"A Need for Voices": The Poetry of Dennis Haskell

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Abstract

This article presents a critical reading of the poetry of Dennis Haskell. Inspired by the experience of hearing the poet read, it uses the concept of poetic voice as an entry point for critical analysis. Haskell has described his poetic aim as being to "write a poetry that incorporates ideas but never ostentatiously … with as quiet as possible verbal skill, and in a way that evokes the deepest emotions" (*Landbridge*). The paper identifies key aspects of voice in the poetry, drawing on arguments by Robert Pinsky and Al Alvarez that voice implies a reaching out to an auditor or reader, and thus has social and cultural dimensions. Attending to both technique and meaning, it first analyses two short lyric poems by Haskell, "One Clear Call" and "The Call," which explore the power of voice in poetic and pre-linguistic settings respectively. Poetic voice becomes a vehicle of social critique in "Australian Language's Tribute to the Times," a bemused satire on the clichéd language of modern politics and economics. In the next section of the paper the focus shifts to his recurrent creative interest in poems of international travel and in particular international flight. The experience of flying is the subject of lucid, practical philosophical reflections in "GA873: The Meaning of Meaning" and "Reality's Conquests," while in "As You Are, As We Are" and "Our Century," Haskell presents vivid intercultural encounters in a voice that is candid, observant and responsive to others.

Keywords

Sometime in the mid-1980s a British Council exhibition of contemporary British writers came to the University of Western Australia. It consisted mainly of portraits of the writers, short biographies and excerpts from their work. During the exhibition, Dennis Haskell and two colleagues organised a lunchtime reading of poems by some of the writers represented. In those days there was exhibition space just inside the front doors of the library, near the stairwell. Of the poets whose work was read, I can only remember Louis MacNeice and Jenny Joseph.

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My most enduring memory of that day is how, as the reading proceeded, people going up or down the stairs heard the poems, and stopped to listen, many remaining till the end. In his study of Bruce Dawe, Dennis Haskell has noted that poetry occupies a marginal position in Australian culture (*Attuned* 227), so the accumulating audience was heartening, and suggested that poetry could still speak to ordinary people. Over the course of his career, Dennis has organised many poetry readings, and it has been one of the privileges of working with him to have heard poets such as Bruce Dawe, Tony Curtis, Alamgir Hashmi, Fay Zwicky and many others reading their work, not to mention Dennis himself. Across the marvellous variety of experiences, forms and visions presented, one constant of these events has been a sense of poetic voice. Having seen Dennis Haskell at work as a poet and critic, as an editor and teacher, in this essay I shall explore the significance of voice in his writing.

Voice is at once highly personal, an expression of the writer's individuality, and something created through labour and experiment. A. Alvarez calls it "a problem that never lets you go" (Alvarez 11). For Alvarez, voice is the key to a poem's vitality: "the writer works to find or create a voice that will stretch out to the reader, make him prick his ears and attend" (18). In *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*, Robert Pinsky argues for the social and cultural dimensions of this interaction. Pinsky argues that while lyric poetry "has been defined by the unity and concentration of a solitary voice," that voice also "evokes the attentive presence of some other, or its lack; an auditor, significantly absent or present" (Pinsky 18, 30). Through the essential working of this voice, or "vocality" as Pinsky calls this quality, poetry reveals its social dimension, even while seeming a private art. In two of his best-known poems, "One Clear Call," and "The Call," Dennis Haskell reflects on two incidents in which the power of voice was manifested.

In "One Clear Call" the poet is telephoned for advice about a suitable poem for a funeral:

> Holidays, the bush, dusty Coonabarabran
> and out of the blue your friend has rung
> you, caught on the hop, an engineer
> who never looks at a book, whose father's died. (Haskell, *Acts* 33)

The colloquial diction, the contractions and the use of the second person rather than the "lyric I" create a familiarly laconic Australian voice that contrasts with the poem recommended, Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar," which is read down the telephone in a later verse:

> So you start, inexpressively enunciating each syllable,
> 'Sunset and evening star,/ And one clear call for me',

> Into a vast tide of silence at the other end of the line,
> The unmoving pen you cannot see, foaming at the words. (33)

