

Shorelines

Three Poets

Barbara Brandt Michael Heald Roland Leach

(Please note that only 'Occasions' is included in this document)

'Occasions' may be ordinary events but the poems in Michael Heald's collection attempt to focus in language the mysterious reality that is the relationship between self and world, so that the inherent specialness of these events is recognised, and they become 'occasions' in that sense too. For Michael Heald, 'Occasion may also imply a need: these poems, I think, enact the need to discover spiritual truths, always unique in their manifestation, but discernible as coherent and continuing.'

Shorelines is an annual publication, introducing the work of three emerging poets.

Cover illustration by Bruce Bellon.

SHORELINES

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Roland Leach

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Michael Heald

Occasions

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Occasions

MICHAEL HEALD

To my parents, Patricia Joan and
Donald Raymond Heald

Michael Heald was born in Grimsby, England, in 1959 and emigrated with his family in 1972. During and after an Arts degree at The University of Western Australia, he travelled back and forth between Perth and Europe looking for home, working mainly as a squash coach. After settling in Perth, he has taught English and Creative Writing at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and is continuing to pursue higher studies in the field of literature. He is married with a stepson aged twelve.

Photograph by Don Eade.

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Subject

The headmaster, genial, white-haired,
would take us for poetry.

A pat on the head
was his blessing.

This time he had a blackened
tree root carried in
and set up on a desk.

It looked like
the night's heart cut out:
too awful a trophy
for a boy of ten to claim
with language,

though a taste
of its black blood came,
and the blessing.

Migrant's Diary

I took a hardback diary
as thick as a novel
to record each moment
of the odyssey. My commentary

petered out as the adventure gained momentum,
but years later I pored over
indelible entries that never appeared
on its lined and dated pages:

the engines tearing us away,
London tilting;

robed men with curved knives
guarding the doors to their country;

carvings of torture behind bars
in a park in Singapore,
where the plane that had nosed
right up to the window
of a Heathrow departure lounge
to have a look at us
roared, but couldn't take off;

and waking in the migrant hostel
to a small window
totally blue morning after morning,
as if we'd risen
permanently above the clouds.

Long Weekend

There's an emptiness in the house
I don't think can be peopled:
wind piping in the eaves
signals a different scene.

It's cut on the big rocks
of the groyne, too, the high note.
The green sea looks askew,
its flattened waves angling in.
There's a low mist of sand
with a cutting edge.

It's this peculiar desolation
of a public beach in freak wintriness
that I came to see:

to enter this landscape
then return to the house
windblown; tasting salt.

A Bucket of Blood

The eminent poet stood
at the dais, a shrouded piano
behind him on which a small pile
of his books lay.

A microphone was pointed at him.

The ladies sipped Special Bond.

'A poem isn't just a bucket
of your heart's blood,' he said, 'a poet
must walk with the heavy buckets
bending a stick across his shoulders
or he must crank and crank
from the deep well
seeing the brimming bucket shimmer in gloom upwards.

 'Or he may move it with a device
employing weight and pivot like a shadoof,
from the swollen river of blood.

Moreover,
a poet must not
be caught bailing out his sinking boat
on the sea of blood.

'But these are archaisms.

However these weighty buckets
are to be carried, it must be done
without spillage. Out at the drain
at the back of the factory
you can open their throats to vomit
their load, draining the heart's
chambers, turning your face white.

 Back inside more buckets are filling:

the poet is a sort of factory hand
who must keep ahead of the buckets.'

Cleethorpes

The damp, salt wind pushes
as I grip the green, rust-gnawn
railings of the promenade.

This is where I first acquired
my taste for desolation,
scouring the ribbed beach
for shells and fossils
on Saturday afternoons whose core
of nothingness I seemed
to have tracked to its lair:
boyish vigilance near a mist
that baffled all searching.

Memories of the resort in season
are tenuous: a big wheel
ferrying couples to the pale sky
and back; a race to the helter-skelter
slowed in yellow sand.
And the men working levers
wiping oily hands of it:
YOU RIDE AT YOUR OWN RISK.

