

body-flame

Body-flame, Michael Heald's first full-length collection of poetry, is a work of quiet intensity and power.

Concerned with the life of the body and its senses, with connections and separations of various kinds, these poems explore what it is to be human in a shifting and frequently alienating world.

Michael Heald was born in England in 1959 and emigrated with his family in 1972. He has travelled in Europe, working mostly as a squash coach, and has recently completed a PhD researching contemporary poetics.

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body-flame

poems by

Michael Heald

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Schedule

Exercise one day, rest the next:
a rhythm with enough momentum,
now, to sway my indolence.
Treading water in the ocean on New Year's Eve,
my forward-planning faculty
suddenly projects the schedule
to my life's horizon,
feels it teeter:

will the day I die
be an on or an off day?

If on, dying could be seen
as exercise, a feat of letting go
it takes an eternity to recover from:
if off, as the ultimate relaxation
before that endless sequence of events
merging you back into everything.

I lie back down
and pull the beach towards me:
either way my conscience can be clear;
I won't be slacking.

Waking Early

Sometimes you wake
earlier than sensation,
before memory. It could be
any day, and who you are
is so thinned out
you look through yourself:

and the act of recollection
can be considered and withheld,
the vacuum kept intact
by stillness and a refusal
to focus circumstance, which would
be to form a point and burst it;

as if all you are
is awareness itself, a film
of receptive tension across time.

And this feeling stays with you
all day, the lightness, and the faint
panic that you might be lying
with the stacked dead of Africa,
or slumped on some cell floor
up North: you just couldn't tell
you weren't there.

October Twilight

Out in the cool October twilight
to scrounge an evening's worth of wood
while I can still see:
a blowy day, now calm, and a cold
night in store. The garden's whitenesses
— daisy, May, the orchard's cloud —
are fading as I find an old
stump, pulled like a rotten tooth
from its muddy gum that winter,
and when I swing the axe up
hit a branch
of the cherry tree, shining blossom
showering my hair and arms,
as if I've brought down the last flakes
of light from the air on myself.

Death of a Forest

Trying to make the loss of a forest
appear in its adult dimensions
I said, 'Imagine a landscape
where all the trees are dead
and there's no green:
how would that make you feel?'
He thought for a moment: 'I've seen
a place like that, in Tasmania.
The trees left were all bare, just sticks.
I thought it looked good.
It looked kind of weird ...'

as if we're drawn to such scenes
because they're part of our destiny,
of our time's body,
which we love.

Spring

A ball of midges
hovers above the tall spring grass
like a cloud of steam;
a patch of air
seen under a microscope,
its invisible busyness revealed.

I go up close
and peer into it
(it's about head height)
focusing the tiny bodies
being tumbled, following
an individual's path,
one line
of the scribbled sphere.

It's like a cartoon version
of a fight, a scrimmage held aloft
by sheer vehemence;
but its milling
is softer than aggression,
and the way one suddenly darts
to hover elsewhere
looks more like precise cooperation,
decisions sparking
in an agile mind.

I walk away, then turn
to see it
still effervescing in place,
a fragile and tenacious turmoil,
the ghost of coherence.

The Blue Pasture

The ocean is so still and flat today
it looks like a blue field
you could walk over to the horizon;

the continuation, in blue,
of the land, as if we lived
on the edge of a huge blue pasture.

We're no longer at the limit
of our territory: it extends, blue,
as far as the eye can stride.

Dodge

One of the first
warm nights. Going into
the laundry, I duck,
my body remembering
the spider's web that's usually
slung across one corner
of the doorway in summer
like an eye patch:
fatal obstacle
to frail flight: deflecting me
by force of character.

It's not there yet,
but I might as well
get back into the habit.
I let an armful of clothes
flop into the basket, thinking
how much I like the spider's
grim patience reappearing each year,
and how my body might remember

that slight dodge
more keenly than most
of life's manoeuvring
when the will to move's worn out.

Punctuation

Sipping coffee, speaking; the vine
silently conducting nutrients
above our heads, when a passionfruit
whacks the ground with its ripeness,

weird piece of punctuation,
full of slippery seeds and sweet.

