

Classic Poetry Series

David Ray
- poems -

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David Ray(20 May 1932 -)

David Ray is an American poet and author of fiction, essays, and memoir.

Ray is the author of twenty-one volumes of poetry, the most recent being "When" (2007), "Music of Time: Selected and New Poems" (2006) and The Death of Sardanapalus and Other Poems of the Iraq Wars (2004). A new volume, "After Tagore: Poems Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore" has just been released (2008).

Ray has taught at several colleges in the United States, including Cornell University, Reed College, the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, and the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where he is professor emeritus. He has also taught in India, New Zealand, and Australia, and has published books inspired by the cultures of each country.

He and his wife, poet and essayist Judy Ray, live in Tucson, Arizona.

Biography

Ray was born in Sapulpa, Oklahoma in 1932. Ray comes from a broken home that was thrown into upheaval when his father left the family by hopping on the back of a watermelon truck headed to California. After his mother's next failed marriage ended in the suicide of Ray's stepfather, he and his sister Mary Ellen were placed into foster care—a system that wasn't kind to young children in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Ray's classic "Mulberries of Mingo" steeps from memories of he and his sister being thrown out of a foster families home at dinner time - to fend for themselves eating the mulberries from a neighbor's tree. The years that followed were dark and tragic as he and his sister were separated to face their separate nightmares of abuse.

He is a distinguished award winner, and has lectured and read at over 100 Universities in England, Canada and the U.S. Graduating from the University of Chicago, BA, MA; he became a co-founder of the American Writers Against the Vietnam War, and has been commonly quoted in recent anti-war actions.

Ray's poetry varies from short, three to four lines pieces, to longer 30 lines poems. His work is also often autobiographical, providing unique context and insight to scenes of childhood, love, fear, sex, and travel. "Communication is important to him, and he has the courage, working with a genre in which simplicity is suspect, to say plainly what he means."

He is the founding editor of *New Letters Magazine* and *New Letters on the Air*. His work has appeared in *Harper's*, *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Iowa Review*, and many others. He has also held faculty positions at Cornell, University of Missouri-Kansas City, University of Iowa, and Reed, as well as visiting positions at Syracuse, and universities in India, Australia, and New Zealand.

At the Washing of My Son

I ran up and grabbed your arm, the way a man
On the battlefield would recognize a long-lost comrade.
You were still wrinkled, and had a hidden face,
Like a hedgehog or a mouse, and you crouched in
The black elbows of a Negro nurse. You were
Covered with your mother's blood, and I saw
That navel where you and I were joined to her.
I stood by the glass and watched you squeal.
Just twice in a man's life there's this
Scrubbing off of blood. And this holy
Rite that Mother Superior in her white starched hat
Was going to deny me. But I stood my ground.
And then went in where for the first time you felt
Your mother's face, and her open blouse.

David Ray

Doing Without

's an interesting
custom, involving such in-
visible items as the food
that's not on the table, the clothes
that are not on the back
the radio whose music
is silence. Doing without
is a great protector of reputations
since all places one cannot go
are fabulous, and only the rare and
enlightened plowman in his field
or on his mountain does not overrate
what he does not or cannot have.
Saluting through their windows
of cathedral glass those restaurants
we must not enter (unless like
burglars we become subject to
arrest) we greet with our twinkling
eyes the faces of others who do
without, the lady with the
fishing pole, and the man who looks
amused to have discovered on a walk
another piece of firewood.

David Ray