

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Adamson
- poems -

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Robert Adamson(17 May 1943 -)

Robert Adamson was born on 17 May 1943 at Neutral Bay, and raised in Sydney, Australia. He was educated at Neutral Bay Primary School and Crows Nest Technical College. His grandfather was a fisherman on the Hawkesbury River to the north of Sydney, where Adamson has lived, on and off, for most of his life. A series of juvenile misdemeanours resulted in him being sent to various detention centres. It was during this period that he first began writing poetry.

Adamson is one of Australia's leading poets, and is a successful writer, editor and publisher. His books have been published in the UK and the USA and his poems have been translated into several languages. He has published fifteen volumes of poetry and has organized and produced poetry readings, delivered papers, lectures and readings at literary festivals throughout Australia and internationally. He has been writer-in-residence at Australian universities, and was President of the Poetry Society of Australia, 1974-1980.

He was a key player in the growth of the 'New Australian Poetry' and was an editor of the Poetry Society of Australia's magazine, *New Poetry*, from 1968 until 1982. He taught creative writing classes for the W.E.A during the seventies and was the poetry reviewer for Australia's national newspaper, *The Australian*. In 1975-76 Adamson organized, as President of the Poetry Society, Australian reading tours for Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan.

Robert Adamson has worked as a poetry editor and consultant with Angus & Robertson/HarperCollins and he established several small publishing companies, including Prism Books and Big Smoke. He was the poetry editor the literary magazine *Ulitarra* from 1993 to 1997. In 1997 he became a founding editor, along with James Taylor, of the international poetry journal *Boxkite*.

Canticle For The Bicentennial Dead

They are talking, in their cedar-benched rooms
on French-polished chairs, and they talk

in reasonable tones, in the great stone buildings
they are talking firmly, in the half-light

and they mention at times the drinking of alcohol,
the sweet blood-coloured wine the young drink,

the beer they share in the riverless river-beds
and the backstreets, and in the main street –

in government-coloured parks, drinking
the sweet blood in recreation patches, campsites.

They talk, the clean-handed ones, as they gather
strange facts; and as they talk

collecting words, they sweat under nylon wigs.
Men in blue uniforms are finding bodies,

the uniforms are finding the dead: young hunters
who have lost their hunting, singers who

would sing of fish are now found hung –
crumpled in night-rags in the public's corners;

discovered there broken, lit by stripes
of regulated sunlight beneath the whispering

rolling cell window bars. Their bodies
found in postures of human-shaped effigies,

hunched in the dank sour urinated atmosphere
near the bed-board, beside cracked lavatory bowls,

slumped on the thousand grooved, fingernailed walls
of your local Police Station's cell –

bodies of the street's larrikin koories
suspended above concrete in the phenyl-thick air.

Meanwhile outside, the count continues: on radio,
on TV, the news – like Vietnam again, the faces

of mothers torn across the screens –
and the poets write no elegies, our artists

cannot describe their grief, though
the clean-handed ones paginate dossiers

and court-reporters' hands move over the papers.

Robert Adamson

Creon's Dream

The old hull's spine shoots out of the mud-flat,
a black crooked finger pointing back to the house.
On the dead low the smell of the mangroves.

The river seeps through the window, the books
are opened out on the desk. When the first breeze
hits the curtain the cats scatter.

It could be dawn for all I know, concentration
wanders through Creon's words to Antigone
Go to the dead and love them – okay so they live as

long as I do – what else can I make of it?
The bright feathers from a crimson rosella lie
in clumps on the floor with a pair of broken wings.

In the dark I try to write and remember the zoo
I played in as a child. There was a balding sedated lion
and a wedge-tailed eagle hunched on a dead

tree in a cage; they threw it rabbits
in 1953. The whooping cranes side-
stepped the concrete ponds and whooped all night.

The blue heron flaps across the river in my head,
poddy mullet hanging from its tight beak.
Ah, dead fish, the old black crow, the sick pelican.

