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Playing with time: Prose poetry and the elastic moment

Abstract:

The prose poem typically presents itself in the guise of a paragraph, suggesting that readers treat it as such: a narrative fragment. As a narrative ‘unit’ it might be expected to focus on a relatively brief moment in time, a tightly framed episode. Its isolation (from any other fragments of the imaginary ‘whole’), however, would seem to drive its attentions according to principles different to most lengthier narrative prose. The passage of time that might, for a longer narrative, stretch across its entirety, becomes, in many cases, a feature of the prose poem’s concision – and particular power. The elastic treatment of the ‘moment’ – sometimes connecting with both distant past and future – can therefore be identified as one of the form’s defining, poetic characteristics; intriguingly, it is a characteristic owing its effect, in part at least, to the fluidity of prose. This paper surveys a particular body of prose poetry, produced under the auspices of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI), noting the prevalence of the elastic moment and considering the variety of techniques involved.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

Many poems, in a variety of forms, feature memories and the process of memory itself. This paper focuses on the particular quality of time recalled – or projected – within prose poetry. I have identified an elastic treatment of time as a frequent trope within the bulk of poems written as part of the Prose Poetry Project that ran for over two years (November 2014 to March 2017), under the auspices of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI) at the University of Canberra, before the project paused, and was then extended. The Project began with three poets exchanging prose poems by email, and grew to a group of 24, with members in Australia, the UK and Asia. By March 2017, over 2,600 prose poems had been amassed, in the spirit of collaborative exploration of the form.

I make no claim for all prose poems exhibiting such a trope, or even all those written for the Project. Indeed, in making a selection of poems for an anthology titled *Tract* (Carroll and Munden 2017), my co-editor, Monica Carroll, was equally able to select poems that dwelt more exclusively on a single, confined moment. My assertion is rather that prose poems reflecting on the passage of time, or incorporating time-shifts as a significant part of their content, do so with remarkable *abandon*, the effect at once casual and extreme. It is as if the expected parameters of time are thrown to the wind, and the gesture is all the more striking on account of the brief space in which it happens; not only a *brief* space, but a *tightly framed* space, with no line or stanza breaks or other spatial elements to assist in the temporal stretches and shifts. As readers, we are most familiar with the paragraph as a unit within a larger narrative, dealing with a manageable segment of time. It is startling, therefore, to find within a single paragraph – the prose poem – shifts that might be more familiar in the breaks *between* paragraphs, or, even more characteristically, *between chapters*, and not necessarily those adjacent to each other. In narrative terms, prose poems that exhibit this treatment of time are actually *compacting* it, and quite radically.

Is it a contradiction, to suggest that these prose poems present time as elastic, while also compressing its narrative span? It may be helpful here to consider the prose poem's problematic relationship to flash fiction. The distinction between the two, so often elusive, is usefully articulated in their differing allegiances. Where flash fiction presents a compact narrative, prose poetry's instinct, and effect, is often to shrug off any sense of narrative structure or thrust, and offer instead an ingenious lens through which far-fetched moments can be viewed as part of a single, kaleidoscopic scene.

There is of course a spectrum of adventurousness evident, and the following investigation of individual poems will move from the simple stretch to the (effortlessly) contorted.¹

Stretch #1: The daily stretch

As demonstrated in IPSI's series of prose poetry chapbooks, *Pegs, Jars, Keys, Gaps, Nets* (Atherton et al 2015), the prose poem is adept at exploring the quotidian, sometimes celebrating its simplicity, at other times revealing its hidden depths. In a number of the Project poems, time is witnessed in the repetition of an act; that is, the

act is not as a rule repeated, in that subsequent sense, as it might be in a novel, from one chapter to another; rather it is described as a frequency. Interestingly, Monica Carroll's selection of 'single moment' poems includes a number of poems featuring this frequency, as if the passage of time represented by the repetition of an event has somehow been assumed, or absorbed, overwritten by the momentariness of the particular repetition in focus.