The rusting skeleton
of a ride's bucking course
is stranded in the off-season.
I watch from this shore,
where sea and sky
are an indivisible grey,
as I've watched
from its counterpart where the sea
is the sky's blue vitrified:

as if my crossing
could finally be made out:
will glint like a ship
then be claimed, spent of light,
by the distance.

Although It Was Night

Although it was night
it was so warm
we both had our shirts off:

you were cycling home,
put your rucksack on
over bare skin,
your lifesaver's physique
now loosened slightly,

then ensued one of those
pre-departure silences,
the stars furiously watching it,
crickets chafing at it,

until we shrugged off
our being together
and you wobbled into
the warm dark.

Impression of a Student Bedsit

Little room to improvise
between the two postures.

A plastic bin with scraps
around its mouth, a bike
leaning bonily against the wall,
dispelling the sense of indoors.

In the corner a vine
of darkness, that flowers fiercely
some nights as he looks up
from the brightened page.

I Use the Word

I use the word
—'sparkle' — just the one
for that gap,
and for a moment
its meaning disappears
as if consumed,
goes out,

reminding me of when,
as children, we'd shake
the meaning out of a word
by repetition, till its sound
was a nonsense to be savoured.

Lament for a Lost Accent

You escaped the other day,
just for a syllable or two,
merging us for a moment
that felt like healing, a return
to the old unselfconsciousness
of speaking. You went out
guilelessly to represent me
and for this I strangled you:

all those years rehearsing words
on the school balconies, checking
your reflexes to avoid
the shame of difference
(I remember 'kookaburra'
tripping me up, releasing you,
and the laughter, the laughter ...)

You swung the burning spotlight
on me then, but I don't think,
now, you'd want revenge,
ridicule your replacement,
shout 'impostor!' He is,
after all, the survivor,

a voice you still chafe at,
knotted with our history.

Country Calling

'Hello? ...'

'Hello ... Paula?'

'Hello ... Is this "Country Calling"?'

'It sure is.'

'Could I have ... Dolly Parton?'

'... Yes?'

""'I'll Always Love You"?"'

'You've got it.'

I'm at the deli now, bright
in the black suburban night,
but stay in the car to listen
as the song makes its hopeless
declaration, in quavering high,
then low, spoken notes,
fascinated by the nakedness
of the voice this distant girl has chosen.

The Sketch

Amusement is simmering as I enter,
their young stares intense, gloating,
as those who hold in sight
a victim of dramatic irony.

Turning, I see a sketch
of my profile on the blackboard,
so accurate and alive it winds me.

Their laughter is released
and I let my breath go with
the benign, satisfied shouting.

When they've gone, I face
the likeness again: it fixes me
so surely outside myself
that I feel unsteady,
robbed of my contours.

With three broad wipes
I make it vanish, but as I step
from the room notice
the dust cloud still hovering.

The Argument

It's late to be going shopping —
nearly five, Friday, and the weather
threatening. There's that hollowness
after an argument, amplifying
forced casualness, tones of irritation.

There's a gift to be bought
but anyway, I want to go out,
not to be away, more
to begin the journey back;
and to have the week's busyness
wash around me before it recedes:
to wade in uninvolved presence.

Out to sea there's a great
pouring through of light,
which the shopping centre
tries to imitate in its sky-lit central mall:
an immense, majestic generosity.

When I come out, there are pools
of rain on my car, but the sun
has found clear sky close to the horizon.
The drive home parallels the coast:
as I think again of who was first
to let an aggressive pose take hold,
a soft golden light, blocked
and released by passing houses,
touches my profile like a slow photography,
as if what's needed is a radiant
watching that can choose
the right moments of ourselves
to focus, and remember.

Misty Evening

I squeeze the high-beam trigger
and a new slide clicks up:
a deeper view of where
the road peters out in bush,
mist smoking at the edges.

The lights' beams scythe
the swamp's giant grass
as I swing around
into the driveway's well-worn grooves
and trundle up beside the house.
From the road above,
a streetlight behind a tall dead tree
sends black rays through the mist
like an anti-searching.

It's a miraculous climate in the universe
that lets water's molecules drowse liquid,
dreaming of fabulous creatures:
how rare must this be
under the stars —
an animal that knows
of its own life and death,
tasting both on its skin
as it moves through mist.