The Huntsman

The huntsman
has drawn off the glove of itself
and left it on the windowsill
next to the keyring,
the abdominal hatch ajar:
you can see down
the tiny tubes its legs filled
and in through the pin holes
it looked out from.

I carry it in cupped hand
like a withered flower
to where I'm working.
When I open the window my desk's
up against, warm air nudges it towards me
as if breathing into tinder:

but the life's gone out
for good, touching off
a dull sparkling
the next size up.

In the Markets

In the markets, I straighten
— after peering at some candles —
into a wind chime, that crumples
with a muted tinkling. I stoop
and it jangles free,

repeats the ragged peal
as I'm walking away,
the collapse of my being there
echoed fainter and fainter.

Amusements

1. Balloon Sculptor

tweaks a shred of colour
(quick stretch of a muscle strand)
and puts it to his lips,
more garish dribble
than dangling instrument,

points it
at us like a bulbous tongue,
lifts it
in our direction;

breathes it out like a slow flame,
easy-going glass,
retentive wind-sock;

seals it from its parent
lungs with a neat belly-button
then gets his fingers in
his long sigh and works
like trying to get then free
again, fast enough to beat
its clutches, with the ruthlessness
and delicacy of a faith healer
in a gut,

(it's almost possible to focus
just articulacy in its puff
of wonder, malleable aura)

whatever it is
squeaking as if it's
a squeeze to emerge from formlessness,
and we're amazed to find
we recognise something made
of floating tied in knots.

2. Pin Head

He'd coveted its mysteries for months
finally had enough saved up

and got one in the huge new shopping centre
the finishing twinkle of which was just
retracting as we got there:

heavy sandwich of silver pins
that shifted en masse in the box
with a muted cymbal crash,
tugging your hand: unlikely gismo
of tiny pistons attempting
a crude and jerky approximation
of moltenness, like the first goes
at motion pictures. In the coffee shop
he raced around collecting its impressions
of every object and contour he could find,
each one a flash-bright epiphany:
gleaming elbow of the chair,
fairytale fruit, implacable
cutlery: dazzling fossils pressing
on the eye until he did its sibilant
now-you-see-it now-you-don't trick,
sneezing the last discovery out of there.

We stopped short of tilting back
our heads so it could do our portraits,
saving that for home: like looking up to meet
one instant of a downpour, rush
of heavy rays that prod
and stop to form
the mask of your expression: like lying
a bed of nails on your face
and preserving your smile; a mirror
where your image bulges from behind
(you don't pull faces but push them)

and when you take yourself carefully
from the mold what confronts you,
as he says, and why he likes it,
is so lifelike and yet so cold,
so there and yet so missing,
your every look's chilled to numbness
for ages after.

Keating's Face as the Children were Talking

To see
Keating's face
as the children were talking,

letting itself
be pushed around, putty
in their questioning;

to see those features
shifting, you could believe

that innocence was a heat
to melt a whole landscape.

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.

The Accent's Reply

Who says?

You make it sound as if
I went back of my own accord,

as if those few syllables I managed
were a mumbling in sleep
that petered out gently,

not the blurt of one held under.
You muscled me back down
but it's your own flesh
you're trying to drown me in,
poured through all those English lives:

how could you think I'd die there?
I'm a living pause, nourished, harboured,
while you're the one drowned out,
who can't hear yourself think,
hear yourself be, gasping fish
out of the element of yourself.

SEPARATIONS

Reminder

*You have no need of my thoughts or my hopes,
living in the realm of the absolute event.*

— from 'Ishtar', Judith Wright.

Afterwards, you're quiet
and still. And then your stillness
is shaken. Gently at first,
then roughly. I watch
oblivious to the dart of pleasure
my withdrawing has pierced you with.

Smooth and sweet release:
your mother said that with the last
of her seven it was like that;
the epidural had damned sensation
halfway up your spine, so just
that pleasure trickled through
as the second of the twins came,
limp and silent. Now
you rush, you open:
shouldn't have accepted
that chemical blindfold that meant
you didn't recognise the pressure,
so the first dropped into
the stainless embrace of the commode
before you realised; should have been
braver, should have been the one
to take him back, so few
acts of mothering to be had ...