Each day she appears as if fresh from the shops, charms you with the illusion of the new. The weather is glossed with the same, skilful repetition of the unique: every cloud a sweet nothing, every sunburst bright as your breakfast juice, every snowflake an unpredictable kiss. (Munden 15/5/16)

Some poems make their dramatic discoveries in the midst of casual daily ramblings. The seashore is a typical setting for Paul Hetherington's poems, and although their beginnings may be deliberately unremarkable, they move swiftly to their extraordinary findings:

In the tideline's scatter of shell and bluebottle, ratchety pebble and slow blue thought there's a small tear bottle. (Hetherington 2/1/17)

In sea that splashed querulously he lifted a bucket of wet sand, and found a mermaid in it. (Hetherington 31/8/17)

The sea serves a further purpose in each poem's development. It acts as 'a surging tide' or 'sucking wave': both movements are witnessed in the poems, but they are also emblematic of the momentous shifts, not least in time, that the poems conjure and present to considerable emotional effect. In the second of the two poems quoted above, the experience (with the mermaid) becomes a force that carries the poet/narrator beyond the quotidian into a lifelong haunting:

Something to carry him beyond drab sunshine and gritty sandwiches; the offered icy pole and hot concrete walkway. For eighty years he said nothing about her, and now her song began to gust in his throat – about colours and air and a place to lie down. (Hetherington 31/8/17)

This mention of passing decades is a frequent occurrence in the Project poems. The following list is of phrases mentioning a decade, or multiples thereof. The list is not exhaustive, and is taken only from the hundred poems selected for the *Tract* anthology. And although a number of these phrases are from poems by Paul Hetherington, five other poets are represented too.

It grew for centuries before he found it

Forty years of living

ten years of journals

He is 10 years dead

You remember a man who returned to his house after twenty years to start mowing the lawn

Papa touched her Mama just twice in ten years

Ten years later you answered the door
That was thirty-three years ago
for a hundred years the heat rises
Thirty years later and sometimes I feel your ghostly hand on my arm
the horse must have been for the knackery these 40 years
there's no real reason to care what happens in a hundred years' time
forty years working as a curator
for fifty years no-one saw her open it
Twenty years ago... he'd stopped to help a stranger with a boiling radiator.
Twenty years dived into three words
Bought thirty years ago from a second-hand dealer
40 years after he last saw her, she died.
Words retreated further. Two months, a year, a decade.
Later – maybe hours or maybe decades –
(in Carroll and Munden 2017)

A question arises around the influence of the Project. Was a single, intriguing leapfrogging of years enough to encourage others to try the same thing? It is certainly the case that many poems inspired others, and that many of the poets – some of them writing prose poetry for the first time – learned from their co-contributors, with experiment the order of the day. If the 'daily stretch' sounds like something of a gymnastic work-out, that is appropriate, since the Project was to some extent an 'exercise', encouraging the flexing of prose poetry muscles (which some of us didn't at first know we had).

The *surge*, or *suck*, the manner in which the conventional passage of time is dissolved, is achieved in part through the prose poem's natural fluidity. As Linda Black writes, 'the prose poem encourages thoughts to be continuous, to twist and turn, hold themselves up short, or open out into a broader perspective, sometimes travelling at great speed' (Black 2012: 2).

Sometimes the 'action' at the heart of the poem is archetypally quotidian, but perhaps more typical is the transference of that quality to things more exotic. 'Each New Year' begins a poem by Alvin Pang (3/2/17). In one of Paul Hetherington's poems, 'That orchestra played through twenty years. The same pieces, with unvarying intonation'. Further into the poem, the repetitive occurrence is even more extreme – both in the nature of the event and in its frequency (which is perpetual): 'Always, driving home, lightning struck the top of a tree'. These disconcerting frequencies prove to be preludes to a shift of scene, and a fundamental struggle with the elapse of time:

He sat in the psychiatrist's room and tried to recollect himself. What he hadn't remembered – nearly half a life. His strange middle-aged face in the mirror. The

conductor stooping with baton held out. The cymbal's clashing stroke. (Hetherington 8/11/16)

The 'action' here is far beyond the scope of the paragraph unit as found in most novels. Prose poems, certainly the generally short prose poems written within the Project, are not then simply paragraphs. Their isolation differentiates them from paragraphs that form a chain. As Adrian Wanner has stated, the prose poem 'is presented in a frame that invites the reader to regard the text as a poem' (Wanner 2003: 11). Adam Geczy, too, points to the 'enframed' quality of the prose poem (Geczy 2001, n.p.). We may well spend as long reading a short prose poem as we might stand looking at a painting. And our more habitual expectation of moving swiftly from one paragraph to another, in a longer piece of prose, accentuates the abnormality of the experience.

