

Naked Clay is an intimate response to the paintings of Lucian Freud—‘the great amplifier of twentieth century figurative art,’ as the critic Sebastian Smee has written. With an astonishing touch for individual paintings, and for the connections between seeing and touching, Hill begins his own process of amplification with poems arising out of the ‘Flemish’ portraits and life-studies of Freud’s early work, those exacting acts of surveillance that made such an impression on London half a century ago. The poems then move, in keeping with Freud’s shift of style, into the matters of flesh, nakedness and performance with which the painter confronted viewers. Of Freud’s “late style”, the painter Frank Auerbach wrote that it has “no safety net of manner”. This might be said of Hill’s engagement with Freud’s incomparably candid treatment of his ailing mother, his naked daughters, his male and female friends, each of them tenderly and shockingly rendered in all their “creatureliness”. The poems are as urgent as the paintings, and taken together they constitute an essay on the ambiguous gifts from a painter of such mortal, material presences. Barry Hill has created a unique space for the senses and the intellect to be prompted, explored and disturbed.

Barry Hill was born in Melbourne in 1943, and completed his tertiary education in Melbourne and London, where he worked an educational psychologist and a journalist. He has been writing full time since 1975, living by the sea in Queenscliff, Victoria. He has won major national awards for poetry, history and the essay. He has written many pieces for radio. His libretto, *Love Strong as Death* was performed at ‘The Studio’, at the Sydney Opera House in 2004.

Broken Song: T G H Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession (Knopf 2002), his magnum opus on Australian poetics, which won a National Biography Award and the 2004 Tasman-Pacific Bi-Centennial Prize for History, has been described as ‘one of the great Australian books.’

In 2008 he won the prestigious Judith Wright Prize for his reflections on revolutionary romanticism, *Necessity: Poems 1996–2006*. Along with *As We Draw Ourselves* (2007) this book also includes his responses to living in Italy, and his Buddhist travels in India and East Asia. *Lines for Birds* (2011) is a collaboration with the painter, John Wolseley. *Naked Clay: Drawing from Lucian Freud*, is his ninth collection.

Between 1998 and 2008 he was Poetry Editor of the national newspaper, *The Australian* and between 2005 and 2008 he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Melbourne. He is currently the recipient of an Australia Council Fellowship, which enables him to spend time in Kyoto and Calcutta while writing a book called *The Peace Pagoda*, about the travels of Rabindranath Tagore in Japan.

Also by Barry Hill

The Schools (1976)

A Rim of Blue (1978)

Near the Refinery (1980)

Headlocks and Other Stories (1983)

The Best Picture (1988)

Raft: Poems 1983–1990 (1990)

Sitting In (1991)

Ghosting William Buckley (1993)

The Rock: Travelling to Uluru (1997)

The Inland Sea (Poems) (2001)

Broken Song; T G H Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession (2002)

The Enduring Rip; A History of Queenscliffe (2004)

The War Sonnets (2007)

Necessity: Poems 1996–2006 (2007)

As We Draw Ourselves (Poems) (2008)

Four Lines East (Poems) (2009)

Lines for Birds, with John Wolseley (Poems) (2011)

Barry Hill

Naked Clay

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*To George Papaellinas—
grace under pressure*

To me Art's subject is the human clay.

—W.H. Auden

Letter to Lord Byron

It is as naked as a hand.

—Robert Hughes

Lucian Freud

Everything is autobiographical and everything is a portrait.

—Lucian Freud

When the oriole rests, it knows where to rest.

Is it possible man isn't equal to this bird?

—Confucius

The Great Learning

Glass

*And remember this: it is always figures that look at pictures.
It's nothing else. There's always a little bit of mirror somewhere.
You don't get Red and Blue Number Three looking at Red
and Blue Number Four.*

—David Hockney to RB Kitaj

Dead Monkey, c. 1944

A little thing, its small death.

Every hair on its laid-out body
you would think them pins
but along the forearm it is bare
and in the palm of his or her hand it's bare
left white, a lake in the crater of the deaf ear.

And the eye
the eye as closed as a Brazil nut
only the mouth
there for us to worry about.

A mouth breather from way back?
A jawline some dare face each morning.
The teeth, little pegs
spaced and half-broken.

The brave young painter must have had
a foul breath to work with.

And what does our old tail do
when we are dead?

Stiffen and curl, raise itself
create a shadow
snake along the ground
back into the mouth.

Boy with a Pigeon, 1944

In the palm of one hand
I can feel the soft weight of the bird
all its downiness of the kind
I had, once upon a time
on my cheek, my upper lip.

In my other hand its feathers quiver
then settle like a silk bow tie.

Blue sounds, blue sounds—
the bird colours my jacket
calls into my stiff throat.