I hold you, but don't trust
my body's language after it's whispered
this reminder, betraying all those nerves
that kept their silence: provoking,
with its visceral honesty,
this outburst from the you
even that needle, that went so far,
couldn't get to: assailing us both,
lamenting and vengeful,
from *the realm of the absolute event.*

Blackberries

You brought a bowl
of blackberries to me
in the study, you

hot and grimy, yet brisk,
me propped on the desk
as if recovering from heavy labour:
it was a day
when I couldn't think of anything
except your body, while you
were luxuriating in the garden's responsiveness
to the sun's blaze of attention,
wouldn't be withered
back to your own limbs
by the indoors glow of mine.

And I couldn't touch them, let alone
bring one to my lips,
so intensely did they resemble
your swollen nipples.

Going

We're sitting out on the verandah
of the Mundaring Cafe, where
the Great Eastern Highway calms down,
levels out, as some bikers
begin powering past, more

and then more of them,
like a strong rain starting,
reclined as if utterly
at ease with their going,

as we remain
awkwardly upright, ornately
caged in our wrought-iron chairs,
trying to 'get somewhere'.

They're carried past in comfort,
with their feet up, but stiff
like bits of furniture; falling forwards,
yet in the backwards-flying, comic book
KO position, a jack-knifed crucifixion.

The sound of them
punctuates our silence: the gulping,
or when they're bunched, the gobbling

of moments: alarming
as far as it's an impact,
like arrows in a soft target;
soothing in as much as it's a viscous
dripping into the main body.

Dracula

That windy evening, out on the dark
verandah, I must have seemed
like Dracula, a corpse that had
sat up again, eyes shining,
speaking of future togethernesses
that made your blood run cold.

Later, though, I lay
pinned by the stake
of your conviction,
that old heart split,
the past glugging out

in rich clots
of memory.

**Los Chasquis, Fremantle,
September 1995**

I'd forgotten about music.
Now this Chilean exuberance
eases me onto Fremantle's
warm limestone shoulder, tears oozing
from the dark, implacable
gaze I'm wrapped in. That drum

throbs at such a depth: what was it
Komunyaka said: 'I've beaten a song
back into you'? The strumming
is almost frantic, and the tempo
vehement, but that woman's moving
with it as though it's lightened her
so the ground barely keeps hold.

Dark, earnest faces, glowing pipes,
drum-club pounding:
an engine at full tilt
driving stopped grief out of me.

After We've Agreed

After we've agreed
to split up,
you're stroking the cat
— your hand
with that firmness in softness
that winds me when I remember —
who watches me, eyes narrowed,
head back, after we've agreed.

Hush

As the phone-box door elbows
past me, I remember
it nudging us closer
and at the moment of hushed
confinement your eyes
holding mine and
widening, then swerving
playfully away.

Lost

*We have found each other
On the golden plateau
Far within us* — Vasko Popa

And this blank plain where
we're lost to each other?

Where the breath-taking completions
are ragged bites out of me;
where the contours that soothed
are heavy blades;

where the turning inside out is slow:
is a weeping, a blossoming, a retching;

where the night
is a wedge of darkness
entering my heart and widening
it with each tap of memory
at the universe-wide base.

Train Towards Fremantle

The dim, calm sea
we're sliding near, barely roughened
by the evening air,
reminds me of your skin
when you were cold.
A man behind me somewhere
is full of greetings:

'Hello Mum! Hello Dad!'

'Hello Mr Keating!'

'Hello Rottneest!
Hello quackers, or quockers,
or whatever you are!'

I still wonder if we simply
didn't talk to each other; whether,

if we'd let the pain speak,
not the anger for it,
we might not have arrived
at this silence.

Unofficial Ad for Guinness

The Fremantle journalist told me
his friend said the reason
he liked Guinness so much
was that you can touch
your finger to the creamy head
and tease up a nipple.

Deeper

That lurch as I felt
you really were going: from deeper
than I thought movement went,

like the one who's slept
on what he took for an island
as the sea-monster rears ...

