

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Gray
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Robert Gray(23 February 1945 -)

Robert William Geoffrey Gray is an Australian poet, freelance writer, and critic.

Gray grew up in Coffs Harbour and was educated in a country town on the north coast of New South Wales. He trained there as a journalist, and since then has worked in Sydney as an editor, advertising copywriter, reviewer and buyer for bookshops. His first book of poems, *Creekwater Journal*, was published in 1973.

Gray has been a writer-in-residence at Meiji University in Tokyo and at several universities throughout Australia including Geelong College in 1982. He has won the Adelaide Arts Festival and the New South Wales and Victorian Premiers' Awards for poetry. In 1990 he received the Patrick White Award. With Geoffrey Lehmann, he edited two anthologies, *The Younger Australian Poets* and *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, and he is the editor of *Selected Poems by Shaw Neilson*, and *Drawn from Life*, the journals of the painter John Olsen. *After Images* is his latest collection of poetry.

2008 sees the much anticipated publication of his memoir, *The Land I Came Through Last*.

A Bowl Of Pears

Swarthy as oilcloth and as squat
as Sancho Panza
wearing a beret's little stalk
the pear

itself suggests the application of some rigour
the finest blade
from the knife drawer
here

to freshen it is one slice and then another
the north fall south fall
facets of glacier
the snow-clean juice with a slight crunch that is sweet

I find lintels and plinths of white marble
clean angled
where there slides
the perfume globule

a freshness
like the breeze that is felt upon
the opening
of day's fan

Enku
sculptor of pine stumps
revealed the ten thousand Buddhas with his attacks
the calligraphic axe

Rationalised shape shaped with vertical strokes
I have made of your jowled
buttocks
a squareness neatly pelvic

A Sunday of rain
and like a drain
a pipe that was agog and is chock-a-block the limber thunder
rebounds

and bounds

it comes pouring down
a funnel the wrong way around
broadcasts
its buffoon militance over the houses all afternoon

Undone
the laces of rain
dangle on the windows
now slicing iron

a butcher is sharpening
the light
of his favourite knife
its shimmers carving stripes into the garden

And I have carved the pear-shaped head
with eyes
close set
as pips that Picasso saw his poor

friend who had gone
to war
a cubist
snowman the fragrant and fatal Apollinaire

Robert Gray

Annotation

It has always seemed to me that neutral things would help us
if only we could hear
the eloquence
of their dumb ministry.

What is it that these things of the world do?
They submit,
and they endure.
They flourish. They don't ask for anything.

They simply take what is given.
They flourish,
all at once, where it had seemed they were merely enduring.
Everything can touch them.

We are searching for the world, amongst this diversity
of existence,
that has formed itself so loosely
in a ramshackle system.

While our lives, one can see, are just a routine sacrifice,
consumed and forgotten,
off somewhere to one corner
in the courts of the sun.

What can last? Only what we have made
and hand on
amongst ourselves, that is withering in our hands,
but never known without us.

So we take the dark roads
in beautiful clothing, greeting each other;
sorry for the void
that cannot see what we've become.

Robert Gray

Byron Bay: Winter

Barely contained by the eyesight,
the beach makes one great arc -
blue ranges overlapped behind it;
each of them a tide-mark.

About me, swamp-oaks' foliage
streams, hatching by Cézanne.
Off in the heath, a guard's carriage
follows the vats of a train.

A creek spoils the hem of the sea;
spread on the beach in flutes
it has the redness of black tea,
from the swamp's sodden roots.

Behind, cloudy afternoon swells,
the colour of claret stain.
The sunlit town is strewn like shells.
Its lighthouse, a tiny pawn.

I'm walking on the beach alone;
the sea's grey feathers flurry,
showing emerald. Sandpipers blown
seem mice, in their scurry.

And the sun on my shoulders brings,
because it's perfect warmth,
the feeling that I wear great wings
while stepping along the earth.

Robert Gray

Flames and Dangling Wire

On a highway over the marshland.
Off to one side, the smoke of different fires in a row,
like fingers spread and dragged to smudge.
It is the always-burning dump.

