

Ian C Smith

Humanities

Straight from our first tutorial our hands touch reaching for the same book reference card, stepping aside, after-youing, laughing, careless of the shrapnel of future memory, maturity's eventual humility. A chance moment, novelesque, I believe then, shrugging loneliness in the Main Library, this Canterbury Cathedral of my language pilgrimage soaring in my mind.

Over her suggestion of coffee we swap glib biographies, both born near where Alexander Pope lived. Her southern English accent contrasts with my now working-class Australian. Hers sounds eager, posh, womanly. Sweating, I attempt macho nonchalance, grateful for blossoming friendship where I know no-one.

Later, realising she will never be heart-quickenning, a molecule of disappointment, some shame of this, pricks me. In crowded lecture halls she finds, touches me, even if I slip in late, slouching down into obscured seats. When she emerges from behind the Ming Wing's pillars in wind and rain, wan winter light, like a John Le Carre spy, I sometimes walk faster, head down, hear wobbling heels clicking to catch up.

We read about character, mixed messages, betrayal; my electives always attracting her. Marlowe becomes a new hero, succubus a new word. Plotting, I sign up to lists, crossing out my name after she has added hers, but she reads me like our beginners' guides. Breathlessly brave or desperate, she confesses sexual fantasies, boosting my weedy ego.

After *Tess* I take her, using her wretchedly, but she thrills to this, although hating it, a tragic heroine I scorn while also scorning myself, relationships at the heart of everything I study, discuss; what I do when not earning money to subsist. She has never driven so uses me, too, my car serving as her taxi and our venue for debauchery.

The student jobs noticeboard's highest paid gig is sperm donation, smart attached information suggesting a morally high-minded subtext. A paper on Milton due, I suspect rooting for Satan leads me where traitor-angels wind up, brain fuzzy from reading so many lines of blank verse. I seek freedom, atonement, enlightenment; weigh up options, confused, with much to learn. Pandemonium reigns.

Jingoism

The boy who would be my grandfather disappeared from his London home, following soldiers marching to their bivouac on Hounslow Heath where I landed back in Britain. That boy became a regimental sergeant-major, lost two sons to war. Staying in drab Hounslow, I happened on a connection to this fierce family past.

A cavalcade of soldiers processing from London's direction, emissaries of those panjandrums in pinstripes, blocks traffic along the high street, early afternoon light dismal like dusk in Australia. Their reflections shimmer behind me in the window of yet another shoe store, fine rain powdering ginger moustaches, glistening on peaks pressed down hard over foreheads, reminding me of medieval knights' visors.

These soldiers astride impressive horses seem like loathsome warriors as I consider the suffering wrought by wars, the military extending into the personal in my family's abysmal example, as if life isn't short enough. With stoical shoppers I watch this pageantry until we hear only a hoof-clatter of echoes, smell manure, rain, on the street becoming busy again.

Those troops from different centuries probably travelled the same road, tradition Britain's *raison d'être*. I fancy a drummer led the soldiers dazzling that boy, all passed into ashes now, to a grassy area a short drive today from the housing estate built on river meadows where my hard life, more spit than polish, began. What did that boy, later to father many children and set the benchmark for family tyranny, experience?

Night fires casting flickering shadows over swabbed-down restless horses amid sudden shouts, jingling, scraping of stirrups, weaponry, carried across trampled buttercups, swearing in the smoky air, the reek of leather, damp canvas, is what I imagine. The excited boy dreaming of a red tunic, the showy moustache he would twist with a flourish, went missing for several days before being returned to his mother, who, relieved, forgot to give him another good hiding, I was told, breaking the ingrained family tradition.

Of Battles Long Ago

The boy's father wears both belt and braces. No chance of catching this silent man with his pants down, a spectacle, the boy realises later, he never witnesses. Sleeves rolled, collarless shirt outdated, smoking, his father reads the *'Mirror, News of the World'*, while the boy gobbles crunchy puffed wheat with extra sugar, still rationed, greedy, unnoticed, head cocked, reading sports results at an inconvenient angle, but with a crease between them.

Al Phillips (the Aldgate Tiger) lambastes his way to the British bantamweight diadem. Len (the Duke) Duquemin rampages, supreme destroyer on the attack. This calligraphic style of post-war power sports-writing as if the war had never ended, propaganda continued, stirs the boy. Hamlet might flourish at Tottenham Hotspur, too, goal-netting a quivering arras.

Odour of petrol. Rain falls silently on huddled house, privet, the tenebrous streets, washing away smog's grime. For many seconds of what will become remembered rapture, alarm, now, the boy looks up – an earlier difficult angle – sees his father clasping, *crushing* his mother those sportswriters would have written, to the brass buttons of his khaki tunic, a beret folded in his epaulette, as these parents fiercely lock mouths, a tableau the boy never sees again.

That passionate stranger, brief leave too soon over, startles the boy in the blitzed city where bombs had not, his mother's breasts heaving as her soldier vanishes into the blackout, two hundred hitchhiked miles of unsignposted roads before him, Luftwaffe overhead, a searchlight time of future frangible memories for the boy when he reaches manhood.

Fathers return changed
carnage over, back to peace
familial scars.

Two Georges

When I tap on Old Ma Google's back door there he is: an indigenous Australian warrior of the ring hoisting a keg of beer above his head, and again, a newsreel of him marrying in London back in grainy photographic days. My father, who disliked me, boxed overseas during his army service years before whisking us 10,000 miles to Australia. He told me, just once, George Cook, a New South Wales boxer who, I now read, although a smallish heavyweight, blitzed it with the best around the world, caught the trolleybus my father drove, home to Surbiton after training, London bouts, toting a sports bag. A young boy, I became hooked on boxing.

Returning to England, I skipped Buckingham Palace, did roadwork in my father's haunts, past privet, through fog, more privet, to excavate where our clan hollered, discover why, jigsaw puzzling his bruising biography, cause and effect circling anger. When I took a blow to the heart I got in close, hung on. Feinting towards close kin's secrets highlights chapters of your own struggle, glancing memories, like seeing faded tattoos, leaving you weakened. Mother said I am stubborn, like him.

His name also George, electric connection crackling and sputtering above him on rainswept night shifts, he knew Cook was Australian. Perhaps he nurtured an inkling of our gruelling antipodean future. Cook died in Surbiton far from the eucalyptus scent of an ancestral campfire, aged only forty-five, while my father ended his Australian days, still stubborn, at eighty-three. Oh, if only I could Google post-bout boxing banter between Cook – that sports bag between his feet – my father, and his conductor. Expatriate live intrigue. Back stories. Damaging rips to the solar plexus. Fathers. Camaraderie. Streetlight under rain, the promise of a coal fire.

About the Poet

Ian C Smith's work has been published in *Antipodes*, *BBC Radio 4 Sounds*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Griffith Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Southword*, *The Stony Thursday Book*, & *Two Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.