

ICE-CREAM HEADACHE

Take one

'I am an aspirin,' you say
to the man behind the counter.

He nods his head, uncertainly.
He smiles.

There is
a pause.

Perhaps he didn't hear you.

You speak
a little louder.

'I am an aspirin,' you say,
again. You smile.

Everyone
understands a smile,
don't they?

False start

You have become
uncertain
in this shiny Circle-K,

with its row upon row
of Japanese snacks,
and signs that scream
in a language you can't understand.

The promises of air-con
and convenient convenience
are not working out
like you planned.

Nothing
is working out
like you planned.

You arrived . . . how long?
Seven hours ago.

Seven hours ago
you got off the plane.

And that
was the end
of all that you'd known
until now.

Long ago

Nine hours before *that*
with no doubts in your mind
you sat in a plane
on the edge of Australia.

The smooth edge, the straight
edge, the runway concrete. Everything
under control.

Taxiing smoothly to the edge
of your life, ready to fly
to another.

Ready to fly
to Japan.

No doubts in your mind.
You were leaving behind
your everyday life
with its everyday problems.
You were flying away from a life
that you wanted to change.

It all
seemed so simple
back then.

Far away

Back there, back then,
not even a day ago.

So much now changed,
your head
is about to explode.

You left in winter. You were wearing
a jumper. A scarf. A beanie. Seventeen
socks. And now you stand sweating
in a T-shirt and shorts, your head

full of everything,
your head
full of nothing.
Too much.

There is too much noise, there are too many smells,
and the cars on the street are all somehow
just different, and you're too jetlagged
to say just *how* they're different,
but the streets are different,
and the footpaths
are different,
and the air
is different
and the
people,

oh, the people
are different.

Stop making sense

And here. In this shiny
convenience store.

You weren't expecting
to find so much difference.

Coffee in cans and rice balls
and sushi and packets
of tiny dried fish.

You searched through it all
for headache tablets,
thinking that somehow
that was going to help.

But all you could find
was a swirl of unknowns.

You can't read the writing,
and because you can't read it
it's telling you nothing
at all.

Everything
a haze
of not-quite-getting.

Like this man who nods
and smiles in front of you.

There's something
he's not quite getting.

Take two

But then,
a smile
of understanding.

He nods his head
and turns away.

Reaches down
behind the counter
for a crispy waffle cone.

Turns to the soft-serve machine
beside him, pulls you
a perfect serving.

Places it
in the holder on the counter,

rings it up
on the till.

What else can you do?

You smile, you fumble,
you hand him a note.
You accept the coins he carefully places
in the tray beside the register.

Clarity

And at that moment,
you suddenly get it.

Your one (and only)
Japanese lesson
emerging
through the jetlag haze.

Ice-cream? Aspirin?
Could they sound
so much the same?

Perhaps (just perhaps)
your accent isn't perfect
just yet.

Possibly (just possibly)
you didn't say quite
the right thing.

The kindness of strangers

And yet.

This man in front of you.

Listening hard

as you mangle his language,

politely trying

to make sense of your mess.

And more than all that,

much more

than all that,

wanting to help you

land on your feet.

The real beginning

You smile at him

and pick up your soft serve,

walk into the street

with an ice-cream in your hand.

You're feeling much better

already.