Behind us, the city
driven like stakes into the earth.
A waterbird lifts above this swamp
as a turtle moves on the Galapagos shore.

We turn off down a gravel road,
approaching the dump. All the air wobbles
in some cheap mirror.
There is a fog over the hot sun.

Now the distant buildings are stencilled in the smoke.
And we come to a landscape of tin cans,
of cars like skulls,
that is rolling in its sand dune shapes.

Amongst these vast grey plastic sheets of heat,
shadowy figures
who seem engaged in identifying the dead -
they are the attendants, in overalls and goggles,

forking over rubbish on the dampened fires.
A sour smoke
is hauled out everywhere,
thin, like rope. And there are others moving - scavengers.

As in hell the devils
might poke about through our souls, after scraps
of appetite
with which to stimulate themselves,

so these figures
seem to be wandering despondently, with an eternity
where they could find
some peculiar sensation.

We get out and move about also.
The smell is huge,
blasting the mouth dry:
the tons of rotten newspaper, and great cuds or cloth....

And standing where I see the mirage of the city
I realize I am in the future.
This is how it shall be after men have gone.
It will be made of things that worked.

A labourer hoists an unidentifiable mulch
on his fork, throws it in the flame:
something flaps
like the rag held up in 'The Raft of the Medusa'.

We approach another, through the smoke
and for a moment he seems that demon with the long barge pole.
It is a man, wiping his eyes.
Someone who worked here would have to weep,

and so we speak. The rims beneath his eyes are wet
as an oyster, and red.
Knowing all that he does about us,
how can he avoid a hatred of men?

Going on, I notice an old radio, that spills
its dangling wire -
and I realize that somewhere the voices it received
are still travelling,

skidding away, riddled, around the arc of the universe;
and with them, the horse-laugh, and the Chopin
which was the sound or the curtains lifting,
one time, to a coast of light.

Robert Gray

Harbour Dusk

She and I came wandering there through an empty park,
and we laid our hands on a stone parapet's
fading life. Before us, across the oily, aubergine dark
of the harbour, we could make out yachts –

beneath an overcast sky, that was mauve underlit,
against a far shore of dark, crumbling bush.
Part of the city, to our left, was fruit shop bright.
After the summer day, a huge, moist hush.

The yachts were far across their empty fields of water.
One, at times, was gently rested like a quill.
They seemed to whisper, slipping amongst each other,
always hovering, as though resolve were ill.

Away off, through the strung Bridge, a sky of mulberry
and orange chiffon. Mauve-grey, each sloven sail –
like nursing sisters in a deep corridor, some melancholy;
or nuns, going to an evening confessional.

Robert Gray

In Departing Light

My mother all of ninety has to be tied up
in her wheelchair, but still she leans far out of it sideways;
she juts there brokenly,
able to cut
with the sight of her someone who is close. She is hung
like her hanging mouth
in the dignity
of her bleariness, and says that she is
perfectly all right. It is impossible to get her to complain
or to register anything
for longer than a moment. She has made Stephen Hawking look healthy.
It's as though
she is being sucked out of existence sideways through a porthole
and we've got hold of her feet.
She's very calm.
If you live long enough it isn't death you fear
but what life can still do. And she appears to know this
somewhere,
even if there's no hope she could formulate it.
Yet she is so calm you think of an immortal – a Tithonus withering
forever on the edge
of life,
though never a moment's grievance. Taken out to air
my mother seems in a motorcycle race, she
the sidecar passenger
who keeps the machine on the road, trying to lie far over
beyond the wheel.
Seriously, concentrated, she gazes ahead
towards the line,
as we go creeping around and around, through the thick syrups
of a garden, behind the nursing home.
Her mouth is full of chaos.
My mother revolves her loose dentures like marbles ground upon each other,
or idly clatters them,
broken and chipped. Since they won't stay on her gums
she spits them free
with a sudden blurring cough, which seems to have stamped out of her
an ultimate breath.
Her teeth fly into her lap or onto the grass,

breaking the hawsers of spittle.