Some prose poems play on this almost trance-like treatment of time, using the quotidian act as a stepping stone for a disconcerting temporal leap; for instance: 'By the time I'd finished scrubbing down the kitchen counters it was next spring and we had run out of things to say' (Webb 11/9/16). And in the following extract, we witness the precise focus (on Union picnic day) break, as if suddenly subjected to a kaleidoscopic lens, into any number of 'equivalent' moments.

Tablecloth on the table. Union picnic day. Sun is too sunny and gum trees thin.
Cordial from the cooler tap runs warm. Hoops and skipping ropes for the children.
Conversation and beer for the grown-ups. Sometimes a guitar and microphone start.
Other years Santa rolls up on the back of a flat-tray. (Carroll 1/8/16)

It is notable, here, how the break from the single moment is not moving back or forward as such; it is, in temporal terms, all over the place.

Stretch #2: The two-way stretch

Someone was explaining that as we do not know our great-great-grandparents, nor our great-great-grandchildren, there's no real reason to care what happens in a hundred years' time. (Crawford 7/2/17)

Here we see how the prose poem may thrust us back and forward – and by multiple generations – within a single sentence. Sometimes the two-way stretch is managed so subtly that we hardly notice its contrasting forces. Paul Hetherington's poem 'Watermark', for instance, begins with the casually retrospective phrase, 'For years he'd noticed it', before sharpening its reference to the past: 'The high water mark from 1963 notched into wood and etched into stone'. The shift into the future is almost imperceptible: 'He'd basked in the stories: they would keep him secure'. The poem then delves into legends relating to past floods, and there is even a time stretch *within* one of these micro-anecdotes:

Then a swollen river like a monstrous tongue, white horses dragging riotous dreams,
everyone leaving at the end of four days, abandoning streets that were brimming
canals. (Hetherington 28/4/16)

Later (and all this with the space of 123 words), two weeks elapse within the action of a single sentence that brings us full circle to the initial retrospection:

He camped on his roof with stove and tarpaulin, dressed in pyjamas and an old overcoat. Emergency crews slid past in small boats. When water subsided after more than a fortnight he stood on his lounge room's slippery floor, remembering that others had stood here before. (ibid)

Again, it is significant that water orchestrates this entire scenario. Water plays a similar role in a poem by Shane Strange:

I hear the ocean when I dream. The waves coming in and rolling over me and taking the smallest piece with them and again and again and again. (Strange 5/5/16)

The repetitive motion of the water is a microcosmic version of the quotidian. It is also internalised, again with a time-stretch incorporated: 'We are mostly water, I told her one day. That made her shiver for a week' (ibid).

One might call this 'ecological' time, the ever-moving circle of life asserting itself as the ultimate 'whole' of which the prose poem is a fragment. It is perhaps natural for the prose poem to catch a reflection of this in its small observations, even as it spins off into other imaginings:

Birch trees in rows: like potatoes, like wheat. In summer they have a more louche air, clustering around the bar, setting up a card game. Now, winter-naked, they are more formal, more forlorn. You touch one with open hand, the way you touched your mother's coffin, the way you cupped the small dead bird before burial. The ordered and the lost, together in one presence. (Webb 30/5/16)

The simple (though of course remarkably swift) progression from 'summer' to 'winter-naked' becomes altogether more complicated when the trees are touched 'the way you touched your mother's coffin', since we have no clue as to the time-frame this speaks of.

Oz Hardwick's treatment of time is particularly enigmatic. In 'Stepping stones' he writes: 'I see it all in the space of one deep drag on my first cigarette in three years, seven weeks, and two days' (Hardwick 3/9/16).

I find this intriguing. As a single sentence, it is not exceptionally long, but it insists on its unlineated stretch; any line break would be utterly counter to its purpose and meaning. It is possible, admittedly, to conceive of it as a single line within a lineated poem, but its length would be unwieldy. Within a prose poem's frame, the sentence does of course have to move from one line to another, or even more, but its prose identity enables it to be read in an uninterrupted flow; a lineated poem, by definition, complicates such flow, in a way that would be detrimental to this particular poetic moment.

