

Wet, Wicked and Wild: Manifestations of Heat in Kevin Hart's Poetry

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The renowned American literary critic Harold Bloom declares that Kevin Hart is the “most outstanding Australian poet of his generation” and “One of the major living poets in the English language.” The Yugoslavian-American poet Charles Simic also considers Hart to be “One of the major living poets in the English language.”¹ Hart was born in Essex, England, in 1954, and spent his early childhood in East London. His family moved to Brisbane, Australia, in 1966, when he was eleven years old. Hart graduated with an honours degree in philosophy from the Australian National University in Canberra and won a prestigious Fulbright fellowship to Stanford University in 1977. After returning to Australia, Hart earned a Ph.D. from the University of Melbourne. He has held academic appointments at Monash University in Australia, and Notre Dame University and the University of Virginia in the United States, where he currently resides. Academically, Hart has “taken up a position at the crossroads where philosophy, literature and theology intersect” (Kane 102). Hart’s first book of poetry, *The Departure*, was published in 1978. Nine collections have followed to date: *The Lines of the Hand: Poems 1976-1979* (1981); *Your Shadow: (Poems 1980-83)* (1984); *Peniel* (1991); *New and Selected Poems* (1995); *Dark Angel* (1996); *Wicked Heat* (1999); *Flame Tree* (2001); *The Impossible* (2003); and *Young Rain* (2008). Hart is the recipient of numerous awards for his poetry, including the FAW John Shaw Neilson Poetry Award (1976); the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award (1985); the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award (1985); the Grace Leven Poetry Prize (1992; 1995); and the FAW Christopher Brennan Award (1999).²

Hart is often labelled a religious poet, and the bulk of the criticism of his poetry focuses on the religious, spiritual and philosophical aspects of his work, and the relationship between his poetry and his philosophical and theological writings.³ However, Hart is also an intensely physical and sensual poet, one whose work examines the effects of the physical environment on humans, explicitly addresses physical aspects of romantic relationships, and uses physical actions and sensations as metaphors for spiritual communion.⁴ In his review of

1 Quotations from the back cover of *Flame Tree*.

2 Biographical and publication information is from AustLit and Spinks (10).

3 See Brown, Kane, Khalip, McCooley and Mitchell.

4 Acknowledging that Hart’s poetry is far from strictly religious and philosophical, Paul Kane describes *Wicked Heat* as “witty and knowing; passionate and erotic; poignant and elegiac” (111). Likewise, Paul Mitchell argues that a Christian reading of Hart’s poetry

Wicked Heat, Christian Sheppard contends that the “unifying image of the collection ... is heat ... a universal image, one that conjures up an atmosphere” (1). The Australian critic and poet David McCooy includes heat, the sun and “the north” (referring to Brisbane) in his expanded version of Gary Catalano’s catalogue of Hart’s recurring symbols (McCooy 119; Catalano 23).⁵ In *Flame Tree*, Hart’s long-standing preoccupation with heat is readily apparent. Despite spending just six years or so living in Brisbane before attending the Australian National University in the much cooler climate of Canberra, and then moving even further south to Melbourne, growing up in Brisbane affected Hart profoundly, and he has written dozens of poems about that experience. *Wicked Heat* contains at least a dozen poems that deal directly with Hart’s Brisbane years, while *Flame Tree* contains more than forty poems that make direct reference to heat. Although heat is a constant presence in Hart’s poetry, it takes on various manifestations, serves a variety of functions, and emanates from a number of sources. However, in Hart’s poetry, heat in all its forms is always linked inextricably to his adolescence in Brisbane, summer, and sex.

In an interview with fellow Australian poet and critic John Kinsella, Hart states that he began writing poetry as a teenager in Brisbane: “I bought a selection of [Shelley’s] poetry and lay on my bed all summer. It was partly an emotional, partly an intellectual, and partly an erotic experience.” Hart goes on to say that his family arrived from England “in the middle of a Queensland summer. Brisbane was so hot and so sultry, and I was so unprepared for the conditions there, that I would do anything to escape the heat.” Being a newly arrived immigrant from England exacerbated the impact of the heat on Hart, as he tells Kinsella: “Arriving in Brisbane was a staggering experience; it was as though my parents had taken me to a forgotten world, a city off the map ... The humidity and the heat seemed to clog up the flow of time; in a way it was a perfect world for an adolescent. And with that kind of torpor there is a supercharge of sexuality, which filters into poetry.” In an interview with Lee Spinks, Hart states that the strangeness of Queensland affected him deeply, and that Queensland, “and Brisbane in particular,” formed his conception of “Australia” (6). Hart reveals that he became a poet partly because he fell in love with Shelley, and partly due to “the endless humid evenings in Brisbane” and the blistering summer days (Spinks 6, 11). Hart spent the hot evenings sleeplessly alone in his room, and during the days took shelter in the air-conditioned comfort of the Queensland Public

“cannot and should not be privileged” (163), while Gary Catalano draws attention to Hart’s constant reminders “that we live in an obdurately material and physical world” (25).