Then we can't help but
bunch up a bit, tuck down
for a pin-pointed look.

Post-War Studies

Two Pheasants, 1919 (Soutine)

A meaty death
laid out in intestinal yellows
ochres of fact.

Through brilliant
even smeared plumage
death warms the nostrils.

A painter drags the birds
out of spring bracken.
A natural-born killer spreads
a carcass on a canvas.

Neither was cut out to be an ambulance driver.

The plucked bird awaits a pot.
The other, as dressed as an infantryman
before the bombardment
is propped against the bloodied one.

Who is there to distinguish
one feather from another?
How far to the front—
all that tried and true mud?

Dead Heron, 1945 (Freud)

Is the war over? Sure?
Still, touch up the longer wing feathers.
Darken the crest of that bayonet head.
And those half dozen white feathers
the ones beneath the neck, near the breast
whiten those a little more
pretend you surrender
make those feathers *hurt*
that's the shot.

Feathers count as much as scales.
Feathers carry us a long way back.
Feathers, assorted, are deceptive.
Light as they are
they can pull a body apart.

A trick is to pin their beauty.
You have to adore each one—
quilling them, personally, as you render them.

There's absolutely no
pretending not to have handled
the dead bird, not to have dragged
it or yourself down
off the mustard horizon.

Simply be true
to the slate-blue sea
to the aviary of fawns, greys, oak browns—
for the present moment keep on
with what a museum of feathers offers.

When in doubt take stock
of your bold, necessary creation of shadow—
the black frame, the rack for the wingspan
screaming on its oil slick.

Don't touch that.
See, at a stretch
the bird's own bill dips into it.

Time comes
when all a man can do is step back—
admire his own work.

Apples in State: two studies

1 Courbet's

Three green ones, two with a touch of green.
The others red, with the healthy scars apples have.
They fill the bowl as manifesto
the pewter jug standing guard
and two guerilla apples loose on the table
observant of the jug's helmet
as is the half-filled glass between them
the liquid thought in shadow, in prison
with even the pomegranate incarcerated
at Sainte-Pélagie. But the collective bowl
still crowds colour into the room
with such a deep glow, hope
that art goes out the unseen window.

2 Freud's

These small, hard, shadowy ones
could have been shaken
down by Grandpapa.
After Kristallnacht
the box was dragged across Europe.

Now it rests in Wales
before the iron mountain.
The question is: who will
make their way into its caves—
stonebreakers or clowns?

The apples try to glow.
Oh, there is light in them
just as there was, say
in a gold watch that's melted.

One day they will be eaten.
Small boys, or nervous boys in men,
will cut them open
feast on them as if
there never was a garden.

Boy with White Scarf, 1949

Give the boy a white scarf
cleanse him of his sins.
Clothe his Adam's apple
with something soft, unknottable—

Unlike those eyes, the ice blues
and the part in the middle
of the cowlick curl. And those lips
lips to suck sable dry.

Is that (on the bridge of the nose)
the shadow of an eyelash?
His sweatshirt is unsoiled.
His pallor is a perfect steal.

All this before a shift of style
the gamy lust for hogshair
'a looser, more fatty to-and-fro'—
a half-century of louche rigours.

Hard Eyes (*Girl with a Kitten*, 1947)

A look can be so smooth, so
glassy, glass without a speck on it

cold and hard, clean as you must keep
china, or a microscope slide.

These optics, double and different, swim
in each other's rim. The kitten

in hers, hers in its, the poor thing
its fur no match for the soft swatch

of her hair, its gaze is fixed
hers is off somewhere, her neck also bare

sheer as her brow
while the kitten's throat is made

thinner by the minute, the second
her breath. In a tick

she'll pick up the sound
she's listening for, a sound from afar—

the kitten, like a child bride
closer to death than it thinks.

O yes, yes, the young painter
old master makes the two of them

draw us right in
squeezing the best out of last looks—

his nose in close over the hairs doing the kitten's nose
his mouth perhaps open

ever so slightly
just a black slit

as he does the petals
of his wife's lips.

Nicotine (*Interior in Paddington*, 1951)

The milk is you-know-who's semen.

—Charles Simic

Spasm is tricky release—
nothing to write home about
it is sitting and all of a sudden not
sitting still, an itch of mind
a silly telling that does not tell:
it can happen to anybody.

Besides, what looks fraught
is the even watery light
we stiffen when sallow
or unwashed or uncaring
of the cat mewing to get out
wanting a fresh saucer.

The crack in the footpath
is your friend, the slow
footfall behind you is mother's
grandfather's there to remind you.
Avuncular you can be with yourself—
a constant surveillance of leaf

a Weimar loitering in the street.
Don't be afraid.
Light up.
Let someone in
to water the pot
straighten the rug.