It is telling, too, how Hardwick mixes time with space: the 'deep drag' is both a measure of time and a filling of the lungs; and its depth is qualified by the length of abstinence that has preceded it, a precisely chronicled period of time, the significance of which is enacted in the drag. The word 'drag' itself, of course, relates to time. There is perhaps an unspoken *drag* in the 'three years, seven weeks, and two days', a period of time that for all its precision represents a stretch of time that has felt too long. The poem continues:

I'd add the minutes, but already a few ribs and the skull of some horned animal – cow? ox? – have appeared, barely casting a shadow. I flick the butt to anywhere and try to remember water: the sun's noon-high, and doesn't look like moving. (ibid)

The precision of the drag, and the memory, here give way to something more surreal, but it's an effortless transition, again assisted by the seamlessness of the prose, and the casual tone ('I'd add the minutes, but ...') that is actually meticulous in its progression. Time is warping before our eyes. The mention of minutes is bizarrely juxtaposed with the verbal equivalent of time-lapse photography, an animal carcass appearing in the space of a few words. There is however an absolute logic to this. The accelerated time makes the logging of minutes impossible. The mission to specify the limit of the moment is frustrated by the time it takes to engage with such precision.

The final sentence of the poem makes yet another shift, the sense of *parch* contracting time to a standstill, a further iteration of the endurance recalled in the drag of the cigarette: 'I flick the butt to anywhere and try to remember water: the sun's noon-high, and doesn't look like moving' (ibid).

The problematic nature of recording the moment, time-wise, is exemplified too in a poem by Rupert Loydell:

His painting is about the tree that was there when he started painting the picture several months ago. He takes so long to complete his painstaking images that halfway through the process they felled the oak, which was growing too large for the garden, blocking the shade for the house. Some of the pencil marks showing where the tree was, remain on the surface of the painting. It is about absence, about the passage of time, about the way the sunlight moves across the brickwork towards next door. (*for Mark*) (Loydell 13/10/16)

The poem/painting, in chronicling the demise of the tree, carries evidence of its past presence onward into the future, in pace with the movement of the sun.

Stretch #3 (for comparison): The lineated stretch

A (lineated) poem by Hugo Williams, 'At Least a Hundred Words', was in circulation between Paul Hetherington and myself during the period in which the Project got going. We were both intrigued by its handling of time, and it may well have influenced what each of us was attempting.

Williams conjures, within a lineated, free-verse structure, a simultaneous stretching and compacting of time that is similar to those prose poetry feats described above. How, then, are the two distinguished in technique and effect?

Williams's poem unfolds as a childhood moment, narrated as if by a schoolboy in the present tense.

What shall we say in our letters home?
That we're perfectly all right?
That we stand on the playground with red faces
and our hair sticking up?
That we give people Chinese burns? (Williams 1985: 9)

In contemplating the required 100 words, Williams presents us not with some sample 'letter home' prose,² but with verse that captures the schoolboy's slightly random, fragmented thoughts. The raggedness of the structure, so different to a prose poem, is attuned to the schoolboy's slightly random, fragmented thoughts, but also informed by the poet's sophisticated sense of how to dramatise the content in subtle ways. As the teacher in the classroom comes more to the fore, the narrating voice reveals its sophistication, and the seemingly casual stacking of the free verse lines directs the action:

Mr Ray lets go the propeller of his Prestwick 'Pioneer'
and it unwinds with a long drawn-out sigh. (9)

While his back is turned
I roll a marble along the groove in the top of my desk
till it drops through the inkwell
on to the track I've made for it inside. I can hear it
travelling round the system of books
and rulers: a tip-balance, then a spiral,
then a thirty-year gap as it falls through
the dust-hole into my waiting hand. (10)

Here Williams makes the multiple-decade leap characteristic of the prose poems already mentioned. The leap is described as a 'gap', through which the marble falls into the poet's hand. The fall corresponds to the fall of the line. The time-shift, and the appearance of the marble from 30 years ago in the poet's grasp, is presented as a sort of magician's trick. But the poet/magician knows that the poetry reader is herself part poet. The poem is the track that the poet has made for the marble, and the track is highly visible, explicated. The marble runs through the darkness of the invisible inside of the desk, and yet as poet-readers, we see it, and experience the poet's delight at the spiral structure, the lineated form. There is visual as well as verbal choreography directing the reader's attention to the fall, that sudden grasp of temporal perspective that comes as such a powerful revelation.