I watch you moving
in the warm, dry air
of inside, for some reason
exhilarated by the contrast, as if
the film of cold damp on my face
were a war paint
firing my courage.

The Mortgage

It gives a feeling
of floating above the land,
of drifting in the house like ghosts,
knowing there are so many thousands
to be earned, so many years before ownership:
an intangible wedge is driven
between the property and us,

as if we'll only feel
we've appeared here in flesh and blood
when we're sixty-odd.

We'll touch the ground in time
to take frail steps
on the supple floorboards,
along the nubbly paths,
before keeling over and
dropping the last six feet.

Making a Forest Vanish and Reappear

All that's missing is the assistant
with teeth and erogenous zones sparkling:
but this magician's too urbane
for anything so crass. His suit
is potent costume enough
there in the unkempt outdoors.

He passes his smile clean through
what we'd been sure
were nature's flawless loops,

and, as we can see
from the flurry of foliage
clambering up around him,
the company can keep on pulling forests
out of the earth's deep dark hat
as easily as it makes them vanish;
as long as we the public wish it;

can saw great gaps in its body
leaving both ends living
(the eco-system's expected scream
doesn't come ...)

Anything is manageable:
the profiting hand
is quicker
than the public eye.

The Hair

You nudge me in the crowded train
and lean closer to say
'look at that man
touching that woman's hair.'
I turn expecting an outrageous scene
of trembling hands in forbidden worship,
but instead it's a guy I'd noticed earlier,
with a BHP badge sewn to his coat
and a crumpled, empty-looking overnight bag.

There's a cascade of blonde hair
spilling over the seat back
towards his knees, and his hand
has lifted from his lap to meet it,
the index finger pointing through the flow
as if testing its temperature.

When he moves his hand away
the finger stays stiffly put
like part of a claw.
He brings it back
to renew the sensation
and this time his thumb
closes to it, trapping some strands,
kneading them gently
like a length of fabric,
but hamfistedly. The woman
feels no tug, as if the hair really
did flow in perpetual release.

He doesn't watch what he does:
like one of those characters in thrillers
trying to harden or punish themselves,
looking away as they keep
their hand in a flame.
But there's no grimace;
his eyes aren't clenched shut
but stare calmly at what passes,
and when the train arrives
his hand drifts back without fuss
from its trespass.

We shuffle out, other bodies

inserted between ours in the line,
pause in the crowd on the platform
to kiss, then part to search through it
to our separate days.

The Roof

'Why is the sound of the cat
walking on our roof
so satisfying?' you ask,
a gentle buckling of the tin
following her up its hill.

It reminds me of a similar pleasure,
when you return and notice her
watching you from up there,
the home you're coming back to
held calmly underfoot.

She chooses paths across it
as though its barren slopes offered them
like any other stretch
of path-rich ground,
trespassing nonchalantly
on its stern inaccessibility,
her supple movements travelling
its blankness like fluent graffiti.

Out of sight and out of mind
most of the time, this neglected one
of the limits which contain us
crackles, now, in our consciousness,
its stiffness massaged
by the cat's soft tread.

The Dream

Going to kiss him goodnight
after he's fallen asleep,
I approach his tranquil face cautiously,
but he wakes and says abruptly
'I've already had a dream.'
'Oh. What was it about?'
'I was getting blown away
by a hurricane.'

At the Diving

The commentators strive
to pay sufficient homage with their words
to those making elaborate
and precise sacrifices of themselves
to the water, tying themselves
in knots, belly flopping,
until one freak performance
whose virtuosity
transcends gravity:

'Well, what can you say?
This man's really
diving above himself.'

The Guildford Railway Bridge

The journey suddenly becomes
serene, like taking off,
the river underneath
a rich slick
the train is gliding on
with a brilliance keeping up,
the opposite of a shadow.

Most turn to watch,
their eyes opening
a fraction wider to take in
the rippling drift at an angle
to the tracks: a meandering
and yielding surface so at odds
with the grip the carriages have
on their rigid course,
the train's sights unwaveringly set
on the next station, ignoring
this gulf with a mesmerising,
moving floor ...

It's over quickly,
but as the suburban ground slides under
deadening the resonance,
there seems a general pondering
of this half gap, half intensity
in the route from A to B.

