knowledge:  
all this said, still, between us, the wrens and I  
are tossed like a silk sheet  
and travel in sparkling waves.

## At Melville Caves

At the lookout, a breeze drew the mist  
apart without tearing it, and we could see  
white birds speckling the tops  
of trees far below, the rich tangle  
of forest, after the blanknesses of paddocks,  
like the eyes' native language.

For all its massive rupturedness,  
a gentle place: earth-bread broken calmly;  
head-rocks pressed to each other  
like brothers whose rivalry has dissolved;  
the quietness of the monolithic.

And inside the cool mouths,  
their not biting down  
an intense, thrilling mercy.

## Night, and Other Moments

### *Night*

Night is just a shadow, albeit  
thrown by the first hurtling out,  
spinning away from 0,  
measuring us,  
beat or interval:

we're shown the universe  
with our engendering radiance

gone: far more dark than fire,  
a glittering formation equally precise  
as warning, or as promise.

### *Wood Shed*

The wood shed, glowing softly  
on a mild, overcast afternoon,  
for all its low-roofed, unwindowed  
mess of chunks and splinters,  
accommodates this happiness:

the wood carrier and axe wielder,  
and the impatient, stiff-cold firelighter,  
drifting out of me like shapes of mist  
when spring sun finds the rain-darkened road.

### *The Wrong Mystery*

Then I saw that the trees,  
all winter stiffly isolate  
beside oblivious water,  
were now in leaf, resting  
on the surface of the lake:

all that time I'd been  
wrestling with the wrong mystery.

### *On the Outbusts of Charlie Perkins*

Can you stand, with your people,

in a conflagration,  
and your tongue not occasionally  
be a flame?

### *Dreams*

In the first moment after  
that visceral watching inward,  
a white bird wavered towards me  
like a flicker of unwilled seeing,  
and I knew we only dream  
the atmospheres of pleasure and pain.

### *The Heat*

Off to one side  
of the flow of good news about myself  
there'd always been,

I could feel  
the love of my family,  
the love I'd been born into:

like a heat,  
oddly severe.

### *The Realm of Intentions*

The rain is so fine today  
it is the shimmering union  
of falling and rising:  
the membrane between the fingers  
vertical and horizontal.

To go out into it is to materialise  
in the rarefied realms of intentions.

### *Splendid Wren*

Out in the pallid, drizzling day,  
the wren, in blues  
that are themselves alive,  
visits each moment,  
like one *liberated*,  
with the same indefatigable lustre.



## With 'S'

### *Decision*

Outside, a wind so strong  
even the brawny white  
cockatoos look flimsy in it,  
and the huge tree's branches  
all flow together  
in a creaking gesture  
of reaching out, or fleeing.

### *The Dance*

I saw the seriousness  
with which you danced  
alone. You'd become  
impenetrably solid,  
incomparably fluid:

small movements using  
the whole of the universe:

*special plenitude!*  
*best way to worship!*

And if I'd entered,  
your eyes would have said  
*not I, but the god!*

### *Fulcrum*

As you sang your way in along the freeway,  
high up in the ute, suddenly Melbourne  
was right there in front of you,

and you could feel  
how outweighed you were  
by the folly, and the waste:

even your voice was pulled under.

### *City Fountain*

My mind went straight to that  
jolting curtain of water, as I thought  
you could get cancer or the baby  
could already be dying:  
that our lives could gape  
and spill, whenever ...

### *Mckenzie Falls*

In the pool at the foot  
of the waterfall,  
out where it's calm,  
blocks of granite resting,  
as you say,  
like the ruins of nothing.

# THE HUMAN GRASP

*A culture is born not when man grasps the world but when he is grasped by it.*

— Aime Cesaire



## Lifting the Chickens

The chickens aren't used to their coop yet.  
In the gloom they're quiet, pale clouds  
I have to gather up one by one and carry  
to the perch. But there's a surprising tenacity,  
a principle of balance, as I carefully  
release them, and they fluster, then settle:  
their poised quiescence passes from my hands  
as breathtakingly as flight.

## Avalanche

In Berne the bears are history.  
Brawny symbols lumbered  
in their refurbished pit.

The farmhouse had a stone courtyard,  
absorbed now into a stylish foyer,  
where the bears were kept,  
chained and sick. In the neat,  
dingy zones of pine, I tried  
to inhabit the old wariness.

