

MICHAEL HEALD

THE MOVING WORLD POEMS

This is a remarkable and original book. It is a record of the author's explorations into Vipassana meditation, treated in poetic form so that just the most significant insights from the author's experience are presented.

The techniques of modern poetry are highly appropriate for Michael Heald's investigation, because they allow so much precision, such suspension of attentiveness, between one word, one nuance, and the next, because of the emphases that rhythm brings, and because of the concrete, vivid communication, beyond words, that the constant use of images allows. Still, he is the first person I know of who has seen and made use of these possibilities in such a way.

In the final section of the book, the poet applies the attention he has developed, through parsing his physical sensations while meditating, to an objective, calm awareness of everyday life. This allows him to write poems of great clarity and subtlety, classically direct poems, which are the high point of the book.

This book seems to me a daring and triumphant project. I hope many people will be strongly drawn to it, as I was.

– Robert Gray

author's note

Many of the poems in this collection draw upon experience arising from the practice of Vipassana (insight) meditation, which focuses bodily sensations in the process of reaction.

MICHAEL
HEALD

THE
MOVING WORLD
POEMS

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*It's your love of the manifest
that makes you an unreliable
witness*

Rumi

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Yet what kind
of setting out is this,
in **that fabled direction**
inward?

One felt being-deep,
as those few others were
in this steady life:

Setting Out

I have set out.

Yet what kind
of setting out is this,
in that fabled direction,
inward?

One felt being-deep,
as those few others
in this steady life:

the push away
from home to where
skies and cities
were oblivious to me;

the coming free, finally, of that woman
from my image of her,
an era of self
dislodged;
 and

the wild love of my substance for itself
escaped, drawing breath now,
limber and blue-eyed, beyond me.

Disorienting as these,
yet a going of which the
creature is capable,
and the way accommodates,

and already, all that I knew
of myself and the world
bounded by a wavering line.

Speaking

In speaking,
the problem is this:

that while my words can strain
to point at what I've seen,
to efface themselves
in deference to what is known,

your mind,
on hearing them,
may produce from its storehouse
bright, hard abstractions,
admitting no actual light.

And so *detachment* becomes
a cold indifference,
equanimity a desolate bracing
against the never-ceasing winds
of desire and disappointment,

impermanence a blurring, merely,
of the good earth's precious forms,
non-self a dementia chosen:

the way thus
occluded, inverted,
as I speak.

Listening

In listening, then,
it may be wrong
to hear these words
as your own,

as you have listened before
to the *poems*: the beautiful
or deranging words, given
for your soul to repeat.

You form them, yet
they cannot form you,

these exclamations
at what has been witnessed:

the stunning serene dis-
integration of daylight;

emergence, as the mind's
eye adjusts, of body-dark's
subtle spectrum.

you form them, yet
they cannot form you,

these exclamations –

themselves angling
to disperse mere concept-light –

at what has been witnessed:

**the stunning serene dis- integration
of daylight;**

emergence, as the mind's
eye adjusts, of body-dark's
subtle spectrum ...

Beginning

Beginning, you find
the mindbody
is serious about this:

it quietens
gathers itself

and attends:

as if you're a creature
whose senses, whose motives,
you don't entirely inhabit yet.

When I Move

When I move it is because I
am goaded by movement,

a turbulence within
that craves dissipation:

movement that has never
opened its eyes!

Presence

1

The way you can feel your body
though it is not being touched: like the hand
of existence resting on you.

2

The fabric of myself
a blurry guess
beginning to yield.

My body as if held,
yet not;

so *me*, and yet
in a pristine strangeness;

as if present to myself
for the first time;

as if given to myself
to be for the first time;

as if I am creation,

yet this still a faintness
of the immense light of being.

3

Ah,
there you are,
world!

To the Present

You are pre-existent! I saw you,
as if in a flaw of time:

you infinitesimally preceded
yourself, but that was enough
to let me know you;

to show me how
I create you, then give
you to myself.

Sitting The

day takes

colour, glares

and fades,

its dazzling pelt

swelling,

subsiding,

like a slow, vast breathing
to act;

which I sit near,

breathing

to be still,

to watch.

Yet these inward
actions:

a deep readying.