What we see in such age is for us the premature dissolution of a body,
as it slips off the bones
and back to protoplasm
before it can be decently hidden away.

And it's as though the synapses were almost all of them broken
between her brain cells
and now they waver about feebly on the draught of my voice
and connect
at random and wrongly
and she has become a surrealist poet.

'How is the sun
on your back?' I ask. 'The sun
is mechanical,' she tells me, matter of fact. Wait
a moment, I think, is she
becoming profound? From nowhere she says, 'The lake gets dusty.' There is no
lake
here, or in her past. 'You'll have to dust the lake.'
It could be
She has grown deep, but then she says, 'The little boy in the star is food,'
or perhaps 'The little boy is the star in food,'
and you think, 'More likely
this appeals to my kind of superstition.' It is all a tangle, and interpretations,
and hearing amiss,
all just the slipperiness
of her descent.

We sit and listen to the bird-song, which is like wandering lines
of wet paint –

it is like an abstract expressionist at work, his flourishes and
then
the touches
barely there,
and is going on all over the stretched sky.

If I read aloud skimmingly from the newspaper, she immediately falls asleep.
I stroke her face and she wakes
and looking at me intently she says something like, 'That was
a nice stick.' In our sitting about
she has also said, relevant of nothing, 'The desert is a tongue.'
'A red tongue?'
'That's right, it's a
it's a sort of

you know – it's a – it's a long
motor car.'

When I told her I might go to Cambridge for a time, she said to me, 'Cambridge
is a very old seat of learning. Be sure –'

but it became too much –

'be sure

of the short Christmas flowers.' I get dizzy,
nauseous,

when I try to think about what is happening inside her head. I keep her
out there for hours, propping her
straight, as

she dozes, and drifts into waking; away from the stench and
the screams of the ward. The worst

of all this, for me, is that despite such talk, now is the most peace

I've known her to have. She reminisces,

momentarily, thinking that I am one of her long-dead

brothers. 'Didn't we have some fun

on those horses, when we were kids?' she'll say, giving

her thigh a little slap. Alzheimer's

is nirvana, in her case. She never mentions

anything of what troubled her adult years – God, the evil passages
of the Bible, her own mother's

long, hard dying, my father. Nothing

at all of my father,

and nothing

of her obsession with the religion that he drove her to. She says the magpie's
song,

which goes on and on, like an Irishman

wheeling to himself,

and which I have turned her chair towards,

reminds her of

a cup. A broken cup. I think that the chaos in her mind

is bearable to her because it is revolving

so slowly – slowly

as dust motes in an empty room.

The soul? The soul has long been defeated, and is all but gone.

She's only productive now

of bristles on the chin, of an odour

like old newspapers on a damp concrete floor, of garbled mutterings, of

some crackling memories, and of a warmth

(it was always there,

the marsupial devotion), of a warmth that is just in the eyes now, particularly

when I hold her and rock her for a while, as I lift her
back to bed – a folded
package, such as,
I have seen from photographs, was made of the Ice Man. She says, 'I like it
when you – when
when
you...'
I say to her, 'My brown-eyed girl.' Although she doesn't remember
the record, or me come home
that time, I sing it
to her: 'Da
da-dum, de-dum, da-dum ... And
it's you, it's you,'– she smiles up, into my face –'it's you, my brown-eyed girl.'

My mother will get lost on the roads after death.
Too lonely a figure
to bear thinking of. As she did once,
one time at least, in the new department store
in our town; discovered
hesitant among the aisles; turning around and around, becoming
a still place.
Looking too kind
to reject even a wrong direction,
outrightly. And she caught my eye, watching her,
and knew I'd laugh
and grinned. Or else, since many another spirit will be arriving over there,
whatever
those are – and all of them clamorous
as seabirds, along the walls of death – she will be pushed aside
easily, again. There are hierarchies in Heaven, we remember; and we know
of its bungled schemes.
Even if the last shall be first', as we have been told, she
could not be first. It would not be her.
But why become so fearful?
This is all
of your mother, in your arms. She who now, a moment after your game, has
gone;
who is confused
and would like to ask
why she is hanging here. No – she will be safe. She will be safe
in the dry mouth
of this red earth, in the place

she has always been. She
who hasn't survived living, how can we dream that she will survive her death?