Haskell reworks images from Tennyson's poem (the tide, the foam) into his own lines to express the effect of the reading upon the grieving listener. Pinsky describes the process as one in which "The reader is not merely the performer of the poem, but an actual living medium for the poem" (61). In "inexpressively enunciating" the lines, Haskell emphasises that a simple style of utterance, forgoing performativity, may be directly communicative, "an actual living medium for the poem" (Pinsky 61). The choice of second-person point of view incorporates the reader into the subject position of the poem, collapsing the difference between the speaker and the listener, and allowing the reader to share in the emotional interaction of the poet and his friend. Neither the engineer nor his wife can transcribe the lines as they attend to its emotional content, and plumb their loss through its imagery and rhythm. The poet too is caught up in this emotional transference, "registering the scatter of words/ as they lift from Tennyson's dead mouth and your own voice/ … that past sensation of syllables sweeping you and your friends/ across the bar of technique, of grieving, of consolation" (33). Though acknowledging the efficacy of poetic technique, the poet is more attentive to how it affects the bereaved couple and himself.

Summarising his approach to poetry for the anthology, *Landbridge*, Haskell writes of his wish to "write a poetry that incorporates ideas but never ostentatiously, that values ordinary elements in 'ordinary' lives, and that presents all this with as quiet as possible verbal skill, and in a way that evokes the deepest emotions" (Kinsella, *Landbridge* 165). The way in which reflection on poetic voice in "One Clear Call" is subsumed by a concern to capture the emotional interaction is a clear instance of these principles. More generally, Haskell aims for a poetic language that approaches transparency, believing that such an aesthetic has the best chance of broadening the audience for the genre, and moving it from the "fringes" of the culture (Dobrez 289; Haskell "Scribbling" *passim*).

Another poem in which a meditation on the significance of voice arises out of ordinary life is "The Call." Here the inaugurating event is a cry in the night which the poet hears, an "unknown voice, not knowing/ because of its great stillness,/ that it calls from my son's sleep" (*Acts* 5). The mysterious origin summons a parental response, an offering of love and care. First shifting the baby's legs and untangling the bedsheet, the poet is rendered anxious by the passive sleep that follows. The second verse reflects on how human beings "look for meaning in such actions" as the call in the night. Haskell is aware of its metaphysical connotations, amidst the stillness of the house and the silence of the surrounding bush: "as if God's voice called from the centre of our sleep/ but there is nothing" (5). Though sceptical of theological explanations, he is unnerved by the silence, and recognises the human "need" for an answering voice:

>   What we inherit from the bush is a need for voices:
>   myself calling to my son in his recurrent silence. (5)

Emotion supplants intellect here in a reversal that may be a distant echo of Tennyson's lines from *In Memoriam*, canto 54: "But what am I?/ An infant crying in the night" (Leonard 278). As the poem progresses, voice becomes a figure for life itself, surrounded at either end by silence, and for love, the answering of one voice by another. Though at the level of statement, the poem presents "God" as "a word sunk deep in the blood" (5), a human need, it also registers the depth of hope that accompanies the desire for connection with something or someone beyond ourselves. Perhaps for this reason, "The Call" was included by Les Murray in his anthology of Australian religious poetry (Murray 212). The primal cry of the child raises questions about meaning, and the poet's answers are humanist ones, his large themes explored in a poetic voice marked by tenderness and appreciation for life and its contingency:

>   Over the tips of the trees, out across the face of the ocean,
>   nothing moves.
>   It is a humid January night with no breeze.
>   His body is in my hands. (5)

The opening line, through its alliteration, paints a sensitive picture of the Australian setting, carrying forward the theological reflections of the previous verses through a discreet allusion to "the face of the waters" in the Biblical book of Genesis. In this scene, however, "nothing moves." The shorter second line introduces a definite sense of containment into the final lines, a narrowing of focus to the immediate space of the room in the house. "His body is in my hands" reworks the second line of Francis Webb's poem about new birth at Christmas, "Five Days Old": "You are given into my hands/ Out of quietest, loneliest lands" (Murray 151). This intertextuality is an instance of Alvarez's observation that once poets find their own voice, they can "incorporate other people's voices into [their] own and still sound like [themselves]" (27).