I pad the room, out there mangroves are pumping up
the putrid air, life goes on. At the zoo they
still throw the animals dead meat, the big cats

are bred in labs where they lock the albino
freaks away. I pace the kitchen: where are the books,
who reads the poems? I take a drink, ribbonfish

swim across my pages, I shake my head but they swim on –
in low flocks, chromium ribbons, they fly under
the river herding up the poddy mullet,

rippling the surface, as the tawny frogmouth knows.
The books have gone, the spoonbills wade in
with whitebait skipping ahead of them,

channel-billed cuckoo come swooping after the crows,
flying low over the water, calling their mates,
dipping their hooked beaks into the moving chrome.

I sleep in broken snatches and dream nothing.
Mosquitoes suck at my cheeks and empty bottles
clutter the verandah, the books are in darkness

but the sandy whimbrels finger the pages, words
dissolve, waves of the dead arrive in dreams.
Out there the black finger points to the mouth

of the river, where the dead are heading, they
move over the window glass. The extinct fins move
the fingers of my grandfather, mending nets,

the dead friends sing from invisible books. The heron
picks the blood-shot eye from my father's terrible
work in the kilns and darkness is complete.

Robert Adamson

Éventail: For Mery In Paris

Writing this in sepia ink on a Japanese fan,
pain slants my calligraphy
this way, sex just under the cap of my skull.

Dreams taunt your existence
as you swish by in raw silk
until the words I use lose meaning

and my best lines twang like limp
old lace. This metaphor thick with blood
trembles as my mind approaches the blank

folds in the rice paper, writing
on your arms, this scrawl scrolling
through you, each letter a link in the chain

between my head and the bed, a text
of splintering syllables in which
time comes apart, pricking your skin –

the joke's our meaning, gnarled
with the word-knots coming undone
where your breast shines with the sepia

ink and the sheets blot out thinking.
Smudged with love, your bum's a haze
of lavender oil as I rub this in.

Robert Adamson

Green Prawn Map

in memory of my grandfather H.T. Adamson

Morning before sunrise, sheets of dark air
hang from nowhere in the sky.
No stars there, only here is river.

His line threads through a berley trail,
a thread his life. There's no wind
in the world and darkness is a smell alive

with itself. He flicks
a torch, a paper map Hawkesbury River
& District damp, opened out. No sound
but a black chuckle

as fingers turn the limp page.
Memory tracks its fragments, its thousand winds,
shoals and creeks, collapsed shacks

a white gap, mudflats – web over web
lace-ball in brain's meridian.
This paper's no map, what are its lines

as flashlight conjures a code
from a page of light, a spider's a total blank?
So he steers upstream now

away from map-reason, no direction to take
but hands and boat to the place
where he will kill prawns, mesh and scoop

in creek and bay and take
his bait kicking green out from this translucent
morning

Flint & Steel shines
behind him, light comes in from everywhere,

prawns are peeled alive.

Set rods, tips curve along tide, the prawns howl
into the breeze, marking the page.
He's alone as he does this kind of work –

his face hardened in sun, hands
moving in and out of water and his life.

Robert Adamson

Meaning

A black summer night, no moon, the thick air
drenched with honeysuckle and swamp gum.

In a pool of yellow torchlight
on a knife-blade, the brand name

Hickey Miffle—

I give in to meaninglessness, look up
try to read smudges of ink

a live squid squirts
across the seats – now the smell of the river hones
an edge inside my brain,
the night sky, Mallarmé's first drafts.

Who can I talk to now that you have left
the land of the living? The sound of more words.

The moon rolls out from the side of a mountain
and I decide to earn the rent;

the net pours into a thick chop,
a line of green fire running before the moon's light –

does four-inch mesh have anything to say tonight?

The malloway might think so if they could –
Ah, Wordsworth, why were you so human?

On Friday nights I fork out comfort,
but tonight I work with holes, with absence.

I feed out a half-mile of mesh pulling the oars;
this comes once a life, a song without words
a human spider spinning a death web

across the bay. Alcohol, my friend my dark perversion,
here's to your damage:

who do you think you are?

My mother the belly dancer, my father Silence,

my house that repairs itself wherever I go.