⁵ Critics who are also published poets seem especially attracted to Hart’s work. To date, the majority of the criticism published on Hart has been written by other poets, including Gary Catalano, John Kinsella, Paul Kane, David McCooy and Paul Mitchell.

Library, where he read a variety of poets, including Frost, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Eluard (Spinks 6, 11). Thus, since Hart's first days in Australia, poetry, heat, summer and sex have been intertwined in his psyche.

The centrality of heat in Hart's poetry is evident from the beginning of his published body of work. In "The Streets of Brisbane," the speaker warns an arriving traveller, "you will taste the rusting air / Of Roma Street" (5-6), implying that the hot air is thick with disintegrating matter, and later declares:

You will pass men in suits, sweating shadows,
Hurrying down streets named
After straightlaced English women
Who swam through the heat in fussy Victorian dresses
A world away from home. (7-11)

Despite the intense heat and humidity, both the men and women wear clothing unsuited to the climate, causing them to sweat profusely. The fact that the streets are named after "straightlaced English women" emphasizes the imposition of English culture on a climate that requires a different type of dress altogether. Hart's use of "swam" indicates the thickness of the air and emphasizes the sweat that drenches those attired in suits and dresses (and very often those who are wearing a lot less). In Hart's poetry, heat and humidity are commonly depicted as oppressive and the cause of lethargy. For example, "For Jenny" describes "people lazily / Parting the heavy curtains of the heat" (4-6).

In the prose poem, "The Clocks of Brisbane," Hart writes of "those wrestling in bed with the heat." The heat persists long after the sun has gone down, and remains a force to be struggled with throughout the night. The heat is so pervasive in Brisbane, especially during summer, that even the most basic of human activities, such as sleep, become extremely difficult. When Hart writes of "those wrestling in bed," he does not describe a specific couple; rather, he writes of all of the inhabitants of Brisbane, all of whom must fight the heat. The poem thus becomes universal and describes not just the experience of the poet, but of anyone who has ever tried to sleep in the midst of heat. One of Hart's major strengths as a poet is his ability to make the personal universal. Heat and sleeplessness are also present in "Dispute at Sunrise": "in cities wild with heat / Cicadas shake maracas through the night / And make the sleepless sprawl beneath their sheets" (11-13). In this poem, the heat is not Brisbane heat, but rather a universal summer heat that makes cities "wild." The heat is wild in the sense of being out of control and uncivilized; it inspires a festive, carnival atmosphere where "Cicadas shake maracas" while the "sleepless" citizens of the cities "sprawl" in discomfort.

Critics often classify Hart as a religious poet, and he regularly uses heat as a metaphor when addressing religious and spiritual questions. In "Membranes," he writes that "Heat sits in judgement over everyone, / O Lord, this summer night whose rising up / And going down give cruel sleep at best" (6-8). The heat in this poem, as in the poems already discussed, is the heat generated by the sun and trapped in the atmosphere. However, in "Membranes," heat also takes on the form of a God or a Judge, exercising power "over everyone," and once again making sleep difficult. When sleep does come, it is "cruel sleep." The heat is both a part of the natural world and a supernatural power. Hart also describes heat in religious terms in "Your Shadow's Songs": "Who knows if God will come to you / As fire, or as a woman's touch" (VI. 9-10). Here heat, God and sex are all bound up together. The poem entitled "The Hall" depicts "a long sermon" as "the hot event" (2.16), and describes religious ecstasy as being "flicked by flame" (2.24).

Throughout Hart's poems, the speakers and subjects constantly seek relief from the heat, usually by retreating indoors, waiting for nightfall, and praying for rain. Like heat and humidity, thunderstorms are an integral part of Brisbane's climate, and the citizens welcome them as both a beautiful and exciting spectacle and a temporary relief from the relentless heat. Hart writes of thunderstorms and heat in "The Voice of Brisbane":

On summer evenings, when the ache of thunder
Enters your body and lightning prowls around
Saint Helena then streaks along the beach,

And when the day no longer knows its name,
And vegetates (the insects mostly drunk),
You sit and wait for rain to sack the town.