Thus far I have examined the lyrical aspect of Haskell's poetry, but he is also a notable comic poet and satirist. In *Attuned to Alien Moonlight*, he argued that the lyrical and satirical were both significant modes for Bruce Dawe, and Dawe's investment in a poetics of ordinary events and colloquial speech, his interest in love and faith as well as the absurdities of Australian culture and public life have been an important model for Haskell. In his 1994 Colin Roderick Lecture at James Cook University, Haskell argued for the importance of satire as an undervalued sub-genre of contemporary Australian poetry (*Australian*). "Australian Language's Tribute to the Times," dedicated to the former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, takes up the ancient poetic function of "purifying the

language of the tribe" (Eliot, "Little Gidding" II.4). In an irregularly rhymed *terza rima* Haskell provides a catalogue of political catch-phrases and buzzwords deployed by the super-confident one-time Federal Treasurer in various attempts to "sell" his government's economic policies to the public, and then to explain away their failure: "since he would never yield/ till we had a level playing field/ even while life let down our lifestyles" (*Acts* 82). This is a subject in which Dennis Haskell has a special interest, being an accountant before turning to literature. The poem therefore is an astute response to the politics and language that brought about the deregulation of Australia's economy in the late 1980s. The quoted lines capture the ideological firmness with which politicians in many governments, including most notably Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, maintained their commitment to neoliberal policies, even in the face of social harms such as unemployment. The widely-used stereotype of the "level playing field" refers generally to the presumed equality of all participants in a market economy, and in Australia it had a particular application to the benefits of free trade and the dropping of tariffs on locally manufactured goods. The supercharged consumerism which resulted was of little help to those affected by a protracted downturn in the economy in the early 1990s. Haskell's own quip, "life let down our lifestyles," is a clear-eyed human riposte to Keating's heartless declaration that this was "the recession Australia had to have."

In the final section of the poem, Haskell reimagines the political downfall of Keating through a proliferation of contradictory clichés:

> What shock then when at the end of the day
> He drove the thin end of the wedge
> Fast through the window of opportunity
>
> and found himself on life's narrow ledge.
> No worries! Jaggedly bleeding but
> Delighted to be at the cutting edge. (82)

By literalising these conventional metaphors, Haskell establishes the self-referentiality of much political discourse while gleefully imagining one of its master pundits in a grimly ironic impasse. The graceful unfolding of the interlinked tercets provides a measured counterpoint to the distorted and repetitive public speech parodied in its lines. The effect of the verse form is to ensure that the satiric voice offers a bemused, rather than scathing, comment on what is a dominant social discourse.

Although my discussion to date has focused on Haskell in the context of English and Australian literature, he is an internationalist in temperament and practice. His poetry reflects his travels to many countries, and his friendships across many cultures. Noting how many poems emerge from the experience of flight or train travel, Shirley Geok-lin Lim has described him as "a new kind of

Australian poet, a… twenty-first century transnational" (Haskell, *All* back cover). International flight can be said to have become normalised for some Australians in the last thirty years, though the experience is still unusual enough to be a regular subject of poetic analysis. One such poem of Haskell's is "GA873: The Meaning of Meaning." Taking its title from the flight number of the Garuda Airlines flight from Hong Kong to Jakarta and an early work of linguistic theory, C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning,* the poem builds a philosophical lyric out of a phenomenon observed during the flight. Rather like Coleridge arrested by the sight of "the new Moon/ With the old Moon in her arms" in "Dejection: An Ode" (Leonard 328), here the passengers in the plane see "a great, flat, flying saucer of cloud/ billow into pure white waves/ as the wind swept through it" (*Acts* 88; Coleridge). This beautiful and complex atmospheric spectacle dramatically shifts direction, heading towards the plane:

> When it should have hit it was gone –
> dissipated into wisps? or all around us?
> There was no change in the light.
> I felt strange, splashed with calm, and dry and ignorant. (88)

What had seemed a threat, an impending collision, becomes a sort of anti-event due to the mysterious quality of clouds, visible masses of dry air and water particles. The very possibility of human flight rests on technological and scientific advances, and in a sense the passengers aboard the plane are the beneficiaries of that knowledge, but this encounter with the cloud reveals the continuing presence of mystery, the elusiveness of truth.

John Hollander, in an essay on "The Poetry of Everyday Life" writes that reading about flight prompts the question, "'what is the parable of the aircraft and our flight in it?' Flight is surely our contemporary version of the old moralists' road, The Way" (Hollander, *Poetry* 14). Among the three propositions he believes "we may learn from the airplane," one is that "the fastest motion forward through the air is the least eventful" (Hollander, *Poetry* 14). This is indeed one's common experience while flying, and it perhaps suggests the marvellous and exceptional nature of the incident recorded by Haskell. In another sense, however, that event is itself the common condition of movement through the aerial medium, and is made visible here. The poem further opens up questions about the nature of reality and the limits of our knowledge, that leave us pondering the effects of natural phenomena upon us. The paradoxes of the final line, "I felt strange, splashed with calm, and dry and ignorant," reaffirm a Romantic belief in the emotions and the imagination as sources of meaning, with both the poet and the reader sensuously affected by the experience, "without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 193).

