



Australasian  
Association  
of Writing  
Programs

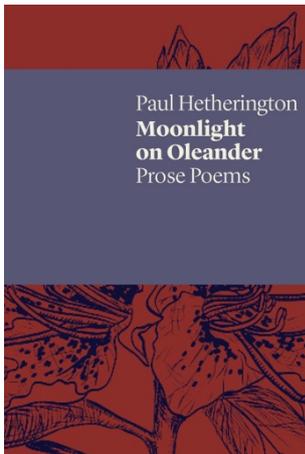
TEXT  
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

## TEXT Review

### Prose poem masterclass

*review by Mags Webster*



Paul Hetherington

*Moonlight on Oleander: Prose Poems*

UWA Publishing Perth WA 2018

ISBN 9781742589862

Pb 128pp AUD22.99

Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton, two expert practitioners and theorists of ‘the monster child’ (Simic in Zawaki 2000: 300) that is prose poetry, note in a co-authored paper that ‘prose poems frequently open up, TARDIS-like, to reveal much more than their actual size on the page would appear to allow’ (Hetherington & Atherton 2015: 275).

Certainly, in Hetherington's latest collection *Moonlight on Oleander*, 'the small grows large in the gaze' (26). Presented in eight sections, it offers a masterclass in the art, versatility and intricacies of this intense and rewarding form.

As if reinforcing the notion of prose poetry's TARDIS-like time and dimension defying attributes, the first section, 'Fenestrations', whisks the reader into various 'calligraphies of distance' (14). As Hetherington notes in the book's Preface (11), prose poetry is a way of containing and expressing the 'mutability of our understandings of space and time' (11). Accordingly, we travel geographically from Washington DC to Japan, Ireland, and Europe; and mythically, into the Odyssey, transposed to the flight cabin of a modern aircraft ('Mythologies' 33), with flight attendant Helen as the face that served a thousand coffees.

The prose poem is an excellent form of time travel.

In 'Body and Tongue', the second section, Hetherington's poetic prose turns sensuous: 'as he smoked bees he thought of soft down on his wife's back ... of night's yellow and black caress' (37). These are poems of muscle and skin: they rub up against experience: 'peeling an existence is easier than it looks ... your situation will mostly be imperfect and at first you'll find yourself itching where the new life hasn't taken' (39); against romantic longing: 'the unavailable outweighs what's possessed' (41); against discovery: 'they held each other at slow arm's length in the morning's indistinct light' (43); and rediscovery: 'semi-conscious you leaned against me and I remembered your weight, a few weeks old in my free left hand' (42). Their fascia is language: promises, accents, 'a poem being endlessly made' (41), 'gestures sutured by words' (45), sentences, 'an unknowable verb' (50).

The prose poem is an excellent form of seduction.

Clues to the theme of the third section, 'Unhooking', can be found right at the beginning: 'I'm making a shrine to the fragment' (52). For fragments read moments, flashbacks, objects and memories. In 'Archive' (61), for instance, a deceased soldier's life is summed up by the detritus he leaves behind, including 'a drawing of a Chinese temple bell; twelve pairs of pinch-nose pliers; three shrivelled bats' wings' (60). A sweater's seam unravelling green thread triggers a recall of 'two leaves ... dried in a notebook ... three of them in a hedgerowed lane in Devon, a bicycle flashing past' (62). A child enters the unsettlingly surreal environment of a delicatessen, which has 'a smell like a complex idea' (55): neither identifiable nor articulable. Amid the 'constellation of cheeses' (55) and intestinal sausage coils 'someone takes his hand and a man jollies his head' (55).

The prose poem is an excellent form of specificity.

Thematic hints are also there at the beginning of the next section, ‘Inchings and Belongings’. ‘The Room Beyond Rooms’ (68) – the title a clever play on the prose poem’s distinctive difference to conventional poetry’s stanzaic form – could be read as the definition of what a prose poem is and does:

Sometimes it opens at the end of a circular staircase; at other times it’s small and spare, smelling of plum cake and cumquat liqueur spilled on linoleum. Occasionally it has ornate furniture and half-pulled velvet drapes ... [s]ometimes the room is an elongated attic. There are dark floorboards; surreptitious light squeezes through shutters. (68)