If a lineated poem can handle a vast yet instant time-shift with such aplomb, then it might be concluded that the lineated form is ideal for the task. Why suggest that the prose poem is better equipped? The answer, I believe, has something to do with the prose poem's casual poise, its appropriation of prose for its poetic purpose, where swift and brief fluidity of syntactical movement blurs the radical time shifts. These poetic qualities of prose are akin to what Michael Hamburger identified in Baudelaire's work:

the prose poem ... enabled him to illustrate a moral insight as briefly and as vividly as possible... [it] allowed him scope for fantasy and for that element of vagueness or suggestiveness which he considered essential to beauty. (cited in Muldoon 2006: 109)

Brevity is a key concept here. 'We have to write at least a hundred words', writes Williams, as he goes on to write over 300. The vast majority of poems in the Prose Poetry Project, evidenced in the 230 selected for a representative, forthcoming anthology, are 'at least a hundred words' but not much more. One or two stand out, at over 200. Williams is an economical poet, and yet he takes about twice the average

length of the prose poem to deliver his time-leap punch. And the targeted nature of his delivery is in no small part what contrasts his poem with those prose poems that have supposedly similar time-leaps at their core.

When asked about the prominence of time shifts in his prose poems, Paul Hetherington has commented:

I have always been interested in shifts of time and memory in my poetry, and various of my earlier works make such shifts. However, I suspect that prose poetry is particularly conducive to them because so many prose poems present truncated narratives that reference significant periods in a life and, as they do so, move readily backwards and forwards through time and space. Perhaps this is something to do with the way sentences flow from one to another in such works and, as they do, so often invite moments of disjuncture, recollection or the compression of experience into crystallising moments and images. (Hetherington 2017: n.p.)

Hetherington's prose poems deploy a matter-of-fact phrasing to draw readers swiftly into a scene where the radical time shifts – presented with such seeming nonchalance – are readily embraced:

Eventually your sister offered you a farm shed and a job as her gardener. That was thirty-three years ago, and every day you look at the estuary next to her house, eyeing her boat. One day, you think, one day. (Hetherington 4/9/16)

Stretch #4: The metaphorical stretch

I have concentrated this far on the explicit mention of time, but many prose poems in the *Tract* anthology capture significant durations of time through metaphorical means. Such metaphorical time shifts abound within Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971), although Hill, interviewed by John Haffenden, somewhat contradicts the description of *Mercian Hymns* as a prose poem sequence:

They're versets of rhythmical prose. The rhythm and cadence are far more of a tuned and pitched chant than I think one normally associates with the prose poem. I designed the appearance on the page in the form of versets. (Hill in Haffenden 1981: 93)

In *Mercian Hymns*, Offa, 'King of the perennial holly groves', is also 'overlord of the M5'; 'the friend of Charlemagne', he is also 'contractor to the desirable new estates'. Perennial is a particularly revealing word in this context. Offa, like the poems themselves, straddles time almost as if it doesn't exist, as if time is an ever-deepening palimpsest as much as a continuum. We see widely disparate temporal elements coexisting within a single observation; this is an example of 'amalgamating disparate experience' as described by TS Eliot (1932: 287), but with time the prime disparity. The reader is not required to look forward or back; there is no flashback, no fast-forward. Instead there is a coexistence of disparate temporal elements presented within the prose poem's flux.

In many of the Project prose poems we see this ultra-compaction of time manifested in physical terms. Cassandra Atherton (6/5/16) describes the 'evenly spaced transverse bands of white discoloration on my nail plate, I'm told I should think of them as my

growth rings, my tree rings'. And Maggie Shapley (17/12/16) writes that 'the ripening of raspberries and rhubarb can be heard'. In Hetherington's poem, 'The room leant on them' (5/11/16), we are told that 'in all the time since, still that room stood within him, merging with rib cage and breast bone'. The passage of time is here rendered as a visceral presence. Turning the time-telescope the other way round, we see Jordan Williams describing words that 'tarnish in the microsecond it takes for them to travel from your mouth to my ears' (Williams, 15/12/16).