Anatta (Non-self)

1

My jaw
is extraordinarily present,
as if I watched
from my torso:

I do not know why
the terrain of the mindbody
discloses it from here.

I recognise the jaw
as peculiarly mine, yet also
that it is not me at all:

that it exists as resoundingly
outside my idea of it as the moon
is outside of the earth.

The tapering of face,
hinge of speech and eating,
yet even these familiar contours

ghostly in a dense mist
of sheer cohesion.

2

In the quiet hall, someone's
coughing; then my own.

I searched like a mother
amongst cries of the newborn
for uniqueness,

and could hear it, but also
that it was otherness:

identity no more than this
loop of recognition

spinning.

Fire

An encounter, some way off, about
which apprehension flared.

I watched the scalding at my heart.
The encounter's image grew,
or shrank, as I let
the burning claim me,
or knew merely *fire*:

sensation
fear's substance and dimension!

that while my words can strain
to point at what I've seen, to
efface themselves
in deference to what is known

The Self

Like those two-minute noodles:
hard and clumped, a wad
of brittle entanglements.

Dhamma

Like the bright clean limbs of the eucalypt
within its smudge of leaves

Waking

As when you believe yourself
to be moving, having vaguely registered
windows passing, until you realise
it's the other train in motion,
yours remains at rest, stillness
for a few moments an event in itself –

except the opposite: you had believed yourself
solidly at rest, then know, like waking,
you are thoroughly in motion:

are thoroughly motion.

Vedana (Sensations)

The way all things first
touch you.

The fire in the engine
of every blind act,

core of every mood.

The patch of ice
on our road to choosing.

*

Hands in the dark,
pulling,
pushing.

Medusa-glare
turning your
attitudes to stone.

The ocean
you have been helplessly
borne upon,
lifted, plunged,
cast far far away.

Flames
withering you
to blackened gestures.

*

The flavour
of each thing your mind
tastes, insisting
you like it,
or you don't.

Your *cliffs of fall*, Gerard,
fathomed, for millennia,
by those inward-watchers of the East,
tranquil at the well
of your dearest deep-down freshness.

*

Uniform –
coarse, tight:
your wretched obedience
unbearable now,
having stumbled upon this
prospect of peace.

Skin,
sealing you
creature
of the moment's heat:
cooling, loosening;
lifting away
terribly like part of you
yet as if
nothing; grotesquely,

yet as if
with the cosmic propriety
of a waning season.

New bright map
of who you are and
why.

Wafer of light between
event and reaction.

Thread
of your experiencing
you may follow
out of the mindbody's
labyrinth of suffering ...

*

Because their vibrations travel us,
speaking of substance, and their echoes
attenuate and mingle, composing an *interior*,

we come to believe ourselves
an entity apart, not
a complication of the flow,

forget that it's our birthright
to know ourselves as cascade of being.

*

I remember when
sensations were truth
were fate: when I did
as they told me.

Now they are
the walls of myself I
can walk through.

*

I dreamt that I was gathering them,
the pleasant and the unpleasant,
like autumn leaves: friable,
unconnected, harmless.

*

The very roots
of suffering, their hold
reaction:

without which

they draw free,
wither away
like tendrils of mist.

The Kite

At first it's as if the kite
has no string:
careering, oblivious.

Then as if you hold
the frailest of threads, with which
you feel you might almost restrain
it slightly:
but the thread just breaks when you try.

Nevertheless, you have never felt
quite this possibility before,
and so return to the field, eager.

Now the thread is stronger:
you can guide, a little,
in calm skies, though when
the bigger gusts come,
it's gone again.

But now you know
you're not just imagining the thread.
It strengthens itself through use, like
a muscle:

as if the plummeting and soaring
may be taken in hand
by an equanimity
with its feet on the ground.

Reactivity

Rogue force,

flinging your life around.

Shoving you towards,
yanking you away,

pinning you right here.

Vehicle

approaching the meditation room,
hearing the chanting –
vigorous, continuous –
like the dhamma vehicle's
engine running ...

your mind,
on hearing them,
may produce from its storehouse
bright, hard abstractions,
admitting no **actual light**.