The hours get larger but you cannot sleep:
You walk around the house, inside the heat ... (1-8)

As anyone who has spent time in Brisbane knows, one can feel a thunderstorm brewing and see lightning flash in the distance long before the storm actually arrives. Residents eagerly await the rain, and again, despite the onset of night, "cannot sleep," because even though they are indoors, they are still "inside the heat." After a sleepless night, or a night of "cruel sleep" ("Membranes"), one awakes sweating to find the heat already intensifying. Later in "The Voice of Brisbane," Hart describes "The brash young morning" as "Absorbed already with its crazy heat" (40-41). Here Hart may be using "crazy" to mean either "insane" or "impractical"; both meanings would certainly suit the context.

Although all summers are hot in Brisbane, some are worse than others. At times, the heat becomes so intense that normal human activities seem impossible and time seems to slow almost to a standstill. Hart writes of this phenomenon in "That Bad Summer":

The air gone thick and bad. Some days it takes
An entire afternoon to cross a road,
Some days an hour to wink at one you love.

What's worse, the hottest year this century!
Our bedroom windows have begun to sweat,
Reflections in mirrors cannot stay awake,

While numerals peel off the Town Hall clock.
Better, perhaps, to sleep the summer through. (10-17)

The air has "gone thick and bad" due to the stifling heat and humidity. The hot, thick atmosphere, combined with the lethargy created by the intense heat, makes the simplest activities extremely difficult, and thus crossing a road takes an "entire afternoon" and winking at a loved one takes "an hour." The heat affects even the physical structures of the city: the windows of the bedroom, the last refuge, "have begun to sweat," and the numbers "peel off the Town Hall clock." The speaker suggests that it might be best "to sleep the summer through"; however, as Hart has made clear in numerous poems, the heat usually makes sleep impossible. The heat is so powerful that it affects, and at times controls, everything in the city, from the people to the physical environment. In "Membranes," Hart writes of "walls going all wavy in the heat" (20). The heat has the power to distort both the physical world and the speaker's perception of it, lending the heat's immense power a God-like quality.

In one of several poems entitled "Your Shadow," Hart describes a lover's shadow as a victim of the sun, which is of course the source of the heat that makes Brisbane life so difficult during summer:

All morning the sun tries to distract,
Displaying mountains, offering flowers,
Then, furious,
Burns it within an inch of life
At noon, when it crawls under your feet. (5-9)

Hart personifies the sun as vengeful, furiously burning the shadow "within an inch of life." The shadow has to seek refuge from the sun's violence by crawling under the feet of its owner. In Hart's poetry, the sun often burns the recipients of its heat. In "Amo Te Solo," Hart alludes to both sunburn and the stifling, oven-like atmosphere created by prolonged heat: "Last week we burned our flesh, but now we baste" (III).

37). In “North,” mosquitoes “score their names upon our peeling skin.” (10). Sunburn is just as central a part of summer in Brisbane as heat, humidity, sweat and insects. Not only does the heat burn skin, it penetrates the surface, and, as Hart writes, is “in the flesh by afternoon” (“Come Back” 21).

In Hart’s poetry, heat is also associated with insects, such as the ubiquitous fly:

On summer afternoons
 When the sun has halved the day’s allowance of air,
 You dart around
 Like tadpoles in the coolest water
 And make me feel as heavy as my bed. (“Flies” 11-15)

The fly’s seeming imperviousness to the heat reinforces the speaker’s susceptibility to it, rendering him an inanimate object. In “Poem to the Sun,” Hart describes the sun, the source of the heat, “inciting the insects” (9); mosquitoes are present in both “North” and “Madonna.”

Love and lust are often associated with heat in Hart’s poetry, both the heat of summer and the heat generated by passion. At times, several varieties of heat are present in the same poem, such as “Her Name”:

Poincianas flared that Christmas holiday.
 They grew right up against the flyscreen wire,
 Over verandahs, living off wet heat,
 That heavy Brisbane heat that knocks you flat

And hangs around all night, outlasting beer,
 A heat that bruises souls. I saw them burn
 Outside my bedroom screen while thunder rolled ... (1-7)

Hart depicts the Poincianas as both the recipient and the generator of heat; they thrive on “wet heat,” they “burn” and flare. Once again, the Brisbane summer heat is intense; it is “heavy,” it “knocks you flat,” “hangs around all night” and “bruises souls.” Later in the poem, love and a lover enter:

The whole of summer passed through every night
 And smouldered in the letters as they formed,

And everything she was and I could be
 Seemed darkly written there and not in books:
 A love to grow with us and judge us both,
 A fire I felt when whispering her name. (23-28)

The name of the lover contains smouldering heat; the letters of her name are infused with summer heat, causing the speaker to feel “a fire” when “whispering her name.” Here, language itself has become hot.

