

Cumulus: Collected Poems. By Robert Gray.

John Leonard Press. 346 pp. \$32.95

Reviewed by Geoff Page

There used to be a printer's reason why poetry collections were 64 pages long. In recent years they have stretched to 90 or more. At 346 pages, Robert Gray's *Cumulus: Collected Poems* presents an interesting problem — especially for someone who has read all its constituent volumes as they emerged. Does one simply put the book on the shelf for future reference? Or does one read it right through at normal speed? Ideally, one would read (and re-read) one of its poems per day for the best part of a year.

Taken at normal speed, however, *Cumulus* reminds one overwhelmingly of Robert Gray's uniqueness as a poet. Though he owes a debt, now some distance away, to the American poet, William Carlos Williams, and though he has been somewhat imitated by other Australian Imagists, Gray is never to be confused with anyone else. It was Les Murray who, long ago, pointed out that "Robert Gray has the best eye in Australian poetry". Gray himself, in his poem, "Thin Air", surmises that "My life ... must be a hymn / to the optic nerve." It's significant though that in "Thin Air", dedicated to his long-time partner, Dee Jones, Gray adds immediately that "Other senses, you have proved, / will have all they deserve."

Some critics like to consider Gray a painter *manqué*. His most typical poems are minutely-detailed descriptions of loved landscapes in various lights and weathers, often using metaphors and similes derived from the visual arts. A typical example can be found in "Home Run": "Of all the colour, this is the colour to have seen. The sea / is blue as ink, / or as a dye, newly pulped, / from which a great billow of fabric has been lifted, / the slightly lighter sky."

In this context, some might consider the addition of a small sample of the poet's own drawings at the book's end to be a self-indulgence but, as Gray says in his Author's Note, "The free verse line in my poems I see as analogous to the spontaneous line in drawing. This written line is a gesture, also, although for the voice." What lifts Gray's poems well above the "thousand words" a picture is proverbially worth is the presence of the other four senses — and a deeply meditative habit of mind. Gray once described himself as a "Buddhist heretic" and there is no denying the influence of that outlook on his work — even though he remains an explicit materialist. Occasionally, as in the manner of a sage, Gray allows himself a series of aphorisms, most of which are intellectually or spiritually persuasive but which exist only at the edges of poetry as we normally define it.

Take, for instance, the undeniable yet original wisdom in "We've come to fear science / because it brings bad news. / It is our only friend" and/or "Good is the conclusion / that we draw from evil". Gray is here attempting something similar to Wallace Stevens' famous sequence of aphorisms about poetry, "Adagia". It's significant, however, that we don't find "Adagia" in Stevens' *Collected Poems*.

On the other hand, when these sorts of perceptions are seamlessly woven into the poems we do have a part of what makes Gray's work so distinctive. His poetry is not simply an effort to reproduce "Nature" as accurately and evocatively as words permit. What we see in his poems is the movement of a highly attentive mind, informed by all it has read and experienced hitherto. It's worth reinforcing here too, that Gray is concerned to give us, as implied in "Thin Air", the taste, touch, sound and smell of what he is observing or remembering.

This is something well beyond the resources of the painters whom Gray obviously admires and on whom he is plainly something of an expert. Almost any of his haiku will give a sense of it: "Flesh-pale, a wet floor / and scaffolding. A train's sound. / The rock dreams a tree of stars" or "Open the door on / the gunshot of the morning — / work all day wounded." (from "13 Poems").

Although *Cumulus* has, literally, scores of such poems it is probably Gray's longer, more ambitious poems which are most impressive and which have already (and deservedly) been extensively anthologised. They include early poems such as "The Meat Works" and "Flames and Dangling Wire" as well as later ones like "Malthusian Island" and "In Departing Light". All these poems — and others such as "Flemington" and "The Circus" — have a strong moral, even prophetic dimension. The poet not only notes and evokes, he suggests unwelcome complexities — and compels us to take them into account.

Other unforgettable poems include "Bondi" and "A Sight of Proteus", both of which have a fine balance between beauty as we traditionally understand it and the human-generated detritus in which it is often to be found. In "Bondi", for instance, Gray starts by noting "big, plastered, peeling buildings, in cream, with art deco curves and angles" and "buckled suburbs of dark brick" but by the end he is leaving us with a single gull "carried off by the wind, down the bay" and asks us to see how "it goes along / on its outriggers, smoothly; beautiful, particularly in the dusk, / when it flows away as smoothly, sideways, as the running shallows — / its whiteness, that is picked up by the whiteness of a wave's single wingbeat, / out there on the deep mauve water, creating a vast space."

It is no small tribute to Gray's skill that we can readily imagine for ourselves the painting being generated here. What such a painting can't do, however, is to parallel the cumulative effect wrought by the poet's extended syntax, his alliteration — and his free verse rhythms (as sensed, for instance, in the last line: "out there on the deep mauve water, creating a vast space.")

As with any "Collected" there's a risk of a poet's mannerisms and unconsciously re-cycled imagery showing through more than they would in a single volume. An academic could no doubt write an article on Gray's numerous uses of the word "smoke" and the many different images which employ it. He or she might also speculate on Gray's idiosyncratic preference for phrases such as "of a sudden" when most would say "suddenly". They might even take exception to Gray's (intermittent) use of rhyme schemes that are so flexible in sound and structure as to be almost invisible, even while they make a significant impact on the poems' syntax, imagery and word choice.

There is no doubt, however, that *Cumulus: Collected Poems* is an essential book to have on your shelf — even if you already have the collections from which it was compiled. As Gray says in his Author's Note "The latest versions of my poems are the only ones I acknowledge, and only those that appear in this book." A few readers have been frustrated by Gray's habit of revising his poems long after their publication but they will find that the (usually quite small) changes made in *Cumulus* are definite improvements. For such a visual poet, the book's design is perhaps too rigorously plain but that may be not so much a cost-cutting measure as a deliberate contrast to the richness of imagery within.

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