Meaning Love

you said
'I want you to hear me.
It's over.'
But all I could
hear was your voice,
meaning love.

Separations

1. Back

After the curette they could only find
a room in the maternity ward.
The nurse prised open the jaws of a camp-bed
for me to be swallowed by sleep down,
but you asked me into yours,
behind you to avoid the tubing.
I shaped myself, the spoon
which that night, monstrous
with cries of the new born
and labour groans, would come
and sip the turmoil of your wakefulness from.

You brought your son
to the hospital and stayed
the night in my flat. The sheet

swayed like a slow eyelid:
in the dimness your back-turned
nakedness a dazzling wall.

2. Weekend

All weekend your son's flesh
torments me with resemblance.
I let him sleep next to me
on my new bed, but his weight
and breathing there becomes
the beast of my loss, tearing me
from dreams of your tenderness.

At the station you were displayed
in the big window of your new car,
flushed, reclining slightly
in the generous seat: looked down reaching
for the still unfamiliar ignition.

After the anniversary weekend in Bridgetown
heat clung as we drove. We backed off
the South Western Highway into a dense

green cloud of Ti-tree. You were nervous,
on the lookout, then reclined, legs spread
exultantly, and we were
the gleaming core of that secrecy.

3. Impetii

you knee-walked
to the far side
of the bed, put out your hand
for me to join you

you accelerated
away
in the dismal Midland carpark

In the CD Shop, the Heart

In the glossy miniature, a dog
with its human hand in a glove
held a small red heart
between thumb and forefinger (vivid as
the bee sting tweezered off
my father's arm one summer)
while around a morose fountain
slunk wolves, snakes, a half-woman half-leopard,
and what looked like just
an elongated torso: I thought it might be

the heart I've got now, because
of an exactitude in its position,
yet, smooth and helpless,
toyed with by those energies.

The dog looked pleased:
as if it was a dare
to extract it, or as if it was
about to be popped in and swallowed.

Yet what also fulminated
was the sense that what was happening
wasn't even about the heart.

Paralysis Circuit

I read
we're hard-wired
with a paralysis circuit,
that stops us doing
everything we dream (otherwise
what a doomed creature
we'd be, remote control toy
to our fervid unconscious).
But that one where
I asked you if you had
a lover, and you replied
in your pleased, child-like voice,
'O yes!' then started
to tell me how you did it
shorted it out: the cry flared
from that circuitry, searing me awake,
blind in the night's gut
half-digested by grief.

What Burns

When we were together I was sceptical
about the richness of my desire,
and now we're apart can't fathom
the vitality of my grief:

diaphanous tension
and emotional inertia?

I was down to do chemistry
and physics in high school
but the guidance officer talked me out of it
in favour of history and lit.,

equipping me to remember
and make offerings of words,
and to stray beyond my culture,

where an exotic light refines me
to translucence, reveals my heart
as an effect of confluence; and a guide
whose robes are the flag
of an Atlantis of happiness
shows me the eternal source,
tells me I must realise

what burns and will burn inexhaustibly
all the way through me are not
those perennial intensities
but the dark I lavish on their remoteness.

Stirling's Highway

Bituminised, administered by signs,
the track he wore
between blank port and makeshift city,
stitching up the deal with here,

negligible blemish
in the great loop of ocean
that was his round trip from the mother-land
to collect a fortune.

And us, consigned to retrace
his imperial toing and froing?
The river of glossy traffic
through the western suburbs cuts
into richer strata year by year,
carving a boutique gorge, while distant
limbs of the road-body
bloat and stretch, leaking anaemic settlement.
This hot, still February evening

his road aims into the low,
fat sun so the gold surges,
overwhelming Towards, the troughs slowly
filling with dark.

Fremantle Anchors

They've let their breath out now
and are taking it easy, lying back
or propped on an elbow, giant chain
trailing like strings of bubbles
Most look straight through them
like a shrivelled fence,
though children's hands approach
and nibble at the old skin.

Arrows shot in slow motion
at stability, without them
those arks of Europeans couldn't have stopped
and steadied themselves for the decisive
stride ashore (the strain
told in one stock bent double,
sail-power as circus strongman).