In "Reality's Conquests," Hollander's perception of the uneventfulness of flight is taken up by Haskell. Although beginning, as in "GA873," with the appearance of clouds, the focus is fixed on the aeroplane and the lands beneath the clouds, Turkey and Iran. The clouds elicit no epiphanies or metaphors that bespeak new knowledge attained via travel, only similes that refer to the already known: "the ruffled, massed clouds of Turkey,/ like a flattened English lawyer's wig" (*Acts* 94). The boredom of the journey produces a reflection on the experiential aspect of time: "nothing speeds up time/ once relentlessness is its choice" (94) sets up a disconnect between the technology's programmatic power and the mind's vagaries. The persona is once again concealed behind the second-person pronoun, an inclusive, confidential "you." This voice admits to thinking in stereotypical terms about the countries over which he is travelling: Iran, "a land I think of,/ I confess, as veils and *fatwahs*" (94), unable to avoid the clichés he apologises for. As an invention of western modernity, the aeroplane has always been an instrument of imperial surveillance, and the persona acknowledges this in his image of "the apertures your gaze arrows through" (94). The poem quietly resists the meta-narrative of scientific domination of nature and the realist theory of language, which holds that words match up with objects or ideas that exist in the world: "up here, in an eternity of air,/ everything is quite right, and nothing quite real" (94). The experience of flight, "in which even the sunlight/ stretched like a strange elastic," places demands on existing forms of language; poet and reader must "stretch your head" (94).

Haskell's poetic voice is that of a common-sense Australian, sceptical, responsive to others' needs and practical. Yet in this context language and reality seem unstable:

> To a pragmatist reality
> is as you find it
> but here all is theory
> that somehow doesn't work
> and technology's mystical perfection. (94)

Flying comes to seem an existential vacuum, an interlude in which we lack the concepts to describe our experience. Haskell seems to condense Arthur C. Clarke's adage that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," as the mechanics function but the human dimension of the experience eludes definition (Clarke 36). As if to compensate for these radical doubts, the persona notes, the airline zealously supplies food for the body. "Reality's Conquest" appears to invoke geo-political dominion through its opening image of the gaze as a weapon, but the altitude of the viewer's position is shown to distort or preclude true perception: Iran is "a country that sheer height/ rendered surrealist art" (94). The oddity of this discourse is too insistently

evaluative to command immediate assent to the persona's voice. Rather, this part of the poem seems to draw attention to a form of linguistic conquest, what postcolonial theorists have called "epistemic violence" (Spivak 282-83). The attention of the text turns inward, to the aircraft as a structure of the poet's own culture, to a critical examination of the subject's own experience, and rejects the distant aesthetic representation of other cultures. There is some backsliding from this autocritique in the lines I quoted earlier, but the accompanying apology acknowledges the epistemic violence of this cultural stereotype. In the end, the poem is a challenge to the idea that reality can be conquered.

I began this paper by recalling a memorable poetry reading that focused on British literature. Twenty years later, in the campus bookshop, another gathering celebrated the launch of *Over There: Poems from Singapore and Australia*, edited by Alvin Pang and John Kinsella. Both editors were present, and read their work, as did other West Australian poets represented in the anthology, Dennis Haskell among them. Kinsella has described Haskell as a "pivotal" figure in the development of literary relations "between Western Australia, South-East Asia and its Indian Ocean neighbours" (Kinsella and Ryan 36). The long-standing symposium series on Literature and Culture in the Asia Pacific, teaching in Singapore, and Asian-themed issues of *Westerly* magazine have been some of the means by which he has contributed to these relations. Introducing a publication that arose out of one of the symposia, Haskell argues that while identity is an "inescapable" concept, it is formed through "interaction with various communities," including international cross-cultural communities, as well as local ones (Haskell and Shapiro viii). Identity is consequently adaptable and responsive, neither factitious nor fixed. In a time of aggressively resurgent nationalism and neoliberal individualism, this internationalist and communitarian approach increases in importance, as does the role of poetry as a form of indirect witnessing, an independent individual voice. In this context of "interactions," Haskell quotes some lines by Singaporean poet Robert Yeo about the purpose of travel, which he believes all writers would embrace: "so I hope I may see/ More of what is less apparent" (Haskell and Shapiro ix). In the final section of this article, I shall examine some of Haskell's many poems about interaction through travel.

