

Classic Poetry Series

Gwen Harwood
- poems -

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Gwen Harwood(8 June 1920 – 4 December 1995)

Gwen Harwood AO, née Gwendoline Nessie Foster, was an Australian poet and librettist. Gwen Harwood is regarded as one of Australia's finest poets, publishing over 420 works, including 386 poems and 13 librettos. She won numerous poetry awards and prizes. Her work is commonly studied in schools and university courses.

Gwen Harwood is the mother of the author John Harwood.

Life

She was born in Taringa, Queensland and brought up in Brisbane. She attended Brisbane Girls Grammar School and was an organist at All Saints Church when she was young. She completed a music teacher's diploma, and also worked as a typist at the War Damage Commission from 1942. Early in her life, she developed an interest in literature, philosophy and music.

She moved to Tasmania after her marriage to linguist William Harwood in September 1945. Here she developed her lifelong interest in the work of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein "which informs her entire opus".

Her father played piano, violin, guitar and the flute. Both Gwen and her brother were given piano lessons, and originally Gwen wanted to be a musician. Gwen's grandmother introduced her to poetry; this inspired her and became her life long calling and passion.

Literary Career

Gwen Harwood had written poetry for many years, and her first poem was published in Meanjin in 1944, but her work did not start appearing regularly in journals and books until the 1960s. Her first book of poems, titled Poems, was published in 1963, followed in 1968 by Poems Volume II. Other books include The Lion's Bride (1981), Bone Scan (1988), and The Present Tense (1995). There are also several versions of a Selected Poems, including one from Penguin in 2001.

Harwood used a range of pseudonyms in her early work, such as Walter Lehmann, W.W. Hagendoor (an anagram of her name), Francis Geyer, Timothy (TF) Kline, Miriam Stone, and Alan Carvosso.

She also wrote libretti for composers such as Larry Sitsky, James Penberthy, Don Kay and Ian Cugley.

She corresponded over the years with several poet friends, including Vincent Buckley, A. D. Hope, Vivian Smith, and Norman Talbot, and served as President of the Tasmanian Branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers.

Her poetry has been used by many students who are completing the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in New South Wales, Australia, and by Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) students in Victoria, Australia.

Literary Themes and Style

Harwood's poetry has recurring themes of motherhood and the stifled role of women, particularly those of young mothers. Her poem "In the Park" established a certain feminist reputation but others of her poems treat motherhood in a more complex and nuanced way. Music is another recurring motif. The Tasmanian landscape, and Aboriginal dispossession of that landscape, form another theme in much of her writing. She also wrote series of poems with recurring characters, two of the most notorious being Professor Eisenbart and Kröte. Many of her poems also include biblical references and religious allusions.

The style and technique of Harwood's poetry has led to several of her works being employed by the New South Wales Board of Studies as prescribed texts for the High School Certificate. Primary focus in the English course is placed on the analysis of the themes expressed in Harwood's poetry, and how such themes are relevant in modern society. Her work is also used as a text for the Victorian Certificate of Education and West Australian Certificate of Education Literature Courses in the poetry section for its literary value and complex themes.

Awards

1942: The Pancake Manor

1958: Meanjin Poetry Prize

1959: Meanjin Poetry Prize

1975: Grace Leven Prize for Poetry

1977: Robert Frost Medallion (now known as Christopher Brennan Award)

1978: Patrick White Award

1980: The Age Book of the Year Award Book of the Year and Non-fiction Award for Blessed City

1988: University of Tasmania Honorary

1989: Officer of the Order of Australia (AO)

1989: Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Best Poem

1990: J.J. Bray Award

1994: University of Queensland Honorary doctorate

1994: Latrobe University Honorary doctorate

Anniversary

So the light falls, and so it fell
on branched leaved with flocking birds.
Light stole a city's weight to swell
the coloured love of stone. Your words
hung weightless in my ear: Remember me.

All words except those words were drowned
in the fresh babbling rush of spring.
In summer's dream-filled light one sound
echoed through all the whispering
galleries of green: Remember me.

Rods of light point home the flocking
starlings to wintry trees, and turn
stone into golden ochre, locking
the orbit of my pain. I learn
the weight of light and stone. Remember me.

Gwen Harwood

Barn Owl

Daybreak: the household slept.
I rose, blessed by the sun.
A horny fiend, I crept
out with my father's gun.
Let him dream of a child
obedient, angel-mind-

old no-sayer, robbed of power
by sleep. I knew my prize
who swooped home at this hour
with day-light riddled eyes
to his place on a high beam
in our old stables, to dream

light's useless time away.
I stood, holding my breath,
in urine-scented hay,
master of life and death,
a wisp-haired judge whose law
would punish beak and claw.

