

Three Poems: ‘Bright Day’, ‘Underworld’, ‘Rehabilitation’

Ian C Smith

Bright Day

Suffering sets him apart. He could be a movie character on a journey, a young Johnny Depp who has tasted the floor, authority’s boot in his face, brooding about money, fearing contact with his major problem, people, wanting neither crutches nor temptation. The thought of enclosure again tightens his muscles. He imagines being buried alive in a coffin, air thinning slowly. Making his way back to reality taking a deep breath he thinks of where rest might come this night, that slide into dreamless sleep, a fragrant woman whispering his name. He could shatter kissing a moist, pretty mouth.

This changing view, clattering soundtrack, reminds him of immersion in books, his mind’s voice urging him on like a sports coach. He memorises a hostel address, and where he can sell a street magazine, wants to save, reach a turn in his trail. He would burn bad luck, that circle of his hurt, doesn’t realise others sitting here speeding towards the magic city might also be troubled. Finger on thumb, he traces phrases, seductive sentences, thoughts, dreams of shaping this into print published on a crisp white page.

The walk from the station, the street’s jostle sliding towards him, artworks of advertising fizz, that skyline, sex, wealth, this extended view, rattles his heart; strangers touching, their laughter, frenzy of chatter. He wants to put his fingerprints on this panorama of pulsing late morning, has stopped thinking of what went wrong, that hole in time like an old photograph. On the footpath he claims a seat to absorb what he missed, a figure in a moving painting.

An emergency vehicle’s siren pierces him, some residual jungle trace readying him for flight or fight, basking over. He grips a plastic bag of pathetic possessions, recidivism a word beyond understanding. He has phone numbers, a parole officer, and the woman who works and waits like a heroine in a C&W song.

cinnamon, basil
choices preferable to
gentian, horehound.

Underworld

Our escape route led to a culvert system between school, railyards, and slouching town. A couple of teachers crossing the football ground separated, circling to trap us smoking in the scrub. Our hideaway resembled a birdwatcher’s blind I saw recently on my long, reflective wetlands walk. We watched their comical efforts at stealth, casually stubbed our ciggies, concealed the tobacco tin in its usual artful place, then descended into the underworld.

Along stormwater drains, cool on a hot day, about five feet in diameter, murky, lit by matches, distant openings, oily water inches deep at their centres, sometimes a bestiary of small drowned creatures, furred and winged, viscera we stepped over, stooped, pants tucked into socks, we waddled, our contagious echoes ringing with bravado, subterranean cartographers, or escaped convicts darkling through catacombs. That reek, squalid confinement, would churn me with claustrophobia now.

Emerging in our bayside terminal town we worked the usual shops; newsagents, or either of two rival stores where nothing cost over a quid, swift without seeming so, school squatting a phone call away, two distracting while another palmed preselected items for resale, marauders buzzing with adrenalin, glorying in peer status.

Heading for sandy tracks threading through tea-tree scrub behind the foreshore, we tried door handles of parked cars without shortening stride, cigarettes, change, disappearing from unlocked gloveboxes. Relying on luck, animal cunning, we lurched, maculate, towards early exits from an education as rank as those culverts into deadbolted work, domestic and other disasters, a gradual thinning of hope, yet I recall those times with an ambiguous wan fondness, this retrospection about squandering risk, the bluster of daring, blood's weight pumping through untried hearts.

Rehabilitation

Anger off my heel for now, a murderous taste, metallic, blood in my mouth, drizzle in the yard beyond this high window, an air-slit in pitted stone the colour of bruises housing rage, terror, disgrace; sloughed up, a bucket, mat, graffiti, muscles still trembling, flesh lacerated, survival is my sole aim. If my heart shrivels I shall become a chalked outline.

The boy prone on concrete, blood pooling around his head spreading ever wider filling cracks, alarmed me. Captain Armstrong, 'Snake', for his venomous glare, controlled this regime; straight backed, boxing gloves displayed in his office a sign of muscular Christianity, the firm instruction of young minds led astray.

The historic C19th prison, gutted of tears, fear, yet wreathed in desolation, was sold to developers. Before its makeover as townhouses it opened to the public. When I still searched for love, my then second wife, young sons, and I, joined tourists stickybeaking at forsaken souls' lives. Our guide, Jim Armstrong, flabby retired guard, hair, humour, thin, entertained us, a practised spiel, anecdotes about colourful inmates, reminding us to visit the souvenir shop when leaving.

Reaching the Young Offenders Group area I struggle, remembered sour taste in my mouth, disoriented, itching to break out from our polite, voyeuristic seminar, step into shadow, find a vestigial echo of the vanished tool shed where I witnessed in dread a pitchfork at a terrified boy's throat. For some, the spectral past is unreal, the present real; for me, vice versa. Leaving, I needed to talk, explain, but bore it, bottled up as usual. I didn't tip Jim, this actor, our genial guide, wanted to step forward, expose obscenity, but held that to myself, too, our boys, a salvaged life, my focus. I bought a T-shirt instead, wore it, days softening into years, until, pocked with holes, it eventually fell away into my foul ragbag of reminiscence.

Author Bio

Ian C Smith writes in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria, and on Flinders Island. His work has appeared in *Antipodes*, *Communion*, *cordite*, *Eureka Street*, *Griffith Review*, *Journal of Working-Class Studies*, *Meniscus*, & *Shaping the Fractured Self* (UWAP). His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra Press.