Robert Adamson

My Granny

When my granny was dying
I'd go into her bedroom
and look at her

she'd tell me to get out of it
leave this foul river

it will wear you out too

she was sick
and her red curly hair
was matted and smelt of gin

sometimes I sat there all day
listening to the races
and put bets on for her at the shop

and I sat there the afternoon
she died and heard her say her last words
I sat there not telling

maybe three hours
beside the first dead person I'd seen

I tried to drink some of her gin
it made me throw up on the bed
then I left her

she said the prawns will eat you
when you die on the Hawkesbury River

Robert Adamson

Reaching Light

Where was it we left him?
We say the journey's up, but maybe

memory sinks deeper.
Our journey so far

has been quiet, the only
incident being that rock dislodged

as he spun around on his heel.
What was that stuff – brimstone?

The first slice of sunlight glanced off
a slab of dark marble that turned to glow.

His back moved ahead of me –
his curls, shoulders,

that neck. What new bone was he inventing
in his shuffling head, what chance

that a doorway would appear and then a house?
The dark supported me, comfortably

behind me, a cradle woven from
demon hair. As I rose

and climbed toward day, his turning head,
those eyes – strips of memory,

silver tides, moons rising over the
rim of the world—

brought back the day we were married,
standing in fine rain, then escaping from family,

sex by a rolling surf in a high wind, velvet
heavens and the stars omens:

calendars, clocks, zodiacs –
straight, bent signs.

Robert Adamson

The Flow Through: For The Johns

We loved the front, your wall of words,
and the fact that snatches made
sense to the professors. We read
The Double Dream Of Spring on a jetty
that sloped into Sydney harbour
and argued fiercely about whether it was the way
to go, as if we could have imitated
your logarithms of the soul.
We tied knots in your tangles, tendrils
of phrases that wound their way around the page.
Those were the days we exist in now
nothing made sense because living
took the the edge off our mental fishing knives,
we hacked through time as if it existed.
Gaping holes in space, we filled
them with sentences stitched together
with a grammar that was streetwise,
nothing made much sense and your impeccable
manners got us through the gates.
The mix of sweetness and a ferocity
that could burn holes was the quality
I learnt from Some Trees, those poems were
places I made friends in, I remember
Tranter standing in some classroom reading them,
and his laughter that was edged with
irony and kindness. Ashbery Days where poets
were drunk on codes within codes,
where we cracked language open and discovered
the power of whimsy and a dark abyss
where you could live in the absurd knowledge of death.

Robert Adamson

The Gathering Light

Morning shines on the cowling of the Yamaha
locked onto the stern of the boat,
spears of light shoot away
from the gun-metal grey enamel.
Now I wait for God to show
instead of calling him a liar.

I've just killed a mullo way –
it's eighty five pounds, twenty years old –
the huge mauve-silver body trembles in the hull.

Time whistles around us, an invisible
flood tide that I let go
while I take in what I have done.
It wasn't a fight, I was drawn to this moment.
The physical world drains away
into a golden calm.

The sun is a hole in the sky, a porthole –
you can see turbulence out there,
the old wheeling colours and their dark forces –
but here on the surface of the river
where I cradle the great fish in my arms
and smell its pungent death, a peace
I've never known before – a luminous absence
of time, pain, sex, thought of everything
but the light.

Robert Adamson

The River

A step taken, and all the world's before me.
The night's so clear

stars hang in the low branches,
small fires riding through the waves of a thin atmosphere,

islands parting tides as meteors burn the air.
Oysters powder to chalk in my hands.

A flying fox swims by and an early
memory unfolds: rocks

on the shoreline milling the star-fire.
its fragments fall into place, the heavens

revealing themselves
as my roots trail

deep nets between channel and
shoal, gathering in

the Milky Way, Gemini –
I look all about, I search all around me.

There's a gale in my hair as the mountains move in.
I drift over lakes, through surf breaks

and valleys, entangled of trees –
unseemly? On the edge or place inverted

from Ocean starts another place,
its own place –

a step back and my love's before me,
the memory ash – we face each other alone now,

we turn in the rushing tide again and again to each other,
here between swamp-flower and star

to let love go forth to the world's end
to set our lives at the centre

though the tide turns the river back on itself
and at its mouth, Ocean.

Robert Adamson