

Inside from the start

Ken Smith, *You Again: Last Poems and Other Words*,
Bloodaxe, £8.95, ISBN 1852246707

Ken Smith's poetry is crammed with information: people, places, dates. Consider this, from "Late night call", the first poem in *You Again*:

Discontinued voice from a disconnected number
in a distant rainy Seattle, you're sitting on a balcony,
smoking in another no-smoking house, out there
in the time zones. We're out of sync.

At once, the reader is drawn into something dramatic and urgent; required to stake a claim. By the time most contemporary poems reach us, the "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" is over: the poem is a score-card. As might be expected from a seasoned traveller, Smith's poems are closer to a list of essentials.

Proceeding by intuition means you can cover ground more quickly. Smith placed a high value on coincidence, or more precisely, synchronicity. In one of the interviews transcribed in *You Again*, Smith says:

what we see is only the surface, and the deeper meaning, the deeper substance of what is going on can sometimes be recognised through signs, multiple feelings, symbols, feelings you have about places, people, things, and that one has to trust these feelings as much as one trusts analytical thought. One of the ways is to recognise coincidence...

Smith draws heavily on these perceived equivalences between cultures, or over long time periods: "Nothing has changed ... toothache felt like toothache, sexual craziness like sexual craziness". Sometimes the assumed equivalence between the prison wall and the Berlin wall, or between victims of communism and capitalism, can sound simplistic, but more often it leads to an inspired clarity. Volume by volume, Smith found common ground with an ever more diverse set of characters. *Wild Root* is beautifully orchestrated – Smith's most coherent volume – yet also has the most eclectic terms of reference: the American Deep South is set against post-Communist Eastern Europe and Serbian myth. Because Smith's vision as a poet grew more

coherent the more he broadened his range, he found himself with more and more to say.

Synchronicity, equivalence. Take, for example, the accident of one's name. Kenneth John Smith is an absurdly common name, and a source of great amusement for the poet of *Everyman* ("Your Majesty / my name is Smith..."). In *Last Poems* we are told, "Bin Laden is Ken Smith" (the poem was occasioned by a fortuitous Internet find), and a poem in *Wormwood* is subtitled "for John and all the men in the world called John". Tongue-in-cheek perhaps, but when Smith plays it straight, the results can be hallucinatory. This is from "Part of the crowd that day", in which we hear the voice of anonymity itself:

They were townsfolk, craftsmen, shopkeepers,
The labouring poor who came in from the fields.
They watched the witches burn, the heretics.
They watched the ships leave for the Americas.
They were on the bridge at Sarajevo the first time.
They saw. They wondered. They shouted
burn her, hang him, slaughter the Albigenians.

This common touch is the corollary of Smith's famous sympathy with outcasts and wanderers, a sympathy not based on shared experience so much as attitude, or something in the timbre of the voice itself, a dissipated syntax that marks out territory rather than paints a landscape. Like King Lear's Poor Tom, Smith's wanderers (Fox, the wanderer Yacob, Charlie Delta, Eddie and the rest) carry the conscience of the society that excludes them. Not that Smith ever sounds civic-minded. But it is not so much outsiders as insiders who fascinate Smith: prisoners, subjects of political despots, victims of the secret police or the capricious global economy. It emerges that those whom history overlooks are also the ones who internalise history's conflicts and divisions most deeply.

In a review of *Shed* (for *Stride* magazine) Martin Stannard complained

I think it would be awfully easy to say something pleasantly politically correct about these poems and shrink from saying that these 300 pages demonstrate that Ken Smith does what he does very well but it's a bit samey after a while...

This needs to be addressed. So many characters make their way through Ken Smith's poetry, and clearly all of them contain a measure of Smith himself – as they must. Whether you have a problem with this depends on how you define

a persona. A persona can be used as a disguise or as a theatrical mask. A disguise preserves the wearer's identity, a mask accentuates certain characteristics. There is a tradition in Bali (Smith doesn't refer to it, but I suspect he was aware of it), that an actor must find a correlation between his own face and that of the mask he wears: must laugh or cry with the mask. And not through an excess of zeal, but in order to ensure the overall body language is correct, to aid the performance. Likewise, there are fine movie actors who submerge themselves entirely in a role: method actors like De Niro. Then there are truly great actors who, at their best, risk revealing something of themselves. Smith was the Brando type: able to speak for so many, yet always unmistakably himself.

If all of this makes Smith sound rather too earnest, I should say that throughout *You Again*, the poet's peculiar brand of absurdist black humour is to the fore. In the prose poem "The 72 virgins question", some pertinent questions are asked, concerning the belief held by the September 11 hijackers that, as martyrs, they could look forward to the attentions of 72 virgins in paradise:

How was the figure 72 arrived at? ... Are any of them boy virgins? What proportion, if any? ... Given the length of eternity, how long, and how, do they remain virgins? ... What if the martyr is a woman? Does she get the same privileges, and how does that go down with the lads back at the base?

This Brechtian humour can be traced to Smith's obsession with borders, whether geographical, historical or psychological. Increasingly, Smith opened up the borders of genre. When a poet has the confidence to allow humour into the mix, it lends great warmth to the work.

The poetry collected in *The Poet Reclining* and *Shed* is politically engaged, amused, sane and horrified. As well as opening new perspectives on this work, *You Again* contains Ken Smith's final poems, along with interviews, letters and some absorbing accounts of how he came to write key poems. Smith is refreshingly honest about his working methods, and talks of "slapping the poem around ... like a piece of pastry". There are tribute poems from Tom Pickard, Sean O'Brien, Michael Anania, Tony Connor and Judi Benson, many written in Smith's own manner, and a fine overview of his career by Roger Garfitt. The book also contains several photographs. There is a pronounced contrast between the warmth of the snapshots showing Smith relaxing with friends, and the publicity shots, in which Smith remains defiantly unknowable behind tinted spectacles, hat and moustache. Whether pose, publicity stunt or in-joke, these now appear part of Smith's great mask project.

PAUL BATCHELOR