"Our Century," from the 1997 collection, *The Ghost Names Sing*, is set in a departure lounge at Singapore airport, where "all the would-be passengers/ sat apart, folded into themselves/ like escalators" (*Ghost* 64). Through this image of alienation and self-enclosure, the poet contests the discourse of liberating mobility so popular among theorists of travel of the time (Clifford). Flight itself is further defamiliarised:

> Outside under vapour trails
> written like destinations in the sky

> the 747 stood to attention, its metal
> like sleek, lizard skin, (64)

the imagery perhaps a symptom of, perhaps a resistance to, this place of deracination. Beyond the plane, the detached, observant persona sees "the ceaseless Singapore cranes," and reflects on the contrast between Singapore, "a government/ fiercely fixing electronics,/ technobiology, culture," and Pattani in Thailand, where he has just come from, and where "in the heavy-headed air/ time slurs" (65). This older way of life, viewed from the admittedly limited perspective of a temporary visitor, seems to him a more bracing and human form of social organisation than the "cybernetic" system that Singapore has implemented and Australia seems to be emulating. Thus, the transit lounge becomes a site for comparative cultural criticism: globalisation is stifling cultural difference and narrowing concepts of cultural value:

> this is our century with its international face
> calling us at pre-arranged times
> where time is of the essence, where all subjects
> have become one: economics. (65)

Here Haskell returns in a more personal voice to the concerns that he satirised in "Australian Language's Tribute to the Times," regretting the spread of an artificial and dehumanising system that excludes all values but its own. From within one of the clearing-houses of this corporate world, the airport, the poem offers a culturalist critique of its effects: "what is it about organisation that makes it/ so unnerving… ?" (65).

In "As You Are, As We Are," Haskell is a tourist, "slightly dazed, silly with excitement" for his first journey on the Roma subway, among "tired-eyed Romans trundling" to or from work in an off-peak train (*Acts* 67). Long sentences comprise the first stanza, their sequence of punctuated phrases mimicking the stops along the way, and the traveller's uncertainty about the route to the grave of John Keats in the Protestant Cemetery. Haskell is as interested in the modern buildings as the historic monuments, condemning the "idiotic pyramid" and finding beauty in the ordinary: "an ivy-like vine that cascaded/ in single stemmed waterfalls,/ the drops turning red/ one by one down its slope" (67). Despite its ugliness, "sticking out of the ground like tarnished bone" (67), the pyramid is one of three repositories for the dead that unify this poem. Robert Pogue Harrison has argued that graves, mausoleums and museums are "places… in our midst where the dead exert their power… and… carry on a secular afterlife" (Harrison x). Poems that thematise writers' graves, such as Matthew Arnold's "Haworth Churchyard, April 1855," or W.H. Auden's "At the Grave of Henry James" commonly eulogise their subjects, and their art, but Haskell adopts a much less reverential view of the authority of the past.

Inside the cemetery, a note of comic realism is introduced:

> The Protestant cemetery has tall, gaol-like walls
> as if for fear the inmates might skulk out (67)

The concierge's business-like reminder of the closing-time, and the well-fed cats in the corner, "stretching their teeth," endow what might in other hands be a cultural pilgrimage with the sort of juxtaposition of the sacred and profane that Auden noted in "Musée des Beaux Arts." Haskell interrupts his account of the poet's gravesite with a flashback to his visit earlier that day to the Keats-Shelley House museum. In a restrained description of the preserved room in which Keats died, every detail, the "amateurish and now well-worn" appearance of the painted floral ceiling, the "unused… fire" and the small "rectangular room,/ cramped like a preparation/ for what was to come," evokes the lost life and the poet's poignant response to it (68). In the cemetery, by contrast, the memorial to Keats fails to move him, and he turns away, drawn instead to the graves of unknown people. Quoting their Italian inscriptions, he comments, "How headstones everywhere speak/ the untranslatable/ Esperanto of loss" (69). Inclusion of the language of the place he is visiting is a regular element of Haskell's travel poems, functioning as a recognition of alterity, but this is one of the more complex, with its paradoxical appeal to the universality of grief and to its ultimate inexpressibility. This turn in the poem enacts a movement away from Romantic mythologising towards a more democratic reflection on bereavement.

