

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Robert Gray**

**- 5 poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2012

**Publisher:**

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

## **Robert Gray (23 February 1945 -)**

Robert William Geoffrey Gray (born 23 February 1945) 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*.

### Works:

*The Land I Came Through Last* (Giramond, 2008)

### Collections

*Nameless Earth* (Carcenet, 2006)  
*Afterimages* (Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002)  
*New Selected Poems* (Duffy & Snellgrove, 1998)  
*Lineations* (Duffy & Snellgrove, 1996)  
*Certain Things* (William Heinemann Australia, 1993)  
*Selected Poems* (Angus & Robertson, 1990)  
*Piano* (Angus & Robertson, 1988)  
*Selected Poems 1963-1983* (Angus & Robertson, 1985)  
*The Skylight* (Angus & Robertson, 1984)  
*Grass Script* (Angus & Robertson, 1979)  
*Creekwater Journal* (University of Queensland Press, 1974)  
*Introspect, Retrospect : Poems* (Lyre-Bird Writers, c.1970)

### Biography

*The King's Wife : Five Queen Consorts* (Secker & Warburg, 1990)

## **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

## 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 blariness, 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 blurting 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  
wheedling 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

## 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