Robert Gray

Nine Bowls of Water

Clear water, in silvery tin dishes
dented as ping pong balls:
a lemon juice tinge of the staling light is in them;
they've a faint lid of dust.

A potted water along a board slopped
and dripping lightly.
While the men work on the city road, excavating
its charred blackness,

the water waits
behind a corrugated iron shed that is set
at the pavement front,
under the tall shadowing empty stadium.

On that low plank, also, crude soap pieces,
bright as the fat
of gutted chickens - but, with a closer look, resistant,
darkly-cracked, like old bone handles -

one beside each bowl,
and the rags are on their bits of hooked wire.
The cars continue,
but few people walk here between the lunch shed

and brick wall. Set out along a wet bench,
the kneeling water:
this reality from which we have dreamed the spirit.
We walk in grittiness,

on papers, mud-scrapings,
splattered with a sporadic jackhammer racket,
past nine bowls of water - a gallantry of the union.
Trees in avenues and sailing boats and women.

Robert Gray

The Dying Light

My mother all of ninety has to be tied up
in her wheelchair, yet still she leans far out of it sideways;
she juts there brokenly,
able to cut
with the sight of her someone who is close. She is hung
like her hanging mouth
in the dignity
of her bleariness, and says that she is
perfectly all right. It's impossible to get her to complain
or to register anything
for longer than a moment. She has made Stephen Hawking look healthy.
It's as though
she is being sucked out of existence sideways through a porthole
and we've got hold of her feet.
She's very calm.
If you live long enough it isn't death you fear
but what life can still do. And she appears to know this
somewhere
even if there's no hope she could formulate it.
Yet she is so calm you think of an immortal - a Tithonus withering
forever on the edge
of life,
though never a moment's grievance. Taken out to air
my mother seems in a motorcycle race, she
the sidecar passenger
who keeps the machine on the road, trying to lie far over
beyond the wheel.
Seriously, concentrated, she gazes ahead
towards the line,
as we go creeping around and around, through the thick syrups
of a garden, behind the nursing home.

Her mouth is full of chaos.
My mother revolves her loose dentures like marbles ground upon each other,
or idly clatters them,
broken and chipped. Since they won't stay on her gums
she spits them free
with a sudden blurring cough, that seems to have stamped out of her
an ultimate breath.

Her teeth fly into her lap or onto the grass,
breaking the hawsers of spittle.
What we see in such age is for us the premature dissolution of a body,
as it slips off the bones
and back to protoplasm
before it can be decently hidden away.
And it's as though the synapses were almost all of them broken
between her brain cells
and now they waver about feebly on the draught of my voice
and connect
at random and wrongly
and she has become a surrealist poet.
'How is the sun
on your back?' I ask. 'The sun
is mechanical,' she tells me, matter of fact. Wait
a moment, I think, is she
becoming profound? From nowhere she says, 'The lake gets dusty.' There is no
lake
here, or in her past. 'You'll have to dust the lake.'
It could be
that she is, but then she says, 'The little boy in the star is food,'
or perhaps 'The little boy is the star in food,'
and you think, 'More likely
this appeals to my kind of superstition.' It is all a tangle, and interpretations,
and hearing amiss,
all just the slipperiness
of her descent.

We sit and listen to the bird-song, that is like wandering lines
of wet paint and
like dabs of it,
that is like an abstract expressionist at work - his flourishes, and reflectiveness,
and
then
the touches
barely there -
and that is going on all over the stretched sky.
If I read aloud skimmingly from the newspaper, she immediately falls asleep.
I stroke her face and she wakes
and looking at me intently she says something like, 'That was
a nice stick.' In our sitting about
she has also said, relevant of nothing, 'The desert is a tongue.'

'A red tongue?'

'That's right, it's a

it's a sort of

you know - it's a - it's a long

motor car.'