Fabulous bones from the throat
of famous motion, amongst them
you notice your own free breath
rising and falling like the swell,
drift cautiously as if that fearsome weight
might jerk you to a dislocating halt:
get a vision of these as moments
in an iron acrobat's tumbling pass.

**Financial Advisor,
or The Anti-Troll**

Squat, like a troll,
but what on earth
has his flesh become?
Nothing of forest or cave.

He bulges, the compaction
when all risk's sucked
back inside, his eye's gleam
the sheen on something dark:

and the golden nest-egg
forming outside him, fruit,
somehow, of the pressure.

Vicarious Epiphany

for C

Tormented by his wife's absence,
afraid of temptation when the women
arrived for the barbecue
in summer clothing tantamount to lingerie,
he prayed, and saw their bodies changed:

'like those of your own children
when you're bathing them: tender,
beautiful, part of you',

God having allowed him
to relax in the agonising drag;
to flow, somehow:
to be love.

**RSA Cert TEFL,
Milner College Inc, Perth 1996**

Bosnians, Iraqis,
Koreans and Chinese
drift into circles,
haltingly exchange
pleasantries provided, this time,
free of charge.

Beyond, the roughened
Swan's tongue-flesh wallowing
in a high-rise parenthesis.

Consumer

Last night before sleeping
I knew we already
have everything: felt
the moon move, darkness flowing;
saw a slab of reef
rear from the ocean;

halfway through today,
paralysed by the sadness
of not having one frivolous
re-arrangement of matter churned
out by an oblivious factory.

The Robot of Wastefulness

In the toilets
I shove one hand
in each dryer, so I've got
two roaring metal gauntlets on:

I'm the robot of wastefulness
and it's in my power
to destroy the earth, even if
I'm eaten
from the hands in
as I do it.

The Life of Death

I wake to a woman broadcast
pleading for permission
to die, urbanely
refused: now

we're insensible to the life
of death, as well as
to the life of life,

and my clothes
are rags
of the same foul suit as his,

my moving injures
the air and my very
uprightness is an obscenity.

'How Do You Feel?'

for the Bropho family

After that daughter showed us
what the intense innocence
of a thirteen-year-old girl can do,
reflected back uniform-dark,
her mother's gaze
fixed on the inexorable: 'the sun

will rise in the morning,
the river will continue to flow'
her epitaph, floating free
of that tombstone of the week's
events, the *Sunday Times*.

Walking with the Chinese Poet

Walking with the Chinese poet along the quiet
sunny streets, he's amazed at how we see
no one, only parked cars gleaming, and glittering trees,
tough leaves slithering on the bitumen.
'Like those places in films ...'
'Ghost towns?'
'Yeah, yeah. Ghost towns. You will
never see this in China.'

And on the campus, 'not a soul',
until we're skirting the empty oval
and the players, shining white,
trickle from the pavilion
to sparsely occupy
the green. I rummage
through the jargon to find a way
to say what's happening, give up,
and we watch the cryptic contest
in silence. At the squash courts,

excluded by the glass wall,
he watches our patterned vehemence
for a while, then dozes off, his slight form
like a pile of someone's gear
on the broad wooden gallery.
Walking back, my body is savouring
itself, his scrawny, hunched against
the cool wind, and he says
he's in awe of my exertions,
says the afternoon is 'not a good time'
for him, 'I usually sleep', and

I turn again, sweat in my eyes,
breathing hard, to see him slumped
on that wooden terrace, recovering
between life and death
struggles with his country.

For the Finger-ends of Irish Harpists

Clumsy one-winged seeds
dropping from the pale hand-canopy,

thrumming on an English table,

pointing all over on the floor
till swept up and slung to the dogs,

showers of touch in the meadow:

a tradition my people tried
to amputate, but I'm listening
to an Irish harpist
live in the studio,
hanging on by the fingernails
to his country's version of grief.

To the King Crab

Why you? Well, since the orange roughly is
so long-lived, hauled to the surface
(where its guts, normally corsetted
by the pressure way down there, explode)
still too young at forty-odd to have mated,
its days reclining on the ice of Sydney's
fish shops are well and truly numbered,
and you're the next transient bonanza.
Just when it seemed the briny cupboard
was bare, there are piles of you guys
on the floor below the shelf.

