

COAST ROAD

S E L E C T E D P O E M S

ROBERT GRAY



NORTH COAST TOWN

Out beside the highway, first thing in the morning,
nothing much in my pockets but sand
from the beach. A Shell station (with their 'Mens' locked),
a closed hamburger stand.

I washed at a tap down beside the changing sheds,
stepping about on mud. Through the wall
smell of the vandals' lavatory
and an automatic chill flushing in the urinal.

Eat a floury apple and stand about. At this kerb
sand crawls by, and palm fronds here
scrape dryly. Car after car now – it's like a boxer
warming up with the heavy bag, spitting air.

A car slows and I chase it. Two hoods
going shooting. Tattoos and greasy Fifties pompadour.
Rev in High Street, drop their first can.
Plastic pennants on the distilled morning, everywhere;

a dog trotting, and someone hoses down a pavement;
our image flaps in shop fronts; smoking on
past the pink 'Tropicana' motel (stucco with seashells);
the RSL, like a fancy-dress pharaoh; the 'Odeon',

a warehouse picture show. We pass
bulldozed acres; the place is becoming chrome,
tile-facing and plate glass, they're making California;
pass an Abo, not attempting to hitch, outside town.

THE MEATWORKS

Most of them worked around the slaughtering
out the back, where concrete gutters
crawled off
heavily, and the hot, fertilizer-thick,
sticky stench of blood
sent flies mad,
but I settled for one of the lowest-paid jobs, making mince,
the furthest end from those bellowing,
sloppy yards. Outside, the pigs' fear
made them mount one another
at the last minute. I stood all day
by a shaking metal box
that had a chute in, and a spout,
snatching steaks from a bin they kept refilling
pushing them through
arm-thick corkscrews, grinding around inside it, meat or not –
chomping, bloody mouth –
using a greasy stick
shaped into a penis.
When I grabbed it the first time
it slipped, slippery as soap, out of my hand,
in the machine
that gnawed it hysterically a few moments
louder and louder, then, shuddering, stopped;
fused every light in the shop.
Too soon to sack me –
it was the first thing I'd done.
For a while I had to lug gutted pigs
white as swedes
and with straight stick tails
to the ice rooms, hang them by the hooves
on hooks – their dripping
solidified like candle-wax – or pack a long intestine
with sausage meat.

We got meat to take home –
bags of blood;
red plastic with the fat showing through.
We'd wash, then
out on the blue metal
toward town; but after sticking your hands all day
in snail-sheened flesh,
you found, around the nails, there was still blood.
I usually didn't take the meat.
I'd walk home on
the shiny, white-bruising beach, in mauve light,
past the town.
The beach, and those startling, storm-cloud mountains, high
beyond the furthest fibro houses, I'd come
to be with. Caught, where the only work
was at this Works. My wife
walked, carrying her sandals, in the sand and beach grass,
to meet me. I'd scoop up shell-grit
and scrub my hands,
treading about
through the icy ledges of the surf
as she came along. We said that working with meat was like
burning the live bush
and fertilizing with rottenness,
for the frail green money.
There was a flaw to the analogy
you felt, but one
not looked at, then –
the way those pigs stuck there, clinging onto each other.

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.

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

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.

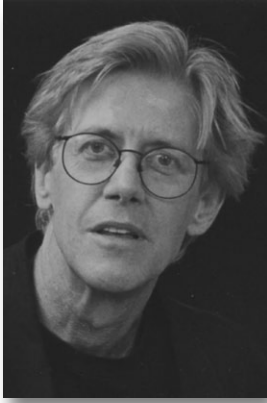
I stroke her face and she wakes
and looking at me intently she says something like, 'That was
a nice stick.' In our sitting about
she has also said, relevant of nothing, 'The desert is a tongue.'
'A red tongue?'
'That's right, it's a
it's a sort of
you know – it's a – it's a long
motor car.'

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
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'S collections include *Creekwater Journal* (1974), *The Skylight* (1984), *Afterimages* (2002) and *Cumulus* (2012). He has won the New South Wales and Victorian premiers' awards for poetry, and in 1990 he won the Patrick White Award for literature.

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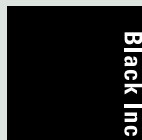
Robert Gray is a poet renowned for his originality and mastery. With influences and themes ranging from Buddhism and haiku to Modernism and the Romantics, Gray inhabits a landscape at once spare and elaborate, ritualistic and impulsive.

Genre: Poetry
NSW HSC English 2015-2020
ISBN: 9781863957021
RRP: \$22.00

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