Paul Munden's poem, 'Before the music', takes one small moment of compaction and explores it in full:

The soloist walks to the front-of-stage for Brandenburg #4, and the audience applauds. He grips the violin and its small maroon cushion between collarbone and chin, and as the welcome subsides in a predictable arc there are two or three unnerving seconds where other, long-gone instruments are in his grasp: the oboe so grimed with school-bag dirt he immersed it in the bath; and the cello in its soft case slung over his shoulder as he cycled home, the spike slipping free and catching in the wheel arch of a passing car. The noise of it splinters from the dwindling applause. The last few hand-claps are the damp patterings of the oboe's ruined felts. Then silence, composure, the chosen gleam of varnished spruce and maple ribs, horsehair stretched on carbon fibre delicately balanced between fingers and thumb, ready to erase. (Munden 2016: 48–9)

The time frame here is extensive: 'long-gone', given that the professional musician is mentioning things from his childhood, is probably a decade – at the very least. There is no flashback, no act of recall. We are presented instead with an embodiment of previous happenings: in preparing his stance as master of a musical instrument, the soloist is haunted – 'occupied' might be the word – by every false start in his journey to that mastery (and mastery, by definition, suggests a long apprenticeship). What might, in another piece of writing, be explored in more conventional linear terms as recollections are presented here as the flux of the poem, all taking place within a single moment: when read, the whole poem 'lasts' just over a minute, but the focus is on 'two or three unnerving seconds' which the poem takes around 30 to deliver. Those 3/30 seconds, however, tell not one but two different stories, each of which has the depth and discomfiting power to repossess the present moment. There may be specific time both mentioned and implied, but the miniature narratives are presented not as temporal entities but as metaphors. The noise of the splintering cello is conveyed by the audience's applause (which has ironic impact, too); the 'oboe's ruined felts' by the 'last few hand-claps'. The end of the poem sees the whole episode vanish, like an ephemeral aberration, 'mastery' once more gaining the upper hand.

'Before the music' was not included in *Tract*, but it would clearly have been suitable for either of the two sequences. In a poem that was selected, 'Every week, she has trudged the quarter mile to church' (Munden, 15/5/16), there is a somewhat similar compression of time into a momentary crisis; the 'moment' represents the full catalogue of mistakes that the organist's fingers 'remember' from years of service, before the 'cracking of joints, and an inexplicable click of her teeth like a malfunctioning machine, followed by nothing.' The compression has resulted in the poem being chosen for the opposite strand to that in which the poet himself would have placed it.

Conclusion

At the time of writing my own prose poems for the Project, I was also working on sonnets. Thinking about the sonnet's characteristic *volta*, it occurred to me that the equivalent of the *volta* may sometimes be present in the prose poem in the form of a time shift – not occupying a specific *position* within the poem, or turning point more associated with the turn of line, but a time shift that exists within the elastic, single moment of the paragraph-poem, charging the whole work.

Unlike the shift in 'At Least a Hundred Words', which emerges as a sharply focused revelation, almost scientifically timed within the closing passage of the poem, the particular type of time shift within those prose poems I have discussed is more the grain of the whole work. To use words from a poem by Alvin Pang (2/2/17), it is 'Something about how memories groove. Our repetitions bleed through. Perhaps we scar time'. To put that another way, if one compares the prose poem to an impressionist painting, the fluid treatment of time is there in brushstrokes that characterise the whole.

As with such painting, speed of composition may play an important part. Even Hill's carefully cadenced *Mercian Hymns* was relatively swiftly written: 'it did come quite quickly for me – in three years, which is rapid by my standards' (1981: 94). (His second book, *King Log*, he says in the same place, 'was nine years in the making'.)

Might it be the case that the more extreme speed at which poems within the Project are written contributes to their 'extreme' handling of time? Oz Hardwick, talking on East Leeds FM (2017), comments:

because a lot of people [in the Project] are in Australia, what happens is I wake up in the morning and turn on the computer and there's a couple of emails most mornings with prose poems that people have written during their day time on the other side of the world ... and I start off every day ... by writing one or two prose poems and they'd be influenced by what I'd got in my inbox, maybe what I'd been dreaming about, maybe what I've got to do during the day, maybe just a random memory, so it's essentially almost free writing. (Hardwick 2017)