Eggplant

The eggplant's dark shine
appears in a green hand
that droops like a dying man's
about to let go

but over the weeks keeps
a rigor mortis grip
on the growing fruit
as if on a kernel of wisdom
grasped too late, that swells
to a blue-black bell
in the hand whose finger ends
have drifted from its prize
in ornate wisps, or like
talons poised to strike:

a gift you have to snip
the strong green wrist
to receive.

A Model of Ruthlessness

Though disturbed
behind our evasive approval
for its red glowing eyes
and swivel-action clobbering
as he put it through its paces,
we're more taken aback
the next day, when he's at school,
his mind's control of it relaxed,

to see it lying snugly
back in its packet,
clear plastic drawn
like a space-age blanket
over bulging silver muscles
and robotic bones:

this model of ruthlessness
helpless to resist his care.

That Anger is a Dream

*Try to see that the situation is like a dream ...
at a later time, even tomorrow, it will appear
distant and faded, a mere memory.*

Kathleen McDonald.

All I remember
of the argument now
is going out by myself
and climbing a bush track vehemently
to a peak from which the flow
of the ranges could be seen
and the winter sky whole, drifting:

and interrogating grasstrees
as to whether they could best be described
as a burst of green rays
or those rays plunging
down into darkness.

Early Morning

In the early morning
your hand, half asleep,
slips onto my side
and rests there lightly:

as if the strongest love
has no more purchase,
is no more deliberate
than this.

The Found Object

Like the ball plucked
from a game and held
tight by the tree,

something fascinates about the angle
of the frisbee propped
on the long grass behind
the pile of old sleepers,
more than as it leans
on the air and rolls
from hand to hand:

disappearing from view
with a crackle of foliage
then not where you guessed,
the last moment of its motion
is discovered like something precious,

as if flying loose
of our will it had come
to rest its real self,
and like the ultimate
in hide-and-seek players
could have stayed there forever,
a native of absence.

Driving Through Mist

The Great Eastern Highway, beginning
its undulations over the Darling Range
lifts us into mist. Headlights
sink deep shadows in it
of trees on the median strip
like the lettering of signs
affecting solidity, holograms
that veer and dissolve.
Plunging and surfacing, we're abruptly
intimate in a sealed cabin,
co-initiates to the mystery of getting nowhere,
then precariously next to each other
amongst the stars' massive scatter.

A road train climbing towards us
behind the next crest sends its rays
into the reflective air
like a localised sunrise
that we head for not quite wanting
to debunk the melodrama.

Close to home the mist thins:
the car rubs out a thick line
through pale floating scribbles.
The house has wisps on its hat
but its head is clear.

Refund

Though here with a book, the verandah
affords a front-row seat
to the summer day, right up against
the vibrant picture, just where
its atmosphere of birds and insects
thins out and is cooler.
It keeps me watching, not so much
because of all that's happening,
as to work out
whether anything is, or not.

A brief jingling comes from somewhere:
one of the houses or gardens, perhaps,
that have slowly surrounded us,
paving the valley till it's a concave suburb.
Though sound still travels by the old ways,
drifting and dodging, cars arriving noiselessly
(revving up someone else's drive) voices
shouting from where the conflict isn't.

I watch two girls on the other side
of the valley's marshy floor, in bright sun
lugging a large yellow bag between them.
At the dry creek bed the bag tilts
as each goes down then up
with her handle, and just after
the jingling creeps over from the orchard:
even this parcel of fragile sounds,
an accidental carillon, delayed and diverted
then delivered intact;

and following it, the echo
of the silence
as the girls took another step,
that held me here in strange isolation,
my distance from their journey
measured exactly by the bag's
shifting like a slip of light,
and the tinkled 'now'.

The Gecko's Room

I rolled the block up
out of its niche in the moist ground
of the valley floor where the reeds start
and the frog chuckling's at its thickest,
leaving a shining slug beginning
its slow journey from the black stain
of what had been the deepest shade,

and as the axe blade drove in
the walls of the gecko's
narrow room clapped shut
without the drama or last second reprieve
usually accorded the secret agent:

from the grain of the new chunk
reached a tiny grey arm and translucent hand,
like a comedian's exit;
like a frond of fungus.