Back in Australia, I watch  
the avalanche on tv, snow foaming  
over pointed chalets like saliva.

## Mob

less travel than vibration,  
an agitation like boiling,  
fall and rise blurred like watching  
pelting rain on a road,

yet the grey-brown mob progressively  
absent, like a cloud-shadow, this motion  
the flexing of pristine muscle  
across the paddock's bland skin.

## Plain

Across this plain, massive spills  
of brilliance, limited only  
by the rise of hills,  
or the topography of clouds:  
so you can see how this planet  
comes to stop the sun's light;  
is, as it were, an obstruction;

can see how the human head  
is a shard from these  
dazzling lacustrine impacts,  
thought a coruscation;

how *source of life* is spoken  
in a radiant dream;

how *crop, stock and farm*  
are the lucent, blind tools  
whose hands and teeth fit  
the blanknesses of this landscape  
intricately lustrous long before the hairs  
of deep sea light had even begun  
to tease our scaly ancestral eye open:  
whose grip and cut here have the oblivious,  
awkward severity of ricochet.

## Managed Retreat

*... there has been trouble ever since man first planted  
his silly foot on this continent ...*

— Bill Mollison

Trapped between rising sea and seawall,  
the marshes of the Essex coast knew how  
to move back, migrate: brimming sea,  
dying marshes, seawall, glowing farm ...

And they allowed them: dismantled  
the salt-blind, tide-weary wall, and permitted  
these earth-melting, mist-ushering steps  
back into the human heartland,  
taking their bony, proprietorial, brain-bearing  
steps back along with them, knowing  
all those obedient, broad-daylight acres  
would be themselves unfed and defenceless  
without the twilight, shifting, murkily fecund  
edges of their island. And so  
they managed this retreat. Australia! Where

will there be for you to retreat to,  
as the salt rises up with its myriad teeth  
through the floor of your dream-home?  
At this rate your backward step  
will be off this place entirely:  
your silly foot will land next in oblivion.

## Steam Engine

Across the road a guy in a singlet's  
tinkering with a steam engine.  
If country towns are where the first blind  
clutch at this land can still be seen,  
this looks like its polished muscle.  
Children mill around and he speaks the odd  
command I can't make out, but I can  
hear the engine's first coughs labouring  
to be rhythmic, petering out, resuming;  
the steel shaft jabs and jabs  
and the iron spokes tread their shining  
circle faster and faster until they  
merge into a hazy brotherhood.  
The whole thing gleams, it has  
a fire in it: the earth wants intensely  
to drag it all back under.

My steam enthusiast neighbour is a *local*,  
I've already been bitten by his dog: but strange  
that he should lavish such care  
on this antique brute, that's dragged this town  
to where it is today: where the scraps of re-growth  
mock us with a parody of wilderness;  
where salt latches on to paddock  
after paddock; where the young loaf, end it,  
or are snuffed out in the family's implosion.

## Fire

Two per cent more oxygen and you could never  
be cajoled back inside the bush's myriad vessels:  
you would inherit the air and all its creatures.  
As it is you're muttering and glaring all season  
as we tinker with our weapons and refine  
our strategies of containment for when you rise  
like a superbeing between the gods and us,  
anti-hero championing only mutability.  
Yet even your anarchy  
can't unsettle the core promises of order  
like that other incautiously unearthed,  
unearthly heat, the smouldering  
from our formative conflagration,  
and nature here tolerates your frenzy,  
gearing your wayward brawn to a delicate  
leverage that can unclench the stoic pods.

Some say you're the capable half of a tag-team  
with those whose own capacity for mischief  
will never be enough; or the rampant ecstasy  
of those for whom your maelstrom of withering  
embraces is fulfilment. Like your golds and scarlets  
they're half-truths: throughout those first searing  
imperial summers, you never dared enter  
the pristine forest, all massive columns  
and broad chambers then: as those whose eye  
remains steady in the havoc and can read  
the warped languages of aftermath  
have been repeating down the oblivious generations,  
it's the crowded, scrawny crop we mow  
the forest into, and the hasty, careless harvest,  
that invites and feeds your ruinous appetite,  
that inflates your achievements to *disaster*.





## Snowy

like a voice released  
from the shut mouth of progress,  
still chattering about leaves and fins,  
oblivious to listening.