It is intriguing to consider here the time stretch that poets in the Project are contending with: at the time of writing this paper (March–April 2017), the time difference between Australia and England began as 11 hours: 6pm on the east coast of Australia (AEST) was 7am in Greenwich (UTC). English clocks then went forward (soon after the first day of Spring, to 'British Summer Time'), with Australian clocks going back, a week later (with the end of 'daylight saving time', moving into Autumn), resulting, eventually, in a 9-hour difference. It is perhaps not too fanciful to imagine these shifts having some influence on the work produced by those operating within its framework. The speed of transmission – emailed poems arriving in an instant on the opposite side of the world – makes a fascinating further complication: the seeming contradiction, between instant communication and the significant 'lag' in geographically marked time, reflects the two-way stretch evident in many of the poems.

All of this may contribute, too, to a degree of *uncertainty* about time. Oz Hardwick's work in particular makes explicit reference to such doubt.

Later – maybe hours or maybe decades – their mothers will sit them down, discuss performance, suggest tactics for the next round. (Hardwick 18/10/16)

Other poems express their uncertainty more obliquely. Anne Caldwell's poem, 'Our tongues were fat', offers an intense and sustained observation of a childhood summer – 'summer' treated as a single moment – but its deeper subject is the intimation of how everything will change.

We were skinny as wild cats and our feet were calloused from wandering barefoot for weeks. Soon Lily would slip on borrowed stilettos. [...] It can all happen in an instant, [mother] said, darkly. I'd no idea what this meant, just yet. (Caldwell 29/8/16)

The stretch of time is here at once subtle and dramatic. The poem as a whole seems to enact the opening words of TS Eliot's 'Burnt Norton':

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
(Eliot 1969: 171)

Eliot's *lines*, with their deliberate breaks, seem strangely explicatory. A prose poem such as Caldwell's, above, is driven in a different way, its twin prose-poetry consciousness articulating flux, approaching time from multiple angles all within a very brief narrative that seems almost conventional in its telling.

I will end with two final examples. The first, by Oliver Comins, is the poem from which *Tract* takes its title. The poem is somewhat aligned to Eliot's explication, albeit in an unlineated way, tuning in instead to a type of scientific prose from which poetry nevertheless forms, almost in the manner of the mineral formations that are the nominal subject matter:

In digital mineral formations, the structures are no less ornate and astonishing. If you go down to the lower levels, you will find these words squeezed into narrow columns which had been spread wide as fields when they lived on the surface. Up here, only fenced distance encloses and surrounds, faintly containing a narrative of tracts. As each new layer is sent, the older ones begin to fold and become the roots of the new in the rocks of earlier beginnings. From down there, the trees seek liquid, nutrition, while up here the leaves excite and stimulate, become the earth in which the next one will grow. (Comins 14/10/16)

In the second example, by Oz Hardwick (22/2/17), uncertainty about time gives way to an almost childlike confidence in negotiating its abandonment: 'My grandfather joins me on my walk to the station, carrying a sack of leaf mould and whistling to a dog that died before my father was born.' The poem concludes:

When I am young again, I'll climb the fence and run to the tracks, wave at strangers flashing past through smoke-smutted windows, collect names of places I'll one day visit, pick blackberries and catch grasshoppers, maybe fall in love, throw a pebble so high that it'll never come down.

As Hardwick's poem states: 'Time doesn't move faster, it just becomes less linear'. He may be writing at speed, but his prose poems – like many others produced within the

Project – are relentlessly thoughtful about the nature of time: they play with time in a way unmatched by any other body of poetry I have encountered, with highly compelling, disconcerting results.

Endnotes

1. On referencing work from the Prose Poetry Project: while some of the prose poems referred to in this work have been rewritten and published I am analysing prose poems, and sections of prose poems, as they appear in the unpublished archive of the Prose Poetry Project (2015–17). Where such poems are referenced in this text, a full date following the author's name indicates when the poem was submitted to the archive.
2. There is in fact a brief interjection of indicative content in the middle of the poem: 'RESULTS OF THE MATCH. DESCRIPTION OF THE FLOODS, THE LECTURE ON KENYA, UGANDA AND TANGANYIKA WITH COLOUR SLIDES AND HEADDRESSES.' This is hardly conventional 'prose'; it is a list of clipped phrases, and all in capitals, but it is an unlineated episode – a prose poem fragment, if you like – within the otherwise lineated poem.

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