At the National War Museum, Canberra

The first thing we saw
was a man carrying
an inconsolable child
away from the outside exhibits:
a huge propeller, stopped
but still blurred
in plasticine-like metal;
two tanks like massive insects
keeping stock-still in the open;
and latter-day cannons like misshapen
seesaws thudded down to stay.

In the first room, specimens
of weapons under glass,
improvised for hand-to-hand combat
in the trenches, the mood
they were grasped in
as hard to imagine as pain.

Then the dioramas, a word that here
does mean landscape of death.
The moment is frozen and shrunk,
but even at the edge
of the battle's scale model
you feel like someone who can't swim
on the brink of deep water,
the questions 'why?'
and 'how could they do this?'
coming like difficult breaths.
The life-sized soldier, sitting
with his head in his hands,
glued by mud to actuality,
takes up all the space
in your body with his despair.

This is a place for looking,
but at what?
There seems to be a clue
in the way things taper
towards vanishing point:
bullet-head, sword point, plane nose,
the rush of men; or are

focused on it, like the windscreens,
goggles, rifle sights ...

Everything seems drawn, straining,
towards nothing that can be seen.

We're here on holiday, that state
of heightened choice of what to do
and freedom to do nothing,
observing, one after the other,
situations in which there's the ultimate
imperative to act: kill, or be killed;

observing, this seems to be it,
the appalling spectacle
of life and death
merging in the one target,
and all existence aiming.

Twins

1 Twins

Spying on them in the womb
we found them top to tail
in their first sleep,
an intimacy
altogether unchosen.

Now I stare
at their box, slightly bigger
than a packet of tea
and about as light:

their bodies have subsided
and mingled, skipping
the myriad of attitudes
they would have had
to each other in life,
the faintest of momentums

urging images of relationship,
hurrying my heart.

2 The Tools of Grief

The first, when he was offered,
I refused, politely:
a kind of holding
I'd never tried ...

The second I accepted.
His body shocked me
with its warmth, its softness,
and its articulacy, just gave
wherever my hands weren't supporting
as if slipping away like water.
The way his tiny head lolled
took my breath like a long fall.
I noticed a small brown stain
on the white cloth, glossy,
that reminded me of the paint
used for models: a spill
from one of those miniature tins.

When I thought it could have been
from fear, I was all grieving father,
a role I hadn't expected
their unstarted lives would require.

The nurses were anxious to provide us
with the tools of grief.
To bathe them, dress them,
take their picture, though, were dexterities
beyond our dazed will.
To look and to hold
were all we could manage,
and even this felt like a branding.

But when their deaths are relived
with the anaesthetic of crisis worn off,
the efficiently caring hospital room
and its composed attendants gone,
and the two of them quiet in their crib
with beanies on as if rugged up
for a winter outing, so strangely
and deeply gone,
grief craves purchase, grasps
those memories pressed on us:

like tools turned on ourselves
they have to change us —
grip, cut, release.
Yet each time
there's been a learning:
a proficiency less cruel
crafts us closer
to who we must become.

3 Book of Suffering

I read about your suffering.
It was a way
to get closer, though I still
couldn't join you.

The hand you'd been dealt
was spread, revealing
each of the royal griefs:

the loss of part of you;
the loss of *those* children
and of their futures, already

almost lived, remembered;
and, fathomless, the loss
of their need for you.

With the most overwhelming
reason to cancelled, you live
enduring a new separateness
no embrace
can warm you from,
breasts aching with milk,
arms aching
with the weight of nothing.

4 The Resemblance

You said it made you love me more,
that this reflection of me
in God's mirror produced a shock
of recognition, of love
for maleness you hadn't felt before.

When we first met, you said
you'd try to picture me
when I was gone, but couldn't,
the impression I'd made
somehow imperceptible,
while deep enough to unsettle
cool plans for self-sufficiency.

Now it's as if my features
are finally clear to you,
revealed in the brief light
of those two tiny bodies,

soon overwhelmed
by the crematorium's blaze,
reduced to a small box of ashes
waiting for us at the front desk
wrapped like a gift.