

## Staying, or Learning Wathawarrung in Ballarat

Mike Heald<sup>1</sup>

*To grasp the meaning of placedness is to acquire a knowledge of universal application.*  
– Paul Carter.

### I

Keep your life still long enough  
and you may see the world's hand  
move towards you.

Even now,  
when to force it has for so long  
been the only way – with the interminable,  
oblique exertion of work, the steely  
manipulations of science,  
obeisance to an absentee God:

communion, wholeness, transcendence  
so deeply taken, then tawdry imitations  
offered up for sale.

Even here,  
where haste has been beatified,  
where greed and the electron  
snatch us away from every moment  
before it can speak, the mind  
may yet settle to discern

the giving, like a youth growing into  
the composure to receive  
love with grace.

### II

No such thing as a free lunch,  
according to those who have cornered  
the lunch market, but even  
the lowly blackberry vine slinking  
through a foreign forest knows that's a lie:  
that it's there, plump and sweet, for the careful taking.

Nor does my garden charge me for its produce.  
Its blossom, this year, is not just  
the emblem of an abstract Spring,  
a disinterested light raking around to catch

the dingy, skeletal trees again: I've stood  
beside them long enough now  
to know it's of here, between us:  
a general mystical dazzle held out,  
and luminous arcane detail held tight...  
They linger in the dusk with the glow  
of those united by momentous news,  
undispersed by the gathering dark.

(The staying of trees has such a strange fluctuation:  
we waste slowly to our skeletons,  
whereas their flesh withers and floats  
away then gathers again each year:  
if you watch them for long enough  
they show you how mistaken  
we can be about life and death,  
like the ultimate conjurer...)

And the scruffy vegetables fleshed-out improbably  
from limp seedlings pressed in a crumbling,  
finger-poked hole, are the soil doing its utmost to offer  
what it knows I think food should look like  
(later, the tiny apples on the young, only waist-high  
Royal Gala a touch alarming, so many thrust,  
raw red, at me all at once.) It's the ground  
right here that has to keep forking out  
to meet these new demands, a consideration that deepens  
your field of attention, and has you thinking  
deprivation is a tangle in human contrivance  
that can kill, yes, but is not the earth's doing:  
it's providing as best it can, along with shouldering  
all your steps and structures...

### III

I used to recoil from the chill  
as the light dwindles here – used to the city's  
hoarding of its warmth – as the sucking  
of my soft life from its bones,  
where now I know myself swept by,  
frailly resisting, immense diurnal tides,  
tugged towards the dance of heat exchange  
my ego fears but the rest of me  
knows already as heart –  
beat, as breath. Look up

on those nights and you see  
the riches coming from that direction, too: stars  
so plentiful and brilliant they overflow even science's  
control-freak concepts (distance, space, explosion...)  
a punctiform splendour drenching you  
in its spectacular demonstration of how  
the blaze of where you are  
is a flickering speck from elsewhere,  
but the whole holds, and takes you with it  
in its giant cartwheels, joins and unjoins  
your dots in an infinity of forms.

One mild May evening, after so many seasons  
of my tin roof holding its blotchy corrugations over me,  
the downpour's massive press was resisted as usual,  
stopped at a clamorous plane, but with the deluge  
surging and me untouched, it was as if I felt instead  
the touch of time's entirety in the room's charged,  
resounding calm, shelter and exposure thrown  
with such force against each other they merged again  
into the void from which we squint out  
separate events with senses hooked  
on the manifest. (Setting off for home  
that afternoon from the city, driving West,  
I'd seen how late sun had crumbled a small, bright hole  
low down in the vast cloudsky to reach through. Higher,  
far ahead, a flock of heron moved across the grey expanse,  
turned in unison towards me, appearing stopped,  
then turned again to resume their course, as if  
having rounded a mid-air obstruction.)

#### IV

What before had seemed merely there now seems  
given, and by people, too: the street's old timers'  
wry acceptance of the stage you're at; their broadenings  
of the here-and-now that restore to you  
a temporal neighborhood – the farrier who built  
this house, the Chinese joss-house owners  
down the road, the drover with his pack of dogs  
before trucks took over. I inherit  
my compassion for the couple before us  
who always fought (it could have  
been us in that other place, other time)  
and for the endurance of that hitherto sinister-  
looking guy with the eye-patch whose staggering  
along the nature-strips, I learn, is away from  
an ordeal by industrial machinery. And now, some words

have passed into my hands, from those whose paths  
of staying spiraled deeper into here than we can  
imagine, whose voices sought to join in  
with those of the trees and stars and creatures,  
not talk over them. There's even an app, that glows  
on the elder's screen like the thumbnail of a cosmology,  
a postage stamp-sized window within the iPad's  
potent black-framed lapidary window  
that looks out on everywhere

and nowhere. I begin to speak them,  
hungry for what they might tell me  
about what it could mean to be somewhere.

#### Notes

1. Mike Heald's third poetry collection *Focusing Saturn* was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards. His most recent book, *The Moving World*, is described by Robert Gray as 'a daring and triumphant project'.