My first shot struck. He swayed,
ruined, beating his only
wing, as I watched, afraid
by the fallen gun, a lonely
child who believed death clean
and final, not this obscene

bundle of stuff that dropped,
and dribbled through the loose straw
tangling in bowels, and hopped
blindly closer. I saw
those eyes that did not see
mirror my cruelty

while the wrecked thing that could
not bear the light nor hide
hobbled in its own blood.
My father reached my side,

gave me the fallen gun.
'End what you have begun.'

I fired. The blank eyes shone
once into mine, and slept.
I leaned my head upon
my father's arm, and wept,
owl blind in early sun
for what I had begun

Gwen Harwood

Critic's Nightwatch

Once more he tried, before he slept,
to rule his ranks of words. They broke
from his planned choir, lolled, slouched and kept
their tone, their pitch, their meaning crude;
huddled in cliches; when pursued
turned with mock elegance to croak

his rival's tunes. They would not sing.
The scene that nagged his sleep away
flashed clear again: the local king
of verse, loose-collared and loose-lipped.
read from a sodden manuscript,
drinking with anyone who'd pay,

drunk, in the critic's favourite bar.
'Hear the voice of the bard!' he bellowed,
'Poets are lovers. Critics are
mean, solitary masturbators.
Come here, and join the warm creators.'
The critic, whom no drink had mellowed,

turned on his heel. Rough laughter scoured
his reddening neck. The poet roared
'Run home, and take that face that soured
your mother's lovely milk from spite.
Piddle on what you cannot write.'
At home alone the critic poured

gall on the poet's work in polished
careful prose. He tore apart
meaning and metaphor, demolished
diction, syntax, metre, rhyme;
called his entire works a crime
against the integrity of art,

and lay down grinning, quick, he thought,
with a great poem that would make plain
his power to all. Once more he fought
with words. Sleep came. He dreamed he turned

to a light vapour, seeped and burned
in wordless cracks where grain on grain

of matter grated; reassumed
his human shape, and called by name
each grain to sing, conducting, plumed
in lightning, their obedient choir.
Dressed as a bride for his desire
towards him, now meek, the poet came.

Light sneaked beside his bed. The birds
began their insistent questioning
of silence, and the poet's words
prompted by daylight rasped his raw
nerves, and the waking world he saw
was flat with prose and would not sing.

Gwen Harwood

Daybreak

The snails brush silver. Critic crow
points his unpleasant beak, and lances.
Resumes his treetop, darts below
his acid-bright, corrosive glances.

In the hushed corridors of sleep
Professor Eisenbart plots treason.
Caretaker mind prepares to sweep
the dusty offices of reason.

Eisenbart mutters, wakes in rage
Because crow's jarring c-a-a-r-k-s distress him.
His mistress grins, refers to age
and other matters which oppress him.

He scowls purse-lipped. She yawns, and throws
Her arms in scarecrow crucifixion.
Clear of the hills, light's wafer shows
In world-without-end benediction.

She makes him tea. He sips and calms
His Royal Academic temper,
While Life and Day outside shout psalms
In antiphon ... Et nunc et semper.

Gwen Harwood

Dichterliebe

So hungry-sensitive that he
craves day and night the pap of praise,
he'll ease his gripes or fingerpaint
in heartsblood on a public page.
The ordinary world must be
altered to circumvent his rage.

He'll tell, with stylish Angst of course,
the inmost secrets of our bed.
Words are far worse than drugs; there is
no hope of surfeit or remorse.
The world lies wide, and warm. No kiss,
no child, no prayer will keep him here.

I'll wash the floors. He'll watch the stars.
I'll salt his life with common sense.
He'll suck my sap and vigour down
the crude mouth of his private hell.
Visions have no equivalent.
He'll die of drink and candy bars.

Gwen Harwood

Estuary

To Rex Hobcroft

Wind crosshatches shallow water.
Paddocks rest in the sea's arm.
Swamphens race through spiky grass.
A wire fence leans, a crazy stave
with sticks for barlines, wind for song.
Over use, interweaving light
with air and substance, ride the gulls.

Words in our undemanding speech
hover and blend with things observed.
Syllables flow in the tide's pulse.
My earliest memory turns in air:
Eclipse. Cocks crow, as if at sunset;
Grandmother, holding a smoked glass,
says to me, 'Look. Remember this.'

Over the goldbrown sand my children
run in the wind. The sky's immense
with spring's new radiance. Far from here,
lying close to the final darkness,
a great-grandmother lives and suffers,
still praising life: another morning
on earth, cockcrow and changing light.

Over the skeleton of thought
mind builds a skin of human texture.
The eye's [art of another eye
that guides it through the maze of light.
A line becomes a firm horizon.
All's as it was in the beginning.

Gwen Harwood

In The Park

She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.
Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.
A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt
Someone she loved once passed by – too late

to feign indifference to that casual nod.
“How nice” et cetera. “Time holds great surprises.”
From his neat head unquestionably rises
a small balloon...“but for the grace of God...”

