

# Last Ferry

*Remembering Robert Gray*

by Mark Tredinnick

## i. The Jetty

Robert Gray's great poem, 'To the Master, Dogen Zenji', shows us the great grandfather of Zen, landing home in Kyoto after years away in China, where it was said he had studied long and learned much. His fame preceded him, so that when he sat on the stage outside 'someone else's temple', 'all the people were gathered / like birds on the lake'. But he carried no scripture, and 'he showed them / empty hands'. What he told the expectant crowd must have seemed, after so long, very little: 'All that's important / is the ordinary things'. Dogen gave them a list: 'making a fire / to boil bathwater, pounding rice, pulling weeds / and knocking dirt from their roots, // or pouring tea'.

'It is this world / of the *Dharmas* (the momentary events) / that is the Diamond.'

Dogen had learnt, we are told, all he needed the moment his junk docked in China. He received 'his first insight / from the old cook of some monastery'. The cook, who had come to buy mushrooms, encountered the young monk, who had come to find enlightenment; they got talking, while the horses clumped their 'lumpy hooves', and the sea grabbed 'at the timber below' the jetty. The cook tells Dogen that any given moment, properly observed, will be 'more beautiful than the drapery / in paintings by a master'.

Dogen did not want to believe the cook, and the people in Kyoto did not want to hear it from Dogen, returning in his old age with empty hands. We like our truths grand; we want stories, and we prefer them heroic. But the message of the poem is that the universe greets us in small gestures, that life is a succession of vivid instances, that heaven is the present moment, and that 'upon this small leaf one shall cross over / the stormy sea'.

## ii. Later Ferry

Robert Gray, one of Australia's greatest poets, whose work was on the high school curriculum for thirty years, and whose humanity touched many of us, died on 17 November 2025. He was eighty. With him was his partner Dee, who had spent every day of the past two difficult years beside him, after Gray's Parkinson's disease degenerated into dementia and language left him.

Gray was famous for touching up his published poems. When I first got to know him, a fellow poet came across a copy of Gray's *Selected Poems* (Angus & Robertson, 1990) in Cornstalk, Glebe. She paid twenty dollars for it and, after she

got home, found that most of the poems were marked up in a neat hand: small emendations, title changes, tense shifts, adjectives cut or pasted, stanzas deleted. Whose hand was as tidy as Gray's? Three months after we had published his *Bright Crockery Days* at 5 Islands Press, there were still more edits to be made. 'Which poem?' I asked. After some time, I landed on 'Late Ferry', and he nodded. 'How about I read it to you,' I offered, 'the way we set it?' Gray nodded again. ('Late Ferry' is different in every volume, and no one prefers the changes. But that is not the point. The point is the care Gray always took; how much the right words matter to the truth the moment tells.) And so, there in a ward on the third floor of the hospital in Darlinghurst, the figs tall in the afternoon outside, I stood inside and read this fine poem to its poet. The hospital fell away. 'Everything appears to be in order,' he said.

## iii. Seaworthy Vessels

We are told we live out stories, but the world happens in moments. Life, in truth, is a chain of ponds, a discontinuous arrangement of happenings, places, and things. 'Beneath the truth of the body', as Gray puts it in his loveliest poem, 'A Day at Bellingen', we experience our own being as a broken sequence of 'impromptus' or a haiku – a signature form of Gray's oeuvre. Other times, life runs like an assemblage of memory, reflection, proposition, weather, hope, and harrow – the same way Gray's long free verse poems run (for example, 'Diptych', 'Home Run', 'A Testimony').

Poetry's genius is how well it fits: how closely, in its forms, it corresponds with the phenomenology of lived experience. The work of the poet, Shakespeare said, is to give to 'airy nothings' (the felt sense of being alive) 'a local habitation and a name'. In a borrowed house beneath a scarp, in nights of rain, in journeys by train, in a forest walk, on a jetty, when waking remorsefully in a bed alone, in paddocks cropped by horses, Gray locates the love, loss, and loneliness, the confusion, delight, and petulance – and the family dysfunction – of a life that might have been his but might just as well now be yours. He makes these moments habitable, resonant: tiny, seaworthy vessels.

A poem is a leaf that tells a tree, a ferry freighting light through darkness. Robert Gray made such poems. ■

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