

It Feels Like Disbelief

PAUL HETHERINGTON lives in Canberra, Australia. He is the author of seven previous volumes of poetry, most recently the novel in verse, *Blood and Old Belief*, which was shortlisted for the Colin Roderick Award and the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards. He won the 1996 Australian Capital Territory Book of the Year Award (for *Shadow Swimmer*) and a 2002 Chief Minister's ACT Creative Arts Fellowship. He was founding editor of the National Library of Australia's quarterly humanities and literary journal, *Voices* (1991–97), is a member of the Board of *Australian Book Review* and is a former poetry editor of *The Canberra Times*. He has been director of publishing at the National Library of Australia since 1994 and edited and introduced the final three volumes of the Library's authoritative four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend.

Previous poetry collections by Paul Hetherington

Mapping Wildwood Road (1990)

Acts Themselves Trivial (1991)

The Dancing Scorpion (1993)

Shadow Swimmer (1995)

Canvas Light (1998)

Stepping Away: Selected Poems (2001)

Blood and Old Belief: A Verse Novel (2003)

It Feels Like Disbelief

PAUL HETHERINGTON



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For my brother, Mark

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An Image of Time

September

This is childhood and someone is leaving you for ever.
The month of September pains your memory with a thousand blossoms;
the path you have helped to shape is clear for walking.
Once again you realise that you have made nothing
that can hold her away from death
as she tucks blooms back from the path's edge,
smiling at the plastic spade you carry, praising your singing—
you know that she went indoors to a room you have never seen
and did not come out, became a shadow you have never managed to light.
The month of September waits for you now, or so it sometimes seems,
breathing quietly its flowers—its poppies, tulips and bluebells—
and you walk among them, counting each one like minutes
that are keeping you from meeting again her bent form,
your hand on the spade, the garden an open wound.

You Speak

Slowly you speak of darkness and of sorrow,
not as past, as seventeen years ago,
but as if it crouched and nagged within your thought;
as if it inhabited your mind so deeply
its core was irretrievable there.
Then in your hands you seem to hold an image
of what you have lived through, a pattern of loss,
as if fingers might contain it, hold it tight,
although never throw it away. You try,
and now it lies upon the straining table
heavy with a dangerous anguish; now
it's in your arms and clinging to your shoulders.
You heave, you try to cast your sorrow off;
it cascades through the pupils of your eyes.

Snag

Dying fish danced loudly in the buckets,
the spume of waves was intermittent rain
on the rocky groyne, while fishermen
jerked at their lines. This had seemed to him
a chance to cut three difficult weeks away
like an unwieldy snag, to meditate
on time and ocean. The bait's bloodied flesh,
taken from a larger, frozen mess,
was slippery in his hands as he remembered
so many months of living as if hooked
by another's twisting, painful words.
In their weatherproofs the fishermen,
like pragmatic messengers, cast out
elegant, singing lines of silver death.

Prep-School Boarder, Aged Nine

This is not for him a ray of sunlight
but a piercing shaft of loneliness,
this green leaf no symbol of new beauty
but of green ache settling in young bone.

He no longer knows the ineradicable
dailiness of love; all is transformed,
part of the paying duty which defines
this as the “making” of the callow boy;

becoming an image, like the chapel’s front
in that flesh is slowly turning to stone.
Dear boy, dear ordinary boy, you weep;
you are again the martyred one, lost,

looking for excuses, finding none.
Tell the truth: who lives within you now;
where is the skittish child who thought that love
was as natural as any falling rain,

who dances with his battered, lonely bear?

Detention

This cave was once a prison; on its walls
words have been incised with a sharp tool:
“Some light again today, despite the dark;
pain again today, despite the light;
an image, as if printed on the rock,
of the devil gathering our souls.”
More is absence—what was not inscribed—
waiting hours, cold exhaled by stone,
brutalities of guards, the men who fell
and were taken out, a filthy stench,
bitter water and decaying food.
A history records the revolution,
mentions how a few were locked in here
to “improve them” for “less than a year”.

They pause near their cart,
nodding their heads and talking,
holding paper and pointing,
dragging the reins of their horses—
sleet overtakes them;
one shakes the hem of his coat,
the other curses.

Eventually they vanish
from the sparse, washed landscape—
cattle graze, a small pony
whinnies its complaint
into the cold air.
Sunshine begins
to lacquer the hedgerows.

Two evenings later
they have not returned,
leaving only hoof prints
and wheel ruts
that gather small water
and a constellation of rumours—
the tax-collectors.

Jealousy

A dream of anxiety
with jealousy as the theme—
she is making love
with half-closed, switching eyes,
her face become a mask
pricked up with delight.
I rise to consciousness
as she breathes next to me;
now she sighs and turns.
I push the door to stand
in rain, tasting her mouth
in the pale, cold drops.
Across the hazy sky
lightning, white as pain.

A Cat's Bowl

1.

A tenor's voice rises through a heatwave
as Bach's singing tune develops and expands
and seems to move within the organist
whose hands are rapid flurries, who pursues
the climbing song. Music like rising water

in a ferry's wake, its churning aftermath
seeming an image of time, or what is left
for this audience of eternity,
the shape beneath the shapes of things we know:
our chairs, our names, our starchy sheets, our homes.

A cat nudges itself against her legs
and startles this concert from her reverie,
she leans to place a cat's bowl on the floor,
brimming with white, balancing her arm—
the bowl slips, collapses into shards.

2.

In our memory she now lives strangely,
as others advocate what they retain
of her wit and charm and lyrical gift
while a whiteness spreads through all we know—

the lines of her face and musical voice
like shadows on water; the vexed ideas
that she transformed into a metaphysics;
her slippery form funnelled into years

that shed her marvellous way with poetry.
The glinting of light on milk, or fractured water
from a rushing ferry in Bass Strait
must do for a metaphor, her only self

unwound from the spiral of her DNA.
Memory cannot remake her now
except in parts, except as bright deception,
while in this rippling aftermath her voice

seems subdued, challenging the trust
that things remain, can be relied upon.
Yet in light, in fractured forms, she lives
in the only way that's left—another singer

sends her words in waves across a stage.
Sunlight, a broken plate, a metre held
an instant in the song's arrested throat,
recollecting her, the heft of language.

Stalk

I become the thin stalk of a flower,
transformation straining thought until
reduced to a liquid, green emotion,
neither love nor hate, but a silent, slow
being-in-this-place, and only pushing
upwards into flower, or into dark
of soil and rootedness. I am vile
with the greenness; I care for no others,
only my own casting out, and for that
only momentarily. I feel bees
on my petals like ticklish irritations
and shudder under their ministrations, never
giving myself to them—they will leave
me soon, and cannot carry me with them.

Need

In the fierce heat
and exultation
of cicadas singing
I lie awake.
The air
is an idling current.
I go outside
to be near
the extraordinary crying,
the dark like an arm
on my shoulder,
shrilling need
an implacable engine.

The Wasp

The wasp
waits on the mantelpiece,
inscrutable yellow-black,
disrupting the routine
of household, of cleaning.
Its colours are ancient;
a jar does not catch it.
Unmanageable,
a now-darting wasp,
a hint of reclamation,
as if something lost
were returning,
some trouble or beauty
transformed.