Your fate, I have to tell you, gives me
a particularly bad case of eco-grief:
perhaps it's your majestic bulk
and your indifference to shallower
goings on, and that huge right nipper
of yours probably corresponds to an inflated
idea of my pen-hand's powers ...
But what is there to say:
this royal audience can only be
in the manner of an abject apology
on behalf of my species. If I go
and take a hammer to the boxes of ocean

in restaurant windows, where you're trussed
with plastic twine and where the ground
you tread on is each other, you'd only spill
into Northbridge's bedazzled milling,
and be crunched underfoot like beer cans.

I suppose the good news is
you'll only get hunted to economic extinction
(the mopping up of the rest of you
in pursuit of the next nearest harvest
will be an accident).

Book of Songs

I looked
at a book of songs
to join in with the rain,
Spring, the rising of the moon:

looked back at
the city and saw
trees and sky
streaming from its grip.

The Monks Self-Immolating

The monks self-immolating
know they've only
intensified the body-flame,

brightened how we're given,
each moment, to the infinite:

they hold themselves
to the lightless
grappling and crumbling
till that one of their lives
has to let go.

Conjunctiva

A red hand's clutching
at the blue of my eye;
I look as if something I've encountered
has so appalled me it's started
a slow shattering of sight's flesh:

and it could be flowers,
what I get for prying into
the crossfire of their propagation;
or perhaps for ignoring
the mite empires flourishing
in the ceaseless rain
of dust from our bodies.

Or it could be one of our own
concoctions, ruthlessly useful,
backfiring on the stuff of its maker.

I feel a kinship with those frogs
in the rainforest, perishing now
in some caustic season their tender
glistening's the first to be withered by,
attacked where I'm as naked.

I seal them in the dark, imagining
they're bathed in healing fluids
remembering their old bright selves,
but they spitefully glue themselves shut
from inside, take prising open,
emerging bloody, spitting mucous,
clawing with each blink.

The specialist's at a loss, the big plastic
eye on his desk trailing nerves
like a meteor as he searches through
the dark his science has left him in;
and the water-torture of drops
doesn't break it, the fire
crackles on in the chemical deluge
as if its fuel's too pure, its source
some deep friction, sparking clash:

as if the red hand's
a demon of rawness reaching
to drag my seeing
down to its torments.

In the cafe, strangers
hold my bloodied gaze
for as long
as the search for recognition,
or exchange of secret knowledge.

The Negative

Getting up in the silent dark,
struggling to balance, I can feel
the negative cold and heavy in me,
shifting and dragging.

And I can see along the momentum
of those blind acts,
down the bottomless chaos.

Strange Love

the bus driver's pale hand rippling
like an anemone as I slow
to give way

the hotted-up purple Kingswood's
wide slow curve, juggling its dust close,
past us walking on the unsealed road

the keeper's banana-hand
on the kneeling striker's head,
ball cradled in the other

Remembering the Beach, Late Winter

The strength of sunlight
through the window surprises me,
wandering into it
from the dull side of the flat.

Too soon for the beach,
but what it is to go there's
defined against
this lack-lustre, indoors afternoon:

the blue ocean fidgeting, hawking;
brightness like intense interest.

Rather than Gone

Crouching to unlock my bike
I disturb one next to it that shifts
to rest on my shoulder, back into
a companionable sleep, or as if
imploring me to take it instead,

so rather than gone, I'm here
near the steady ground, integral
to a flimsy remaining, the Arts
Building's limestone bulging on my left,
the river over there juggling light.

After Swimming in the Ocean

What are we ready for
after swimming in the ocean?

Re-emerged;
deeply woken.

But walking back
towards these suburbs
with the glittering at our back,
how are we to know
what to do with ourselves?

**Walking on the Nedlands Foreshore,
Winter 3am**

The dark land so low and old.
Grains of human light on it
like polystyrene beans, crude
and infertile. Birds drift,
cry out over the water.
Your walk's vigorous, searching
this night I would have been
content to be carried prostrate
and unconscious through.