Back outside, negotiating the traffic and "*la vita moderna*" in the streets, he adduces a third resting-place of the dead in Rome, the ossuary underneath the church of the Immaculate Conception. Here the disinterred bones of priests and brothers have been collected and arranged in grotesque patterns and uses:

> … skulls with pelvises clipped
> on either side to shape bat-like flaps,
> knucklebones strung from the roof
> form candle-lit lanterns. (69)

The existence of this bizarre display, "a *memento mori* circus" as Haskell dubs it, within "the eternal city" suggests as few sites do the strangeness of past understandings of death in one's own culture. And yet the lines which accompany the display, and which Haskell quotes, "I stand before the cross of God and flee toward the light/ toward the sun in the streets/ where day after day/ grow great silences" (69), suggest its fundamental meaning. Whether the light is divine, the light of life, or that of secular enlightenment, makes no difference; silence, isolation and oblivion beckon. With this grim vision, Haskell ends his poetic journey with a reflective coda:

When I go to cemeteries now
I think of Keats,
and others he's among,
and the dates creep up on me one by one. (69)

This lighter *memento mori*, with its faint allusion to Andrew Marvell's "But at my back I always here,/ Time's winged chariot hurrying near" (Leonard 444), befits the secular responsiveness of the earlier parts of the poem. The title, "As You Are, As We Are," alludes to an Italian proverb about mortality and the links between the living and the dead, but in its condensed form it suggests the common end that awaits all people, while registering their different cultural beliefs about death and remembrance. "In difference what similarities; in similarities, what difference!" (Haskell, *Interactions* ix)

"The Gift," a poem in Haskell's 2016 collection, *Ahead of Us*, is a dramatic lyric, structured around the descent of a plane on a homeward journey. With each succeeding stanza, observation, reflection and experience track the emotions that arise during descending and landing. In the first verse, the sky is rendered with ugly physical images: "Small clouds outside the window/ like phlegm in the sky's throat" (*Ahead* 10). This visual metaphor is then transposed into an aural image of the "the engines coughing," reflecting the passenger's nervous monitoring of these last stages of the flight. By contrast, the scenes on the earth below are beautiful and orderly, "deep olive/ green plantations intersected by water,/ and dry land where men/ and women work: nature is being/ put in its place" (10). The line breaks here effectively to create a sense of balance through assertion and qualification: "men/ and women" or "nature is being/ put in its place" (10), in which a hint of philosophical idealism is quickly reined in by a pragmatic supplement.

In the second stanza the anxieties and dangers of this liminal state of being are captured through oxymoron: "We hang/ *dangling at speed*, in fragile air" (10; italics added). Suspense, however, is deflected in this dramatic lyric, which quickly switches to future tense to reveal the passengers' safety: "but today luck chooses us, the/ headlines will escape our names" (10). Relief is found in "procedures," even those that have been mocked in other poems: "all our fear buckled up/ in a gift of banality, of schedules/ that even we will quickly forget" (10). The third stanza begins with the physical experience of landing, "the rumble and crack of wheels on the ground," but rather than celebrating, the persona continues in a reflective voice, attentive to what Robert Yeo called "what is less apparent" (qtd. in Haskell and Shapiro ix) Any statements professing insights are, however, modest and understated: "The most valuable/ elements of our lives are hardly noticed" (10). Indeed, the "elements" implied here remain unnamed in a conceptual sense. Instead, a more literal meaning of "element" is invoked. Having

opened with a sky flecked with discoloured, sallow clouds, the poem suffuses the homecoming in the "gleaming" of the West Australian sun. Light is made visible in this moment, no longer a source of anxiety, but a medium for the gift of life. Haskell uses synaesthesia in laconically presenting this lyric moment:

> we're heading homeward in the light
> at last unperturbed by its luminous
> and utterly ordinary silence. (10)

Silence has been a recurrent motif in this examination of the voice of Dennis Haskell's poetry, along with language and interaction. It is the context from which the human voice emerges and into which it fades. It is a mark of alienation, both social and metaphysical, recognition of which becomes an occasion for a candid poetic reflection. It is also the "luminous silence" in which intense perception and peace are achieved. Haskell tackles these serious themes, however, with a language that is supple, and grounded in astute perceptions of the world around us. His voice is candid, reflective and sociable, reaching out to the listener and the reader, with an invitation to develop our identities through interaction with his.

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