## Leeches

*i*

You're from Tasmania, worked  
in the bush there: once had to go  
through a gully where the tiger snakes  
struck in volleys, butting your gumboots.  
And you've known their cousin, the tiger leech,  
been nudged and burrowed into  
by its fat vitality. And then there are  
Bill Mollison's stories: the dog tied up overnight  
outside the salt circle, in the morning  
just a lump of bloated leeches; the man  
who couldn't urinate, refusing the cut,  
on the brink of self-poisoning

*ii*

If I find one on my arm my mind  
heats up, knowing there are now  
the serious places to search, where more  
than just clothing has to be drawn back.  
Once, at the lake, your son  
came out of the water complaining  
of a sore eye: 'it feels like a leech  
is in there.' We greeted him  
with disbelief, but turning  
the lid inside out, there it was,  
snuggled into the raw skin,  
and when you flicked it out  
a sheet of blood was flung.

*iii*

To me, their oozing, concertinaring along  
is the bizarre gait of nature  
going for our most succulent parts, and  
since we're the chief cloggers and foulers,  
the painstaking, heroic march  
of her army of tiny pipes  
aiming to drain us off.



ground and trees in piles at the wharf,  
and everyone's cupboards full of crap.

## River

How can the river be both  
revered source of native vitality  
and crude adversary to be triumphantly subdued  
in the one nationalist breath?

We've all heard the poem: man masterfully,  
rampantly, astride a torrent of horseflesh  
(that old story careering over the rocky bush  
like a lost echo) and seen the monument,  
the multicultural cowboys' concrete stranglehold  
and the beast on its mighty knees.  
But the beginnings of rivers are so far back  
beyond our own that only the dreaming  
reach of myth can enfold their stories around  
our just-kindled camp fires of knowing: otherwise

all you might see is a trailing thread,  
not the serpentine binding of ground and sky,  
not the rearing earth and diaspora  
of fabulous, progenitive creatures;

and you might think rivers carry things away,  
not realise they are raw mirror,  
pure recurrence, inexorable stasis,  
and the crystal road to the country's future;

and you may not heed the warning  
of the river that caught fire and was helpless  
to put itself out; or of the river whose bridge  
was a brittle hand that let its passengers,  
frail tributaries of life for all their athleticism,  
trickle into its mainstream of death;

and you may not restrain those corporations  
who swagger into our neighbours' forests  
and piss their waste down the valley,  
or the golf magnates syphoning off  
the water so their fairways glow, while downstream  
the villages sipping there for millennia  
unaccountably wither; or those outfits  
up North, trading in the primal fire,  
whose fanatical contaminants trickle past

security like spittle from a slack mouth.

Australia! *Externalities* soak deep  
in your territory, and your farmers  
raise an anti-crop impossible to export:  
will you uproot every pale and many-fingered  
native hand with the know-how  
to hold down those stinging crystals  
until, on the driest of continents, all rivers  
flow with the irony of salt?

# Catchment

## *Catchment*

*To catch is to let fall*  
gently, the downpour slowed,  
for those last green moments,  
to a profusion of trickling,  
soil breathing in moisture and breathing  
it out along the creek where  
the creatures of dilution gather.

## *The Department*

### *i The Valley*

The department is managing  
government policy which is to  
manage popularity while keeping  
the multinationals onside.

When you speak to them you do so  
in the din of a factory a familiarity  
with which has made them wry:  
your words are annihilated, your mouthings  
ridiculous amongst the clattering  
inexorability. In the regrowth

near Dwellingup, the *quotas* were  
explained to us, and the trees  
stood around speechless, even to  
that feral chick with the fluffy,  
wobbling antennae on her hat.

If the trees must be removed,  
the soil compacted, and a valley  
become storm-water-drain, with a chemical  
treatment plant to poison the poisons  
thus engendered, so be it:  
their job is to put water in mouths —  
what does it matter how it gets there?

### *ii Shadow Map*

One guy in the group's been *around this forest*

*for over ten years*: child-like face,  
shaven head, and very thin, as if  
he's evolved in that sylvan decade  
to flit amongst the trees, good dirt always  
under his fingernails, long-faded walking boots  
anchoring his ethereality. He speaks

with the softest urgency, like someone  
tending to an injured animal;  
at the meeting with officials in the pub  
sipped water, and turned away  
from their assurances to me  
with a smile like incredulity's apotheosis.

