Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize 2009 winner

Black Bat Burn

Andrew Slattery

In February 2009 temperatures reached 44c in the south-west of NSW. In some towns there were mass deaths of flying foxes. They are not used to such high temperatures. Enclosed in their leather wings, they are unable to escape the heat.

A hushed collective roosts the trees. The branches
have tattered bracts from last night's black moon
and the kercheak kerchak of doing sex upside down.

Restless and the membraney wingspans start to swelter,
wrapped around furred mousebodies. In silhouette
they are wilted kitbags lightly boxed by wind.

At midday the tree's shadow will disappear
plumb down the core of the trunk.
The snakes slip out of the hot grass. The spats of dung

from the pome fruits start to team-up a rank sweet.
The bats dangle like a couple
bound after their bungy-jump wedding vows,

the black bunches and bulges their shoulders,
their stomachs full of pulp and undispersed seed.
The elastic nerves of their skinwings start to spasm.

Leather will expand in heat

like a drum-maker stretches hide over the metal rim.
The seared air singes the fines of hair in the ear's opening.

Distress in the sound-mapping eyes, the bats
are coming down low in the foliage, as clenchy fingers
start to swell and weaken their hold. The grasshoppers

pop from the grass like malfunctioning crackers.
The lemon-scented gum flinces up zest in the heat.
The bats are falling from the trees.

Their book-binding armour softens and closes in
on their model airplane bones. The leaves have paled
and curled. The suppler and the burnt

are sliding down on top of their last breaths.
Tonight the bats in storybooks will eat the figs
and the lilly-pilly berries and veer great sky circles

on the dark monitor sky and below it
they are remodelling the batbody on the same design table
where no two zebra coats are drawn alike.

A dog-day bleep in the going forward
of a species. The sun and its wrackful cindercide.
The bloomed daffodil like a small continuous explosion.

In come the flies and beetles, to pore over the intricacies of ruin;
over the ground with fetid debris, and already in its rising,
the mute, earless moon climbs up a drawing of the earth.

At dawn, pixels of frost will dotter the brown grass.
The criss-crossed trees, the flown-out sky and its sun
that couldn't wait, and so came to Icarus as he slept.