Sankhara (Reaction)

1

To know yourself,
to change yourself,
you must lay hands on mind.

How many have clutched at themselves,
at others, to grasp and reform:
only to find they continue,
ungrasped, unchanged.

Only watching; only a watching
that can hold itself steady
in the moment's brunt,
in the moment's drag,
can allow
this taking hold:

stimulus contained
within its own tumult
settles.

You have stayed
reaction;

you have gained purchase
on your present-
as-it-becomes-your-future:

you have taken hold of mind.

2

The touch
of experience, like a creature
walking on your skin,

harmlessly,
preoccupied,
 unless
you flinch, fluster;

then the sting,
the bite:

yet calmly watched

sensation reaction

separate

like moon from cloud.

Mindfulness

A thousand reflexes
would spring to enable
harm, if not
for this gentle intervention.

Detachment

You have seized
the world either
to keep
or to kill.

Unclenching
you feel
the strange embrace
of what is.

Anicca (Impermanence)

1

Flow can't be focused
by the mundane eye:
it congeals as these form-blurs.

The mundane mind is Victor Frankenstein
cobbling remains together,
jolting them into blundering life
with the voltage of desire:

your moving world.

2

Relaxing your grip you find
that tools and materials
unsnag, realign ...

and if each act can be woken
from its nightmare of incompleteness

your exertion will enjoy
the daylight of evanescence –
will be *collaboration* through and through!

Samadhi (Concentration)

Without it, you may perceive
the world lumpishly:

mists as dead-ends;
blurs, the immaculate.

And the greatest misconstruction
will be what you call *I*, that lump
which does not cling,
but is clung to.

When I move it is because I
am goaded by movement,

a turbulence within
that craves dissipation:

**movement that has never
opened its eyes!**

In this World

In this world,
echoes tell us
what to think and feel and do,

over our heads a sky brilliant
with stars not there.

Movements

We are like those things so insubstantial –
petal-shards, spider-husks, little clouds of fluff –
that seem to move deliberately,
leap even, scurry and glide,

and yet are merely
bustled and wafted.

The Metaphor-spark

Perhaps you think
that the metaphor-spark
gives a glimpse of depths
cavernous, intricate, profound.

But could it equally plunge us
into our own gaudy darkness,

that exhilarating breathlessness
starvation, not plenitude?

Italics

Mould-fronds growing
from concepts rotten at the core;

words stooped
beneath their meaning-burden, or

leaning to make headway
against the driving wind of
the inarticulate.

Language a-wry.

Language enfeebled yet avid.

Meaning just before
it dissolves completely.

Language in the finery
of another language.

The veins of language
standing out with the effort.

The bow and flourish of meaning's
arrival / departure ...

Meaning's hair
left on the pillow.

The March Fly's Orbit

All that you have swallowed
into ownership.

The fever
of your passions.

The poison
of your hatreds.

And these plans you clutch,
strangling the future.

Is it any wonder, when you go out
from your cool house into the pressing heat,
that you suffer the march fly's furious orbit?

The Weird Place

If you say my journey's
to a weird place,
where does that leave you?
Here: where the fireman sets light,
the priest debauches;
the leader follows and the protector harms; where
defence exposes and cultivation lays waste; where
colonisers bar the door,
and those who should be looked down upon
occupy the highest office.

Flag

The Koori flag is undulating
over to my right as I walk:

suddenly the birdsong sounds like
voices calling from exile.

Miracles

These people, blind
to the wonder of being,
burning crazy fires in their darkness.

God

How can we ever undo
this metaphor *God*,

snip the vehicle
free of its tenor,
and watch the man-shaped
ballooncloud, puffy hand pointing anywhere,
drift away into the wide blue?

What would be left down
here? A few scraps of
story, where the self's
translucence shimmers, we might
begin to decipher
by the light of our own flesh;

some wracking
thrills of our own
heights and depths
we'd be obliged to
endure, comprehend.

The Witnesses

There's a family at my door.

They have come forward, as witnesses,
the children following.

Friends, it is a case
of mistaken identity:
what you have witnessed
is the inward
dressed up
as the outward.

You have misread your book:
it is asking you
to knock at your own door,
enter your own house ...

