

Along the Line

VIVIAN SMITH was born in Hobart in 1933 and has lived in Sydney since 1967. These, the two oldest cities in Australia, play a central role in his poetry as in his life, providing key geographical and historical images in his exploration of notions of permanence and change, and in his quirky sense of the bizarre in ordinary life. Similarly his studies and teaching in French before his move to Sydney have given his work a distinctive timbre unusual in Australian poetry. For many years Reader in English at the University of Sydney, he is a central figure in Australian literature as teacher, critic, editor and translator. He has published seven collections of poetry and his awards include the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry and the Patrick White Literary Award. Les Murray has written of him, "From first to last there is an integral voice, a controlled richness of language and response, varied with great flexibility."

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VIVIAN SMITH



CAMBRIDGE

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For Sybille, Vanessa, Gabrielle and Nicholas

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Sydney Perhaps

I

Equivalent in feeling, light and sky,
a Roman morning, fifteen years ago
returns with the clear weight of summer air,
the tang of something dry in copied pines,
dust or oil, a rustling feathered palm,
the heat haze hanging over Mosman Bay.

II

Often reminded now of somewhere else,
my growing stock of slow comparisons
holds in this down sloping narrow street
the remnants of a walk towards the *Fram*:
a suburb garden trim with picket fence,
assorted shrubs, a violence of flowers.

III

Jacarandas and huge moreton bays
with elephants still hiding behind trunks
open the gardens to the Library.
The botany, equestrian monuments,
the relics of colonial heritage:
it could be Buenos Aires in November.

Night Life

Disturbed at 2 a.m. I hear a claw
scratching the window, tapping at the pane,
and then I realise, a broken branch,
and yet I can't turn back to sleep again.

Slowly, not to wake you, I get up,
thinking of food, perhaps a quiet read.
A cockroach runs across the kitchen floor,
its lacquered shell as quick and dry as seed.

Outside the chalice lily lifts its cup
in adoration to the mirrored moon,
full of purpose as it trembles there,
collecting drops of moisture on its spoon.

Noises of the night, it's all alive,
birds shifting in the steady trees,
slugs and snails eating fallen flowers,
a moth freighted with fragilities.

Nocturnal life, the other side of things,
proceeding whether we observe or not,
like rows and rows of brown coastal ants
transporting food from here to another spot.

A Pair of Scissors

I bought these scissors forty years ago,
a student tourist on a trip to Spain;
they cost about five shillings, not more,
“Toledo steel, the best blades of their kind”;
they’ve kept their point, their incised arabesque.

They’ve clipped back forty years of finger nails,
dead skin and bits of nostril hair.
Good for cutting paper, binding books,
for snipping flowers, mending, small repairs.

Once they helped me fix a broken switch,
screw an element inside a jug,
free a bandage sticking to a wound.
Once they saved an animal from pain.

They’ve travelled with me twice around the world.

But mostly they’re for fingers and for toes,
for trimming strands of wayward greying hair.
I simply have to tell them what to do.

Nimble instruments, swift serviteurs,
quizzical, hygienic, debonair,
they wait there with a cool, efficient air.

I must bequeath them one day to an heir.

Reply to an Unsolicited Letter

(from the American Biographical Institute, announcing my nomination for the prestigious title 'Woman Of The Year' -1998)

No, I am not Ms Smith.

My name came from my dad

(following a family tradition)

when Vivs were cricketers and South Pole explorers.

We weren't all sons of Oscar Wilde.

When I was a lad the girls I knew

were Robin, Terry, Peter, Lesley, Ray;

Hilary and Jocelyn were boys,

Beverly and Val were in our gang.

My uncle went to war with Evelyn.

What then happened to our names,

last survivors of a vanished world?

One Viv I knew called himself Clive,

Beverly finally changed his name to Dick

(which seemed a bit drastic at the time).

I was too indolent and simply stayed with mine.

Ambiguity appeals more than appals.

If the cap fits wear it, as they say.

Zane Grey was christened Pearl Grey;

John Wayne started out as Marion.

Would it change my life to change my name?

In another country it might have been worse,

I could have been a bloke called Maria.

Traveller's Tale

I heard them making love in the next room
all night on and off at every hour.
I heard moans, whisperings and sighs
and in between silence and its power.

