

Classic Poetry Series

Ken Smith
- poems -

Publication Date:
2004

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Ken Smith(1938 - 2003)

Kenneth John Smith, poet, born December 4 1938; died June 27 2003

Ken Smith was born in Rudston, a small village in Yorkshire. His father (a farm worker and then greengrocer shop owner), whose life he explores in an early poem, *Family Group*, moved around, and Ken attended junior schools all over the county. After grammar school in Hull and Knaresborough, he did national service in the air force from 1958, returned to Hull in 1960 and married his first wife, Ann Minnis.

Known as one of England's most prominent poets, Smith is the author of over a dozen books of poetry, a fictional work (*A Book of Chinese Whispers*, 1986), and two works of non-fiction (*Inside Time*, 1989, and *Berlin: Coming in from the Cold*, 1990). He was a recipient of the Lannan Foundation Award for poetry in 1997 and of the Cholmondeley Award for poetry in 1998. His most recent collection of poems, *Wild Root* (1998), was the autumn 1998 Poetry Book Society Choice, and was nominated for the 1999 T.S. Eliot Award. From 1963 to 1969, Smith worked as co-editor of the *Stand*, and was the founding editor of the *South West Review* from 1976 to 1978. He was writer-in-residence at Clark University (1972-1973), Leeds University (1976 -1978), and Kingston Polytechnic (1979-1981).

Smith's verses come to us from a no-man's land that lies in-between placement and displacement. On a rainy Colombian night, he held a poetry reading in the city square in Medellin, and wrote about inmates from Her Majesty's Prison in *Wormwood Scrubs* (*Wormwood*, 1987). In his journey through time, he wrote *Tender to the Queen of Spain* (1993). In Transylvania, he collected stones "veined with the shapes of letters" and arranged them into a farewell message.

"Ken Smith is a poet who has the ability to craft real poetry, sometimes harsh, sometimes sentimental, but never to be ignored." L K Robinson

Duck At Haldon Ponds

At evening watches the duck
slow feeding the waterline.

Praises the duck. Such a fine
white miracle breasting the mayfly.

Green of her tail feathers,
space of her neck doubled in water
paddles off with my mind.

Ducks I have known.
Old duck mates of mine
inspecting the meeting of air and liquid.

Make no mistake, duck.
I'd like to eat you well cooked
one bell-battered Sunday in April.

And I'd wear your gorgeous feathers in my hat,
make a soup of the bones
and give your leftovers to the cat.

Ken Smith

Encounter At St. Martin's

I tell a wanderer's tale, the same
I began long ago, a boy in a barn,
I am always lost in it. The place
is always strange to me. In my pocket

the wrong money or none, the wrong paper,
maps of another town, the phrase book
for yesterday's language, just a ticket
to the next station, and my instructions.

In the lobby of the Banco Bilbao
a dark woman will slip me a key, a package,
the name of a hotel, a numbered account,
the first letters of an unknown alphabet.

Ken Smith

Fast Forward

<i>one thing then another</i>

one story then another conversation
always interrupted by another conversation

I want the words to barely glaze the page
gone the moment of their utterance

as we are

I want

in back of this a story a man with his face with his name
exile emigrant refugee displaced person outsider offcomer don stranger suspect
the terms interchangeable politically undesirable
a story of a man who leaves his country

and the woman he loves

and the story of why

and her story

they never meet again
that's it that's all of it

far away she hears in the night street
footsteps footsteps stop
when she stops go on when she goes on
from the dark in back of her she hears

I can see you I can see you
Sammy Sammy Sammy Sammy I can see you
far away she must go on
far away he must go on

Ken Smith

In The Next Street

there's only ever one argument: his,
bawling out whoever punctuates
the brief intervals his cussing
| interrupts, something unheard, reason perhaps.

What you never get is silence,
always some groan on the horizon
out on the borders of attention
where would be quiet if they let it.

Always some conversation far away,
foreign, banal. dramatic, translated
it means my wife's name is Judit.
I am an engineer from Spidertown.

What to reply? Your Majesty,
my name is Smith. All lies anyway,
all we do is get drunk, the evening's end
collapsing loosely into gutturals.

We drink to silence, where the stars think.
We drink to the music of the rain on the roof.
We drink to mothers, brothers, lovers, kids,
to the candle burning down its length

till someone blows it out. Distance
makes no difference, the same want
for love or money, the numbers of the winning line
in the state lottery like a needle in the brain.

And then I've had enough. I want
to go home now, far away, to plug myself
back into the sockets, the blackbird,
the evening humming stories to itself,

everything in its place, the moths,
the mouse in the mousetrap, and
in the next street the same old argument.
He's sure he's right.

Ken Smith

Possessions

They spent my life plotting against me.
With nothing to do but cultivate themselves,
but to be there, aligning their shadows,
they were planning to undo me,
wanting to own me completely.