When I told her I might go to Cambridge for a time, she said to me, 'Cambridge is a very old seat of learning. Be sure - '

but it became too much -

'be sure

of the short Christmas flowers.' I get dizzy,

nauseous,

when I try to think about what is happening inside her head. I keep her

out there for hours, propping her

straight, as

she dozes, and drifts into waking; away from the stench and

the screams of the ward. The worst

of all this, for me, is that despite such talk, now is the most peace

I've known her to have. She reminisces,

momentarily, thinking I am one of her long-dead

brothers. 'Didn't we have some fun

on those horses, when we were kids?' she'll say, giving

her thigh a little slap. Alzheimer's

is nirvana, in her case. She never mentions

anything of what troubled her adult years - God, the evil passages

of the Bible, her own mother's

long, hard dying, my father. Nothing

at all of my father,

and nothing

of her obsession with religion, that he drove her to. She says the magpie's song,

that goes on and on, like an Irishman

wheedling to himself,

which I have turned her chair towards,

reminds her of

a cup. A broken cup. I think that the chaos in her mind

is bearable to her because it is revolving

so slowly - slowly

as dust motes in an empty room.

The soul? The soul has long been defeated, is all but gone. She's only productive now

of bristles on the chin, of an odour

like old newspapers on a damp concrete floor, of garbled mutterings, of

some crackling memories, and of a warmth

(it was always there,
the marsupial devotion), of a warmth that is just in the eyes now, particularly
when I hold her and rock her for a while, as I lift her
back to bed - a folded
package, such as,
I have seen from photographs, was made of the Ice Man. She says, 'I like it
when you - when
when
you...'
I say to her, 'My brown-eyed girl.' Although she doesn't remember
the record, or me come home
that time, I sing it
to her: 'Da
da-dum, da-dum...And
it's you, it's you,' - she smiles up, into my face - 'it's you, my brown-eyed girl.'

My mother will get lost on the roads after death.
Too lonely a figure
to bear thinking of. As she did once,
one time at least, in the new department store
in our town; discovered
hesitant among the aisles; turning around and around, becoming
a still place.
Looking too kind
to reject even a wrong direction,
outrightly. And she caught my eye, watching her,
and knew I'd laugh
and grinned. Or else, since many another spirit will be arriving there, whatever
those are - and all of them clamorous
as seabirds, along the walls of death - she will be pushed aside
easily, again. There are hierarchies in Heaven, we remember; and we know
of its bungled schemes.
Even if 'the last shall be first', as we have been told, she
could not be first. It would not be her.
But why become so fearful?
This is all
of your mother, in your arms. She who now, a moment after your game, has
gone;
who is confused
and would like to ask
why she is hanging here. No - she will be safe. She will be safe
in the dry mouth

of this red earth, in the place
she has always been. She
who hasn't survived living, how can we dream that she will survive her death?

Robert Gray

The Fishermen

There comes trudging back across the home paddocks of the bay
pushing its way
waist-deep in the trembling seed-heads of the light
the trawler, with flat roof and nets aloft,
with its motor that thumps like an irrigation pump
and a winch triangulate
on the monolithic cloud. And this cloud is straining out the sunrise
of a Bible tract
that shows a few lumps of islands and just the one boat
in the blazing sand-box of the sea,
while close-up the edges of such a volatile kind of grit
are being swept ashore.

It's all noticed by a cyclist on the wet asphalt, who takes a corner
above the banksia scrub,
by someone in pyjama stripes and venetian slats of light
among the occasional wide bungalows,
by two early walkers going down a track
onto the dunes,
from where they will watch the baggy sea, that is practising its
ju-jitsu on the kelp.