They stand a while in flickering light, rehearsing
the children’s names and birthdays. “It’s so sweet
to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive, ”
she says to his departing smile. Then, nursing
the youngest child, sits staring at her feet.
To the wind she says, “They have eaten me alive.”

Gwen Harwood

Last Meeting

Shadows grazing eastward melt
from their vast sun-driven flocks
into consubstantial dusk.

A snow wind flosses the bleak rocks,

strips from the gums their rags of bark,
and spins the coil of winter tight
round our last meeting as we walk
the littoral zone of day and night,

light's turncoat margin: rocks and trees
dissolve in nightfall-eddy waters;
tumbling whorls of cloud disclose
the cold eyes of the sea-god's daughters.

We tread the wrack of grass that once
a silver-bearded congregation
whispered about our foolish love.
Your voice in calm annunciation

from the dry eminence of thought
rings with astringent melancholy:
'Could hope recall, or wish prolong
the vanished violence of folly?

Minute by minute summer died;
time's horny skeletons have built
this reef on which our love lies wrecked.
Our hearts drown in their cardinal guilt.'

The world, said Ludwig Wittgenstein,
is everything that is the case.
- The warmth of human lips and thighs;
the lifeless cold of outer space;

this windy darkness; Scorpio
above, a watercourse of light;
the piercing absence of one face
withdrawn for ever from my sight.

Gwen Harwood

The Glass Jar

To Vivian Smith

A child one summer's evening soaked
a glass jar in the reeling sun
hoping to keep, when day was done
and all the sun's disciples cloaked
in dream and darkness from his passion fled,
this host, this pulse of light beside his bed.

Wrapped in a scarf his monstrosity stood
ready to bless, to exorcise
monsters that whispering would rise
nightly from the intricate wood
that ringed his bed, to light with total power
the holy commonplace of field and flower.

He slept. His sidelong violence summoned
fiends whose mosaic vision saw
his heart entire. Pincer and claw,
trident and vampire fang, envenomed
with his most secret hate, reached and came near
to pierce him in the thicket of his fear.

He woke, recalled his jar of light,
and trembling reached one hand to grope
the mantling scarf away. Then hope
fell headlong from its eagle height.
Through the dark house he ran, sobbing his loss,
to the last clearing that he dared not cross:

the bedroom where his comforter
lay in his rival's fast embrace
and faithless would not turn her face
from the gross violence done to her.
Love's proud executants played from a score
no child could read or realize. Once more

to bed, and to worse dreams he went.
A ring of skeletons compelled
his steps with theirs. His father held

fiddle and bow, and scraped assent
to the malignant ballet. The child dreamed
this dance perpetual, and waking screamed

fresh morning to his window-sill.
As ravening birds began their song
the resurrected sun, whose long
triumph through flower-brushed fields would fill
night's gulfs and hungers, came to wink and laugh
in a glass jar beside a crumpled scarf.

So the loved other is held
for mortal comfort, and taken,
and the spirit's light dispelled
as it falls from its dream to the deep
to harrow heart's prison so heart may waken
to peace in the paradise of sleep.

Gwen Harwood

The Wound

The tenth day, and they give
my mirror back. Who knows
how to drink pain, and live?
I look, and the glass shows
the truth, fine as a hair,
of the scalpel's wounding care.

A round reproach to all
that's warped, uncertain, clouded,
the sun climbs. On the wall,
by the racked body shrouded
in pain, is a shadow thrown;
simple, unchanged, my own.

Body, on whom the claims
of spirit fall to inspire
and terrify, there flames
at your least breath a fire
of anguish, not for this pain,
but that scars will remain.

You will be loved no less.
Spirit can build, make shift
with what there is, and press
pain to its mould; will lift
from your crucible of night
a form dripping with light.

Felix culpa. The sun
lights in my flesh the great
wound of the world. What's done
is done. In man's estate
let my flawed wholeness prove
the art and scope of love.

Gwen Harwood

'Thought Is Surrounded By A Halo'

Show me the order of the world,
the hard-edge light of this-is-so
prior to all experience
and common to both world and thought,
no model, but the truth itself.

Language is not a perfect game,
and if it were, how could we play?
The world's more than the sum of things
like moon, sky, centre, body, bed,
as all the singing masters know.

Picture two lovers side by side
who sleep and dream and wake to hold
the real and imagined world
body by body, word by word
in the wild halo of their thought.

Gwen Harwood

Triste, Triste

In the space between love and sleep
when heart mourns in its prison
eyes against shoulder keep
their blood-black curtains tight.
Body rolls back like a stone, and risen
spirit walks to Easter light;

away from its tomb of bone,
away from the guardian tents
of eyesight, walking alone
to unbearable light with angelic
gestures. The fallen instruments
of its passion lie in the relic

darkness of sleep and love.
And heart from its prison cries
to the spirit walking above:
'I was with you in agony.
Remember your promise of paradise,'
and hammers and hammers, 'remember me.'

Gwen Harwood