He'd been watching the coupes, he told us,  
and noticed that wherever the map said  
one was to be logged, the whining and collapsing  
began elsewhere, a little way off. So he called  
the Department. Familiar to them,  
he coaxed a chuckle, and the admission  
'yes, we call it a *shadow map*.'

## NVDA

That night, after the meeting  
of the *protection group*,  
after the elation of all those  
eccentric tributaries of concern  
flowing in the one small town,  
I discover the unnoticed injury,  
inspect its depth, extent:

a force is pressing into me:  
unless I can find a way  
to place my body so it  
achieves resistance, it will  
sweep through me, and I will  
fall away, cloven,  
and the green and the fragrant gloom  
and the clinging, floating creatures  
will, in their turn, be swept away.



## *Dream*

In my dream, I said  
to the man in the khaki overalls,  
mechanic of the forests, foot-soldier  
in the war against nature, silvi-  
culturalist: biodiversity  
is the immaculate cushion on which  
humanity royally reclines: beneath it  
is the jagged rock, unashamed  
of my emotive archaisms. It was

a woman's voice that answered  
from the patchy face: I couldn't tell  
if this was ventriloquism,  
and there was the rasping, slow laugh  
of a crow somewhere: *biodiversity  
doesn't vote, people do,*  
and I woke, saturate  
with loneliness and foreboding  
at the disenfranchisement of creation.

## *Watching*

As I sat in meditation  
a cool wind rose and pushed:  
the hatred of cold began,  
but as I watched,  
feeling my skin bristle,  
entering the spaciousness  
in the absence of warmth, I saw

these hills, clothed now  
in a sighing plenitude,  
stripped bare by an impetus  
I could no longer hate  
and only name with the call  
of one creature approached by another  
threatening to tear its flesh.

## *Politician*

Attended our meeting to assure us  
the forest was fine, thriving on its management:  
he'd seen it with his own eyes  
and here were the figures. The statistician

amongst us said afterwards  
he'd timed his lies at two per minute;  
the plain-speaking one of us  
told him then and there he was a liar.

He stormed out;  
                  remembering the votes,  
drifted back. *A long time in politics*  
after he visited, the *report* declared  
its expert eyes could find, within  
the given terms of reference,  
neither trees, nor wood.

And government policy veered  
like a stream around a granite outcrop.

## Big Play, Warrnambool

It doesn't seem likely:  
protean sky and flexing ocean, yes,  
but that mythical big play ...

\*

Rain, clearing: a turbulence  
just beyond the breakers  
as of rock, or reef.

\*

and then the giant tail  
like a forked tongue poked  
and swallowed:  
then an immensity of head  
with cosmic eye luxuriating  
in flight: splash so voluminous  
it seems slow-motion:

\*

and the seismic frolicking,  
continental disport,  
that some would name as *Gaia*  
improvising mountains, shouldering the waters:  
*Gaia*, rearing and singing.

## Pastoral

Even when you see  
just one horse, high and brown,  
standing quietly in the paddock  
with an almost-circle of sheep,

the fellowship of animals  
so present: even these  
whose shapes and habits  
countless human seasons  
have weighed upon, molded:

docile, and yet  
a kind of agitation:  
snag and swirl  
in agriculture's placid stream.

## Ghost Net

As a plastic bag cracklingly  
extricates itself from the rotting guts  
of a sea bird it has strangled  
from the inside, and drifts ...

as the ghost net, its haul  
finally decayed, billows from the ocean floor  
to repeat its oblivious cast;

as the earth of your garden bares  
yet more glass teeth at the tender  
feet of your children, and poisons  
seep from dead enterprise  
into fresh green leaves,

you realise a terrible longevity has been born.

## Song of the Sea-Horse Harvest

First we saw them plucked, indiscriminately,  
from the reef, to suffer, egg-sac and all,  
a tiny withering, and piled up like weathered  
candy, fodder for the dream-horse of potency.  
Monogamous, surviving partners  
left dangling frailly upright.