Only the harsh approval of the gulls
that the fishermen are back, the small boat
swimming exhausted with nose up; back
from a night far out on the weird phosphorescent plain, in the seething culture
of the hatching snake eggs, or from deep
in the icy slush
of moonlight; the sea corrosive-smelling
and raw
like rust. Back from the cobra-flaring,
gliding and striking sea, goaded it would seem by their being there,
who tear
up by the roots the nets and the lobster traps.
Back from a sea sweaty with stars, or from one black and flowing like crepe.
From a sea that erupts
and falls on them so hugely that only the radio mast could have shown
in the foam, if they'd had one. The fishermen have been taught,
by each other, that if swept off

in such a sea, without a jacket, which they don't wear in their work,
to swim straight down and make an end of it,
since they will never get back.

They live inside a dream
out there, everything they know about is in shadows,
who sometimes see a liner,
further off, that goes drifting past them like a town
on the moon,
and who see the ocean vomit a black whale
like its own tongue.

But you have come back, the pair of you, to a morning world
of newspapers and washed cement,
to swollen, damp
milk cartons, and car fumes,
to a train for the city, moving off again through the small town, with a stiff spine,
to the old wooden tenements, with sand hung
in their eyebrows, near the line,
and a sky like bacon.

One of you has a wife, and she is brusque, earth-bound, and unforgiving still.
She loves you, you can tell, by her sullen glances.
Her humid-smelling nightgown, and the smoky
curlicues of hair about her ears, in the streaming light -
'Don't empty those boots there!'
'Mum Mum Mum Mum Mum Mum Mum !'
'Why must you always have this bloody soup for your breakfast? Look,
I'm burning it again. Do something:
watch it. No,
that toast is for the children!'

Who can know how strange the land is for you, the place where you come to
sleep?
You have watched the single mass of the mountains slowly worked loose,
that goes down aslant into the Underworld, and alone then in the bows have
seen the bear-paws
of the ocean idly claw at you.
You see now, half asleep, the children eating - the grains come undone in their
mouths;
you don't speak, and you watch your hands, you once slapped one
like a wave.
And then you wake,

and all is silent. You stagger, scratching
at your underwear. The little cells of the screendoor,
in the afternoon sun,
are sealed with dust. Those big lemons, breast-tipped,
are new for this young tree, out alone in the concrete yard. On the table
the shopping lies agape
like a mouth of grief - the cans of tomatoes, red molars; the pot-scourer; the
foamy bread.
You give up, quite soon, tinkering with the bath heater
and write on the back of a note
a note, with a pen that half works. You walk through the glare
like someone taking a sick day, to the pub, and again you share the dark
waters there; you and they launch out from the Pier Hotel,
travelling together glass by glass.
The school kids come out shrieking in the sun;
such animals, you see, as you have released from your body,
in the hope of a little comfort, a home. What mad delusion was that?
Children were to keep a woman busy
until you got back. In the pub, you stagger before you can walk again on the
water.
It is time to go out
with this bastard, your old mate.
You look up at him, where he comes to get you - that face
might have been some woman's nightmare;
a breath of sour acids,
and never a tender intonation to his voice.
You take your mate's hand, that is hard as a damp stone,
reached to you on the floor,
in the gutter,
in the sea. Through his broken teeth he tells you
to hold on, you'll be all right. He pulls you into the boat
or he'll come out himself.
It can never be said, but you think, Where
have you found a love like this? In the morning you'll part from him again
with a curt word, at the jetty. You will turn and walk inland
and give life another chance.

Robert Gray

Twilight

These long stars
on

stalks
that have grown up

early
and are like

water
plants and that stand

in all
the pools and the lake

even
at the brim

of
the dark cup

before
your mouth these are

the one
slit star

Robert Gray

Wing-Beat

In some last inventory, I'll have lost a season
through the occlusion
of summer by another hemisphere.
Going there
the winter tolls twice
across the year. The leaves of ice
in their manuscripts
are shelved on the air and each sifts
fine as paper-cuts along the wind. I will go
to crippled snow
moving through the crossings, in the headlights
of early nights.
How glorious summer is to them
who have caught just a glimpse of its billowing hem.
'Fifty springs are little room,' an authority
in loss warns, but actuarially
I can expect to own
ten summers, before the heights of blue close down.
Although I've gone
northwards, I shall cross the lawn
at home – the trees and yard in bloom –
in the mirror in an empty room.

Robert Gray