This section is populated by ‘rooms’, literal and figurative, marked out by measurements of time: ‘the angular gestures of a clock’s hands’ (72), and ‘[t]he heart’s small murmur’ (71). They are rooms which, as the poems’ speakers discover, are difficult to quit; yet Hetherington’s virtuosity lulls so that the reader, too, learns to accommodate ‘the lie of a concave sofa’ (74). These are poems suffused with a strange glamour and languor, like a *haute couture* photo shoot in a ravaged outback hotel: even when rain clatters ‘like thrown nails’ or plaster peels ‘like worn bandages’ against backdrops of riots, and streets ‘haloed in night light and anger’ there is some unexpected, unusual detail that redresses balance, that won’t allow claustrophobia to win: ‘a head of purplish broccoli ... beauty that sits in the hand’ (74); ‘a stadium’s bowl plumped with fruits of light’ (76); the exuberance and indomitability of ‘wild parsley’ (77).

The prose poem is an excellent form of accommodation.

Sheets, skies, hands, ice, photo albums, mirrors, buildings, family myths... and the page itself, which ghosts hold ‘in the form of a family... [m]ysterious forms have begun to own them’ (82). These are some of the ‘Memory Fields’ of section four, upon which experience and remembrance is inscribed. Language burrows into us: Alice-like, ‘we follow sentences as they speak in brown chthonic tones, rubbing our faces with childhood’ (85), and ‘we look for ourselves in opaque lids of ice’ (87) as we crackle across frost. Yet do we recall with any accuracy? Judging from the final poem in this section, ‘Red Wine’, it is clear that we sculpt our recollections to fit a personal need: ‘although memory claims she leant forwards to kiss, she denied it, saying she had a sudden crick in her neck. He remembers his lips missing hers and the waiter pausing’ (89).

The prose poem is an excellent form for dissembling.

‘If music and neat gin won’t invite sleep in, then it’s hours staring at the twisted blades of the ceiling fan’ (96) says the speaker of the poem sequence that comprises section four, ‘Insomnia’ (94). A prose poem’s an excellent form for looking at – and writing about – a problem from several angles. Read ‘Insomnia’ when ‘the numbers on your clock scroll and

you're learning to count again. It's not sheep – it's words' (96). You will feel less alone, and it will also serve as an excellent entrée to the penultimate section, 'Moonlight on Oleander', where the night – populated by worms, water, soil, moon and the toxic oleander – seems to be simultaneously setting and muse. 'Don't write about this, you said, and I agreed that I wouldn't. You will, you said, and I agreed that I must' (99). This section synthesises elements we have already encountered, such as rooms, memory, language – 'clots of nouns and writhing, soiled verbs' – and the translation of eros and of limerence into words: 'He wants her poems. Not those in her book, or those that came by email, but words elicited by touch – ' (103).

A prose poem's an *excellent* form.

The final poems within the collection, gathered in 'Blue Square and Black Page', are valedictory in tone, and, as the title intimates, draw heavily on ekphrasis. Death is now an occupant of these poem/rooms, which are 'disarticulating' (119) and shrinking to hospital beds, picture frames, to an urn from which a parent's ashes are dispersed. In 'Elegy' (123), memorialising a father's death, 'a painted blue square luminesces and duplicates' (124) (perhaps through the speaker's tears?). The speaker sees the painting as a proxy for their father, and searches futilely for a sign or response: 'twelve times I have returned but it hasn't released its sound... I would speak with it but what could I say when its word is still about-to-be' (124). One senses, however, that the speaker already knows what the painting is articulating: the blunt and unassuageable ache of '[u]nsayable love' (115).

While the arc of *Moonlight on Oleander* started with 'Ascension' (14) and the view from the plane as it approached Washington DC, it ends in contemplation of the descent towards the inevitable black page. Language, however, will have the last word, with Hetherington concluding this remarkable, fierce, yet incredibly tender collection with mention of 'a lately scrawled manuscript' and the anticipatory action of the roller on the empty printer's plate. A prose poem's an excellent life form.

### Works cited

Hetherington, P & C Atherton 2015 "Unconscionable mystification": Rooms, spaces and the prose poem', *New writing* 12, 3: 265-81

Zawacki, A 2000 'Accommodating commodity: The prose poem', *The Antioch Review* 58, 3: 286-303

*Mags Webster is completing a PhD at Murdoch University. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing (City University of Hong Kong), a BA in English and Creative Writing (Murdoch University) and BA (Hons) in English and Drama (University of Kent). Her first poetry collection The Weather of Tongues (Sunline Press) won Australia's Anne Elder Award. Her next collection, Nothing to Declare, is published by Puncher & Wattman.*