They have marched through the rooms,
their presences litter the surfaces
close at my elbow calling attention.
When I sleep they begin with their meetings,
when I leave home they hold a convention.
The minutes, the notes, the chairman
calls order, the lamps signal aye. When I die
they'll start in on another,
easy at first, learning his ways.
Now they're gone, taken from me, good luck.
If I kept them I'd never be free. I'd die
and have to begin picking everything up,
all the waste paper, baby teeth, beards,
I'd have to go back for the fingernails.

So I'm shut of them, all the gossip and malice,
the tables, the chairs with their jokes on me.
All the prying. the scandals. The telephone
stored it all up. the books lied to me.

That's why I came here, bringing nothing.
There was nothing to do but leave things.
I saved only a few: smells of tobacco
and blankets, a dream of a waterfall,
a length of ribbon, my name, my number,
the holes in my suitcase.

Ken Smith

The Secret Police

They are listening in the wires,
in the walls, under the eaves
in the wings of house martins,
in the ears of old women,
in the mouths of children.

They are listening to this now.

So let's hear it for the secret police,
a much misunderstood minority.
After all, they have their rights,
their own particular ways of seeing things,
saying things, cooking things,
they too have a culture uniquely their own.

And we think

they should have their own state
where they could speak their own
incomprehensible tongues, write
their confessions, their own unknown histories,
cultivate their habits of watching
by watching each other, and fly
their own flags there, at attention
on parade in their medals at their monuments
on their secret anniversaries, making speeches,
singing praises to the God of Paranoia.
And at the end of the day
bury their dead, publish coded obituaries
to each other, and rest at last
in their own kind of peace, forever.

Ken Smith

The Shadow Of God

To Mohács

in the marshlands, still in the pouring rain,
August 29th, 1526, where those summoned
and hastily gathered died in thousands
in the space of a moment the chronicler
scribbles, in the safety of distance,
cruel panthers in a moment to hell's pit.
That day the guns chained wheel to wheel,
smoke and the cries of men and horses,
the knights shot from their saddles, armour
dragging them into the mire, the hooves
stamping them in, the infantry butchered,
in the space of a moment the swift
routine of retreat, slaughter and rout,
the space of a moment. No prisoners,
the wails of the wounded, the dying, becks
brimmed with blood, and the young king
thrown from his horse, drowned in his breastplate.
Thereafter Suleyman recalls he sat on the field
in the pouring rain on his glittering throne
to the long applause of his army: I am
Sultan Suleyman Han, son of Sultan Selim Han,
son of Sultan Bayezid Han. The shadow of God.
And they butcher the captives, dig the pits,
to bury their own brave dead, horses and men,
30 thousand whose last rainy day was this,
and the other dead lie in the rain, or scatter
their bones in the wetlands and the reedgrass.
Whatever birds pecked out their eyes
their names are no matter nor the stream
they drowned in nor the name of the planet
whose soft brown body they shovelled in after.
Thereafter the land burns and the churches,
thereafter women and slaves and silver.
And thereafter, pronounces the historian,
his quill's tip brushing his cheek, his point
squeaking over the page, the lamp's glint
on his inkhorn: the long Turkish night,
the tomb of the nation, dug in the rain.

In the space of a moment, in the centuries
moments pile into, leaf over leaf,
season by season as the winters pass
and the wars roll over and the borders shift
it is ploughland, old bones surfacing
at the hoe's edge and the plough's iron,
scapulae and vertebrae rising in a flat
wide fenced country laid open to the wind,
prowled by the tractors of the collectives
and the same wandering birds, black earth
through white snow, wind beaten scarecrow
and the white silence of another winter.
It is a museum of bones in the thick boney
stew of each other, where some bird sings
in the evergreens and a boy rings a bell
in the long white silence that follows.

It is a field of poles upright at a pit's rim,
carved into cruel faces, chiselled in grimaces,
spiked, helmeted, horned, a ragged line of posts
that are totems of men straggling off into trees,
some aslant, the long necks of horses
rearing from snow. They are flail and bludgeon
and battleaxe, calvaries of yokes and the bows
of the swift horsemen, the trailed arms
of the willow tree. They are the crescent moon
and the star, the cross, the crown, the turban
and the tarboosh, gnarled glances of soldiers,
the figures of dead men rising from the earth,
Suleyman with a basket of heads at his pommel
and the dead king Lajos in his blue bonnet.
Overhead the high jets in the clear blue
corridor of cloudless sky above Serbia,
flying the line of the great rivers
whose names are the same though the names
of the empires and the nations shift
on the maps. South of here, not far,
in the debateable lands of the warring states
the bones are again rising in the mud.

[...]

Very fast very slow the music
a lament from the villages
a music come down from the mountains
called across rivers across plains:
ah no joking and no joking
a gift for the kolo, bridegroom
the thieves they are singing
dance my love dance faster
faster till we fall down.

The reedgrass that will be thatch
first snowy fields turned in the plough.
A line of trucks in a white field
waiting for grain not yet sown:
end of the winter quarter
end of the season of craving
the river's ice drifting south
snow collapsing from the buildings:
the days of the death of King Winter.