Lightning. The rush of wind
hauling rain. Our dry place
against this wall
contracts. What are we doing
still awake in this ancient storm?

This morning, sunlight moves
on the ground outside the shopping centre
with its native stealth.

Sunset

As the bus veered
to follow Matilda Bay's curve,
the sky's pink everywhere and the low
disc of moon, I noticed
how I was as vigilant watching
this unmovingness as a meerkat
up on its hindlegs.

The Abos are so Hopeless

Because we still don't realise
what was destroyed.

Because we've forgotten the dignity
of standing on the earth
as one amongst its creatures,

lost in our uprightnesses amongst ourselves.

The Rainmaker

'Ah, I'm exhausted' he said,
after the poem about him
by the vehement South African,
where all his nightmares of China
came so awake, and by
'that man up there
with no face' whose scuffed gaze
we all sat under.

'My government makes too many compromises
with the Tibetans, because they're so fierce'
he said, blurring into the Official Story;
said, 'there have been earthquakes, floods',
blurring into the Old Testament Story,

until we changed the subject,
spoke of music, the weather, our food,
allowing his face to return, to smile

beneath the Rainmaker's
dignified almost-absorption,
his elemental and prophetic distraction.

Apology of the Ten Pound Tourist from Grimsby

I remember stepping out
of the straight, strong rain
of the station square.
When we got here
I thought it was summer:
the place seemed made
of the elements of happiness:
warmth, sand, blue sky and ocean —
I recognised them from holidays.

Then T-bone steaks, the garden
a somethingth of an acre,
and a car in the drive
of American proportions.
And it was too much, what we gained
from our huge sideways step
onto your place, for the family
following after, maddened
by a native jealousy gone rampant
under the new sun. None of us
had a clue it was all the result
of receiving stolen property,

nor did my mother know
what scarred ground she wept on,
about the generations of you
torn, child after child,
from the parent-flesh, strewn
in our culture so your own
would wither (I saw you

at school, twins whose limbs
bristled like a languid fire
and suited the sky).

So weird now to be watching
here turn slowly into Grimsby,
the bitternesses brewing up
stronger year by year, the city
cannibalising itself with crime,
bruising the delicate land all around,
and our leader's articulated sneer
insisting this is how it has to be,
the old craven self-interest
masquerading as Aussie-tough.

So yes, sorry.
Ever since I found out
I've tried to tread lightly.

Holiday

In that frictionless
time, events replaced
each other so quickly
it seemed they'd
overlap, combine
like the binoculars' discs
of vision: as if I'd come

powerfully into focus
in one consummate
act of freedom:

the motions of leaving
cast their shadows
on those of arrival,
and the car's engine
strained as if it
had no purchase on the ribboning road.

At Gino's

In here the weather's perfect
and the coffee waiting;

enough people behind me, in front
and beside each elbow to allow me
to believe in a continuum
of conversation: and the strange thing

isn't the emergence
of someone I know, but that
I don't know everyone.

Anatomy of a Rain-Shower

Somewhere in the night
the rain-shower:

effortless,
purposeless:

the beginning swallowed
by its continuing,
and the finish, the way
you can't find
the end of your out-breath ...

Lacking definition,
yet so far
from a ragged
or a frayed event,

and all that I'd known
of it anyway

the sound of its collapsing:

the absence of its
silent body in the air.

Wagtail

Before, when the cold gusts
of nothingness came, it felt
like my shoddy attempts
at existence easily demolished,
disposed of. Now I let
the collapsing continue
beyond me — thought-crash
or blood-fall, I'm not the ground here —

watch the whippy pivot
of the wagtail, unharmed
in the wrecked grasp of me.

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Notes

'Los Chasquis': Los Chasquis is a band of Chilean origin.

'Epitaph': Bropho hanged herself with a shoelace, allegedly after being harassed by the police.

'Rainmaker': This poem refers to the painting 'The Rainmaker', by Russell Drysdale.

'For the Finger-ends of Irish Harpists': This poem refers to the practice by the English of cutting off the finger-ends of Irish harpists.