In “Four Poems,” the heat and sleeplessness of summer are intertwined with sexual love: “That entire summer / We made love, and now she’s gone / I still cannot sleep” (7-9). In “North,” a couple are “Just lying here together, breathing the same air / And thinking of sleep” (17-18), and the night is “Too hot for making love” (18). “Nineteen Songs” also mingles heat, love and sexual desire:

For when you truly fall in love
The sun seems closer by a mile:
It is enough to make you sweat
It is enough to make you strip (IX. 13-16)

Falling in love brings increased heat, causing sweat and inspiring nudity, often leading to amorous action.

The heat of summer is associated with ripening fruit, a common sexual metaphor, in “Midsummer”: “These are the richest weeks / When light slows to heat, when all that grows / Fattens with the sweetest juices” (1-3). Likewise, in “The Pleasure of Falling out of Trees,” Hart writes of “The smell of lemons mingling with rich heat” (17). In “Madonna,” the heat of January is “honey heat” (3), once again creating an association between heat and sensuality. The most explicit example of such language is found in the erotic “Nineteen Songs” from *Wicked Heat*, in which Hart writes of feeling desire for “fingers sprayed with juice” (I.10) and describes his semen inside his lover as “hot and wild” (XIV. 10). For Hart, the fertility of both the natural world and humankind are inseparable from heat.

“Poem to the Sun” describes the overwhelming oppressiveness of heat. The speaker’s house is “a place without air” (1); walking through it feels like “wading through warm water” (7). The heat and humidity combine to make the city seem “sealed in plastic” (38). While the inhabitants of the city are suffering, the sun itself is “resting / In the creases of the river” (39-40). The heat is not washed away by rain, nor does it depart with the changing of the seasons; it lingers from year to year: “I left that city on a summer evening, the streets felt stale with the heat of many summers” (“The House” 1). Likewise, in “Reading at Evening,” “The day is heavy, dragged down by the sun / That looks into each window one last time / And finds old air now aching with the heat” (1-3). In a poem about his late mother, “The Dressmaker,” Hart depicts heat as an animal “Creeping through drawn blinds” (8) that “slobbers over you for hour on hour” (26). The heat renders the hours of the day “good for nothing” (4), the hours are “stunned by heat” (7), leaving people feeling “erased” (9).

The prose poem “The Glorious Age” describes Hart’s days at school in Brisbane: “The schoolroom is on stilts, and you can sometimes feel a breeze stroke your legs, wafting up through cracks in the floorboards. It is still the age of inkwells and metal nibs in Brisbane, the age of sweaty hands on blotting paper ... It is the age of wicked heat.” The schoolroom is raised above the ground to allow air to circulate underneath; however, the breeze only reaches the students occasionally, and “sweaty hands” are the norm. The heat is “wicked,” meaning perhaps evil, bad, wrong, depraved, immoral, heinous, or simply incomprehensible; it is hard to believe that it can be so hot, especially for a boy who has spent his early childhood in England.

Perhaps the central poem of Hart’s 1999 collection *Wicked Heat* is the aptly titled “Heat.” While Hart once again depicts the heat as intense and oppressive, the “young blokes” in the poem clearly love it:

A late November day, o lord, and a wild heat has taken root.
By noon those old iron sheds, just over the railway line,

Are blazing, and the young blokes mowing paspalum there
Have stripped to jeans and radio:

Heat strumming the horizon
And burnt air shimmering.

They lick it off their lips, they taste it in the grass stalks. Ah,
Sweet Jesus, how they love it, and they tell you so

In the way they wipe sweat off their foreheads
In the way they let it run straight down their cheeks. (1-10)

The heat is “wild,” it strums the horizon, the air is “burnt,” and the “old iron sheds” are “blazing,” yet the young working men clearly revel in the heat, licking it “off their lips” and tasting it “in the grass stalks.” Heat dominates the environment, yet it is also something to be desired, a sensual pleasure. The poem also contains a hint of religion with the use of phrases such as “o lord” and “Sweet Jesus”; Hart thus combines many of his most common uses of heat into a single poem and gives his lyric a Gospel flavour.

An examination of Hart’s body of work reveals that heat is an essential component of his poetry and life experience, whether he is writing about Brisbane, summer, his childhood, religion, love, sex or all of those themes at once. One gets the impression that for Hart, a life without heat would be no life at all. Jacques Khalip writes that Hart’s poetry “is most remarkable for its sustained interest in the simplicity of experience” (201). By using universal themes and direct, lyrical language,

Hart is able to connect his personal experiences with those of his audience and create timeless poetry that will be read and enjoyed by future generations, whether fellow Australians or not.

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