But as the decorous herd dwindled  
towards extinction, a confinement  
for the pregnant males was contrived, in cages  
barred too narrowly for them,  
but not for their newborn to drift through:

straight after their birthing tribulations  
the nonplussed fathers still hauled out  
to perish in the void of superstition  
but still, as those tiny ones floated clear like notes  
from a stave, the life-cycle of that ornate race  
trickling safely now through the human grasp,  
I felt the tinkling song of the sea-horse harvest  
leaven, like a bouyancy, my heavy predator's bones.

## Penguin Coast

*It behooves man now not to separate himself too jauntily  
from any of nature's creatures*

— Charles Olson

At sunset we follow the boardwalk  
over a chop of scrubby dunes  
to a concrete grandstand facing ocean  
and a lit beach, like the terraces  
I stood on as a boy, amongst the legs  
of men transfixed in vicarious battle,  
where my giant, barbarian voice roared  
thrillingly from the common throat. Here,  
night, another squall, and rafts  
of Little Penguins all move otherly  
towards the gaping arena. Where  
are they now? How do they know?

Behind us, Phillip Island is a wilderness  
surviving only as attenuated  
preconception in the minds of tourists,  
or the fabulous pretext of developers:  
this beach receiving the last weak pulse,  
each sunset, of what used to be a tide  
of these creatures all along the coast,  
habitat long since uprooted, withered  
or trapped beyond roads where cars glide  
avid to crush what may be crushed.

Perhaps

they're still hunting, or assembling:  
my infant son, impatient, trots amongst  
the watchers, foraging for stimulation;  
then someone points, cries out:  
three or four are tumbling in like flotsam,  
stand up like walking fish — wavering,  
sheeny planes — then waddle, uncertain,  
back to the swash, which shoves them  
in again towards our expectation.

Miniature, *cute*, like the soft toys peeping  
from the Japanese tourists' backpacks,  
they inhabit their storybook, documentary

personae stiffly, like finger puppets, arriving  
from beyond our southernmost border,  
from a wildness that only their unwitting  
mediation prompts us to hunker down  
in front of, snuggle up next to:  
the sky's first cold touch, though,  
scatters most of us, and the event  
disintegrates to a laboured straggling,  
intimations gusting in, now, of benighted,  
unwatched creation. Yet back

in the tourist centre, Jim, on seeing him,  
toddles to some empty floor, and sits  
to watch the man in the penguin suit,  
as if his capering and waving metamorphosis  
is to be taken sustained and earnest heed of.



## Notes

'Piece: 'Piece refers to graffiti art, often a word unusually constructed.

In the Shack: Balfour was a tin and copper mining town in North West Tasmania, abandoned after an outbreak of typhoid in the 1930s.

Poem for Jim: There is a story that once, when he was leading prayers, the prophet Mohammed prolonged the prostration so as not to interrupt a game that his infant son was playing in the mosque.

Wiping the Smile From the Face of the Buddha: The Taliban regime in Afghanistan destroyed, with artillery, carvings of the Buddha in the Bamyán region, in 1999.

Chinese Graves in the Blackwood Cemetery: Lake Daylesford was created by the flooding of Wombat Creek, which also flooded the Chinese market gardens in that area.

Catchment: NVDA stands for non-violent direct action.

Dream: *biodiversity/ doesn't vote, people do*, is a statement made by a prominent 'forest industry' spokesperson.

Managed Retreat: The term 'managed retreat' is used to describe the planned withdrawal of human domination to allow the healthy functioning of an ecosystem.

Steam Engine: 'If country towns ... can still be seen' alludes to a comment to this effect by the writer Tim Winton.

Leaving Tasmania: 'the river that's only still ... courts and elections' refers to the campaign to prevent the damming of the Franklin River.

River: The poem alluded to in the first stanza is Banjo Paterson's 'The Man From Snowy River'. The monument is the Snowy Mountain Irrigation Scheme. The river which 'caught fire' refers to the cases of such a phenomenon in the Volga, the Cuyahoga, the Ganges and the Iset, all of which contained large amounts of flammable pollutants. The 'river whose bridge ... mainstream of death' refers to the Yarkon River. A bridge over the Yarkon collapsed during the opening ceremony of the Maccabiah Games in 1997; its waters were found to be contaminated with sulphides, hydrocarbons and heavy metals.

Ghost Net: Ghost net is the term used to describe a fishing net abandoned at sea which continues to catch fish.

Leeches: The anecdotes in stanza one are from Bill Mollison's autobiography *Travels in Dreams*.

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