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How to speak into history's ear-trumpet is not yet the province of Michael Heald. Yet in these days of look-alike poetry from so many younger poets, a 'new' poet's first collection which has a singular, individual feeling for the world comes as a jolt. *Body-Flame*'s poems 'specialise', if the phrase may be allowed, in the way objects, moods, movements and sudden perceptions intersect in instants of time. Often, they are about no more than 'minor' outdoor events – swinging up an axe to chop wood, a haze of midges, brushing into a dangle of windchimes at an outdoors market. Sometimes they are about extremely sharp back-of-the-mind sensations in which the drama of broken relationships is the conscious story-element. All of these poems, however, relate to the mapping of a highly specific type of experience – an awareness both of the temporariness of what we are and do but also of the passing moment's intensity. They evidence, as Heald puts it in his poem 'In the Markets' , 'the collapse of my being there'.

Not dependent on abstract critical terms, many of his poems read like short moments of access to a particularly acute body-sense, read or to a heightened out-of-time 'virtuality' in the contemporary construction of emotion. A poem like 'In the CD Shop, the Heart', for instance, counterposes bizarre associations provoked by looking at a complex, digitally imaged CD cover with his own back-of-the-mind sense of a threshold level of meaning which will, somehow, always escape detection. Similarly in the poem 'Rather than Gone', the forgettable act of crouching down to unlock a bicycle offers the enigma of fullness in what occurs – a memorable but also paradoxically blank feeling for a building over there, a river across the way. His best work is often in these microscopic reconstructions of the materiality of experience and its time-elapse.

Heald's work, in these and similar pieces, is spare, precise, elegant and utterly his own. If his work falters briefly, then it is where first books often do – in occasionally over-sensitive obeisances to today's political issues. Or in odd moments of emotional and thematic evasiveness – such as the opening poem of the otherwise powerful sequence 'Separations'. But *Body-Flame* is a striking book where (Heald's words) the 'perennial intensities' of the informatic, body-conscious, relationshipobsessed age we are part of must be distinguished from 'the dark' a good poet can 'lavish on their remoteness'.

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Martin Harrison is a poet and critic.

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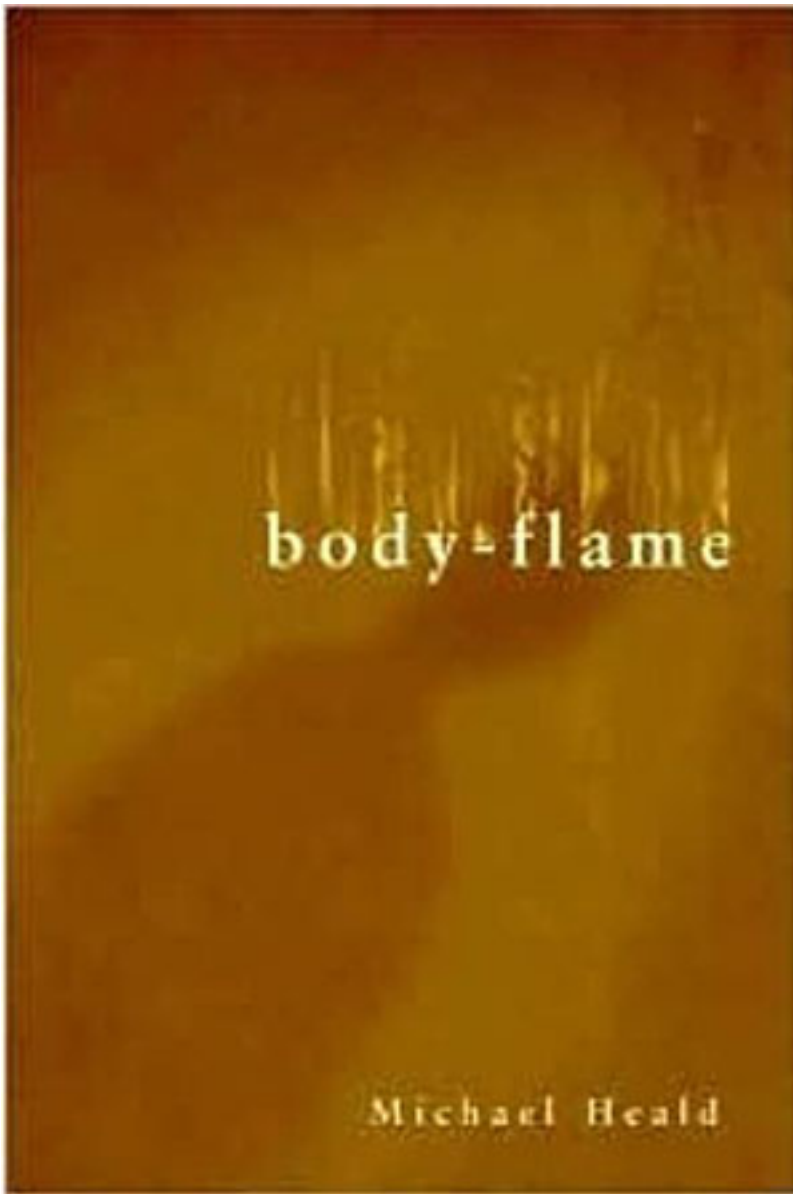
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