The Busójárás.

Time to take to the streets
wearing the skins of beasts
masks years in the making offspring
of the old whisperers in the hearth
kin to the devotees of trees
and certain stones and all rivers
lord of the vines and beasts
our lady of the wild things the old gods
who never made it into heaven.

Busós.

They step out of the unwritten
the unremembered out of Illyria
out of the south the dark the flight
and the distant remembrance of panic
the horned hoof footed hard drinking
god of the shepherds. They step out
through the winter streets in masks

horns in sheepskins and bandoliers
with their bells and their rattles.

Busós.

With their antlers tall in the skins
of beasts belled shaggy moustache men
huge with their clubs and horns
wild in their tall wooden masks
coming on from the distance
all the years they have travelled
out of the unwritten the agrapha
the history of the forgotten
the long shadows of the lost gods.
At noon they have crossed the river
they have taken the streets
filled with organized riot
the ruckus of men in the male dance
the clatter and rattle of flails
the interminable clanging of bells
rain clanking into buckets
in mockery taking their ways
through the orders of anarchy.

Busós.

Fierce and yet not fierce
joking and yet not joking
this is the management of chaos:
the war of the great ratchets
the battle of the bells upright animals
striding through the streets
through the cold falling sunlight
in a wild skirling music
bearing the skulls of animals.

Busós.

Others come as veiled hooded women
a brown friar another the devil
a joker in a Russian tank mask
a Groucho Marx an Austrian helmet.

And these others ghosts in dirty sheets
rags sackcloth and ashes and stocking masks
bunched in knots of impudent silence
young men scattering the girls
the dead risen from the dead.

Centuries ago the traveller
Evliya Çelebi warned his far flung
wandering countrymen of the masked
madmen of Mohács in the marshland
in their shaggy jackets and bells
and their faceless faces:
they are devils devils
in the place of devils
no-one should go there.
In their own legend of themselves
they chased the Turks out of town
in terror. In the ill-disciplined
shaggy masked half-drunk ranks
among pitchforks and whirling clubs
the carved severed head on a stick
of a janissary, moustache top knot skull
goes round and round in the racket
and the gathering fire and the dusk.

How years ago they were fearless
in the place of defeat and rose again
how years ago a pig's blood painted
a cross in the town square and how
the masks stained in animal blood
and the wild cries and the kolo
was their resistance. How once
they were one with the beasts
one with men one with the gods.

Rutting and butting as beasts
sticks for pricks bells balls
and under the mask is another
and another they are Busós
three days of the year Busós
parading their ragged squads
to the square where the cannon

from that year of the rain
thunders mud and rags and smoke.

Busós.

Come nightfall on the third day
of marching and mayhem and music
that is Shrovetide the fire's lit
in the square. King Winter is dead
carted off in a coffin and burned.
On the coffin in flowery
Hungarian script: it's sold,
our country, it's sold, we have
nothing left but our fathers' pricks.

Where does this music come from,
an old woman asks. From all round her
from everywhere from earth
from the wind from the long turned
furrows of defeat the old sorrow
the old joy the songs
of the long gone into the dark.
It's sold, our country,
and all the thieves are laughing.

Time to march one last time
on the town and burn winter
with bells and cannon and fire
round and around the tottering square
masked men and horses the music
round and round the kolo
the dancing of the hairy men
and winter goes up in the flames
the tall smoke climbing the sky.
Busós.

The sliver of moon the first star
on the pale blue flag of the sky
as the sparks flare and die. At the edge
of the embers of memory the borders
of hearing: bells laughter a child
a cough girls singing the swift music

in the ashes of the evening
whisps of voices at a distance
in that far off language.

Ken Smith

The Window Of Vulnerability

Sure today it could come in a fast plane
named perhaps for the pilot's mother,
the city ends in a smear in the road
and that in a child's shoe. No one

will say aboard the Missouri *<i>all these
proceedings are now closed</i>, by nightfall
hours beyond zero no one remarks
<i>it was grey, it had no beauty at all. </i>*

Now what to do with these postal districts
drifting downwind? It would be
routine enough on the autopilot,
flying home till there's no home to fly to.

Ken Smith

Train

<i>After Max Ernst's 'Europe after the Rain'</i>

In the dark
each sits alone
clutching his flag

I have more than my one death
to attend to
there is a sickness about
and the magician has vanished

But I sit with my twenty six years
spread on my palms
and I wait for the silence
when the programme is interrupted
and the speakers have no script.
And I think how to carry my children
into the sewers.

Roll up the cities.
Let the window explode
in a million glass flowers.
In the darkness already
the woman picking milk from the step
the ashes raked last thing at night
are postures, buried
slipping into dust, rock, ooze,
furniture of a planet
wheeling in silence
lonely as a train
waving its little handkerchiefs of steam

Ken Smith