Millennium

The millennium we thought might
form a boundary from the madness
of the past, the *leader*
swept us over in one
messianic stride. Once again

we wake in the field of slaughter
and ask how we got here,
and if it is our natural habitat:
our inescapable, putrid nest.

The Full Look

... if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst

– Thomas Hardy

The politician feeding
on the fear he's sown;

the warlord fashioning amputees
as symbols of his power;

the father choosing
which child next he'll
drop from the bridge
to punish the mother;

the fanatic
shattering those near as he
sweeps all aside to find heaven;

the paedophile's groom and
grip ...

Each and every act
a clutch at happiness,
veer from pain:

without such seeing,
without such knowing,
no hold can be taken
that such harming won't soon
escape unweakened.

This Man

This man had had a wife.

Betrayal, abandonment, jealousy,
were his torments,
and a child whose pain
he assumed so deeply:

such were the wounds
he tore in himself, over and over, with
that one barbed union, unaware

there was no barb but the clench
of his own flesh.

Heart

The rush of love
out from yourself
towards the other ...

Then, dazzled
by where it has alighted,
you forget that its source
is deep within you,

feeling where it burst free
as a wound,
as your *heart* ...

Trivial Matters

Trivial matters,
but those reactions –
that lunge, that recoil –

are the pattern, writ small,

are the propulsion,
the gait and direction

of your whole life ...

To Move

is to let
the bones of your usual moving
lie still, until they feel
those subtler actions that
grip and urge them,

and learn
a new coordination,
new deliberateness;
then move

from that recurring moment,
the moment *that can't improve*,
that has felt like
a function of your existence,

its press and clamour still there
but as if, now, to a knowing
not already a being,

your heart
astonished by a new strong
giving-through to ease:

your mind
has opened its eyes
a moment earlier, a fraction wider
in the body-dark:

you have eluded
what had always come,
sidestepped fate:

you have moved.

the moving world

'So it seems that other creatures have appeared here!'

– Majjhima Nikaya

The Level

A furry spider is folded
high on the bedroom wall: outstretched
it would be rangy ...

I could put it out:
it would be sleepy enough, this time of year,
to sidle into a jar if nudged.

But this house
has so many gaps,
it would be no more
than a ritual:

nature would simply
trickle back and find its level
in my porous home.

Life

Rocks, too, are alive
it's said, their life
just less apparent: molecules
straining in such microscopic
slow-motion as to feign inertia.

Perhaps that's why I step so carefully
around the dry and disintegrating bee
on the decking this late autumn:
because my foot-of-many-bones knows,
as does my self-in-solution,

that integration is precarious
and only a phase; and this bee's
breaking-up, as much as the rock's
heave-together, is its life.

The Flock

The flock's grain
is fine,

like dust when your line of sight
intersects with the sun's,

floating like gold leaf in water;

yet its drift is now
and again abruptly reined –

a writhing to be free, or
easing into those contours offered?

The flock shimmers,
inscrutable as decision.

Winter

This year, winter
just ruffled my hair
and sent me along to spring ...

Apple Tree

Bought as the year
began darkening, three-pronged
like the tough foot
of a wading bird, sparse
leaves blanched,
forlorn in its black-plastic-bandaged
socket of earth:
but on closer inspection,
buds already thronging.

Flower-tree

Bud, flower, empty cup
all on the same branch, like a clock
telling different times at once:

a hand of cards,
a run;

or the earth cheating
at rock-scissors-paper
against the sky.

That House

I realise now why I liked
that house so much: it had
a hill so close and round
it was company – it spoke.

With its high verandah
facing that way, it was
always in cahoots
with the buoyant earth.

Arms of Grass

our spade is turned

– Ludwig Wittgenstein

I write this with an unsteady hand,
after all that spadework,
digging out a mat of lawn
for potatoes. And yet my memory
is of arms of grass widening
to receive the soil, as late sun
surged like rivulets of sweat.

Balance

In the sheltered warmth of the back verandah
my legs feel attenuated: stalks
swaying slightly not in air
but the internal weather of my balance:
minute adjustments, molecular steps,

as the earth rolls hugely.