I hardly slept, they kept me half awake.
I saw their young bodies intertwined.
I heard laughter, sniggering and cries,
and passion urgently defined.

Next morning I prepared to leave quite late
and went downstairs to organise the bill.
Such a sense of emptiness about,
the office open, everything still.

I needed coffee and a fresh croissant.
The manager in black at last appeared.
"Those people in the room next door to mine . . ."
He looked at me, I smiled; I'd say he leered.

"There was only one man in that room.
Old. We didn't know he was dying".
I looked at him again, he looked at me.
I could have sworn that he was lying.

Tune

When I came back from Europe late last year
a new tune kept running through my head.
It still recurs at odd times of the day,
haunting like a perfume or a face.
Its clean string of notes obsesses me.

I cannot write it down; I have no key.
I can't translate it to another code.
I cannot even hum it to myself.
It has to sing itself inside of me.

I heard it first in Prague on Charles Bridge—
early summer evening, cloudless sky—
where exiles from a grey dictatorship
played their haunting high Andean flutes
among the rows of buskers waiting there.

Expatriates, tourists, dissidents, passers by—
an ancient tune of sorrow pierced with joy—
those refugees, those exiles far from home
playing their haunting high Andean flutes;
this place of wandering scholars, vagabonds.

I heard them two months later playing near
the market place at Cambridge in the rain:
their piercing flutes' insinuating song—
its cry of joy, its almost desolation—
hungry for home and all its idioms.

To a Bottle Tree

Nature exacts a tribute as I pass
thinking of you as some old dried arrangement
drawn by a child with clumsy confidence
suggesting comfort rather than estrangement.

(This shouldn't be a formal hymn of praise,
a stiff pindaric or a Barron Field:
I'll try and see if I can find the way
correspondences can yield

the cool pleasure of asymmetry.)
You're like an elephant seen from behind
and when it moves it seems to split apart
huge and delicate and awkwardly refined.

You stand there like a boulder on a slope,
a door ajar that makes one start to smile—
exotica almost erotica
where happiness exists beyond guile.

Remembering W H S

Come back once more and walk along the shore,
a styrofoam container in your hand,
and search again through litter on the sand
for shells and seaweed. Start a new collection.

“There’s no such thing as rubbish,” you once said,
“only things we don’t know how to use.”
You had the gift for the unexpected find,
quick as a bird, knowing where to choose.

A gull creaked on its hinges overhead.
We talked of jacarandas and the trees
that come from other places, like ourselves.
“So much depends” (you smiled) “on overseas.”

You wrote with such a sparse sufficiency
and liked it when the bones began to show,
your poems spread before you like your life
neither rich nor poor nor fast nor slow . . .

Nothing can be useless to a poet;
that came last night in a dream.
Is it mine or am I quoting?

Every wise man has his problem,
every idiot his theme.

Posthumous Retrospective

When I first saw your work I didn't like it,
thirty years ago, another me.
I missed the wit, misunderstood the strange.
Now room after room, it bowls me over
as your life's work stands clear, complete, declared.

To grasp at last your whole search set out here,
loads of junk turned into metal flowers,
how you expand our notions of the real!

Miniature cathedrals, altars, shrines
built from bits of brokendown machines,
axels, cams, poppets, pinions, cogs,
delicate as moths and butterflies,
the leap of life that flares in a branch of keys.

Did your art need death to show its shape?
You moved off beam, impossible to fathom,
to make old iron look as light as feathers
and yet to hold the force of bonsai trees.

You never said you were misunderstood
or sidelined by a group of jealous rivals.
You lived where pieces meet and match,
and energy was not lost in complaint,
shaping work whose sense of fun, and power,
now surround us in these high lit rooms.

The Names: 1938-45

Box

Days of winter.

No mountain at the top of the street, the ships gone from the bottom of the road.

A cold wet drizzle covered all.

Rain sewing the sky to the ground and undoing it again.

We sat around the fire or the wooden kitchen table. Like being very small and licking mother's face instead of kisses. We had to change the world to keep it going.

And then we found the box, the single wand, the cup of water.
And read the words and wondered what they meant:
gamboge, Nile green and crimson lake.

Summoning up summer in a small patch of blue
while birds like music echoed in the sky.