Aubade

Waking, my hand is resting
on the ridge of my shin, reminding me
of the sawn branches I took hold of yesterday
I didn't really want to burn –
so pale and elegant –
but at my son's insistence
chose from and laid in the fire;

to slide the bone of my arm now
from the bone of my leg
would feel like it did
to draw those branches
from their tangle: each with a way,
like flames, to come free.

In One Ear

I'm leaning my head on my hand,
so one ear's blocked, and the train sounds
seem both nearer and more distant,
a cacophony that's inside me
and yet from which I'm excluded:
rumbling and clatter gigantic but like shadows,
and all the talking as if uttered
by my own hollowness, too close
to focus. Just one half of one sense
impaired, and where am I?

Self-portrait in a Train Window

I have made this journey so often
my reflection has grown older.

After childhood, for so long
the face appears to stand still,
though it is in motion
like glass:

 until, in photos
taken just last year,
you look so young.

Volcano Tour

Then the guide made you realise
you were standing where the volcano
had tossed lumps of rock which,
if a human head had occupied
one point of their trajectory,
would not have been in the least deflected.

And an apprehension of that crushing hail,
those craggy-knuckled king-hits,
made your skull feel held aloft
as on a shy, and your consciousness –
all that you complicatedly are –
fragile goods behind a plate-glass window
with the earth rummaging for stones.

Comet

The dark road out of Apollo Bay
aims us at this portent,

slow, and faint, yet a plummet
of such proportions

it tears your eyes
from every form they've clung to
as a measure of who you are,

from every face or earth-scape
you were oriented by:

a fall past
all ground.

Touching Snow

In that photo of me leaning,
in my early twenties, on a wall
of snow in an alpine village,
I now remind myself of an insect

whose balance is unaffected,
as yet, by the first touch
of some avalanche or other that,
next moment, will sweep it away.

Divorcee

The force with which
gravity slams you to the ground
and that with which
desire flung you at the *beloved*
now seem akin –

and a child
like one of the sparks thrown off
that doesn't fade, but grows.

You reel, but stay put
in this family
rearranged as forces deeper
than desire took hold:

you are awake, now,
in the universe of forces.

Separatees

After kissing our son goodbye, I almost
took a step towards you.

*

From the phone your voice said
darling before you could catch it.

*

Yes, but for how long before this
were we automatons?

The First Christmas Eve

There's a big black ute
in my driveway,
my ex's new partner's:

in its tray, the batmobile
nestled like a young one in the pouch.

We carry it between us, she and I, to
a place of overnight concealment in
my house, this Christmas
being *mine*, and I ask
if it was difficult to assemble:

she laughs and says it wasn't her problem,
and my relief that its myriad
dark parts are put together
works loose as a ruthless
acceleration shakes my heart.

The Looks

When you dangled, in your sling,
on my chest, your blue eyes
now open, now closed, to what lay ahead,
I would look into looks so
direct and warm yet not
quite at me, not quite for me,

as if unaligned, now,
with the world's eye contact.

Resemblance

My infant son
would scan the shelves as I carried him
from room to room, searching
for what he desperately wanted next:
just like me.

But when I carried him
into the music, and let
the music carry us, he was content
to watch and be quiet:
just like me.

Back There, or A Migrant's Return

Back there, the brawny,
fiery eye watching me
relented: the muscles
of my face and throat relaxed;

that is not to say
I felt at home:

it was like the embrace
of someone whose mind is elsewhere.

In this Garden

In this garden, parrots come
and strut around the grass
as if they own the place,
but when you look again
are gone.

The slick red at their breast catches up
a moist burning of my own there:
anxieties that, likewise,
come and go,
natives of transience.

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about the author

Michael Heald was born in Grimsby, England, in 1959, and emigrated to Perth, Western Australia, with his family in 1972. He graduated from The University of Western Australia with an arts degree and worked in teaching and as a squash professional until embarking on further study. He completed a PhD in contemporary Western Australian poetry in 1999 and is now Subject Leader of Literature in the Foundation Studies Program of Trinity College, University of Melbourne. Michael also teaches Poetry and Poetics at The University of Melbourne.

Previous books of poetry with Fremantle Press include *body-flame* (1999), and *Focusing Saturn* (2004), which was shortlisted for the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards and the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards.