

Representations of Death in the Poetry of Stevie Smith

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ABSTRACT

The English poet, Stevie Smith, is best known for poetry which offers childlike poetic voices and accompanying drawings, traits which resulted in her often being overlooked as a serious twentieth century poet. Writers on Smith use words such as ‘ambivalent’ and ‘strange’ to describe her verse. What though lies beneath Smith’s strange poetic veneer that continues to engage her readers? I would argue that the sense of escapism delivered through fairytale imagery and the child’s voice that is characteristic of much of her poetry are key contributors to Smith’s plentiful poetics on death, paradoxically given their childish themes, most of them about death .

In this thesis I examine how death dominates Smith’s poems on human suffering, gender and sexuality, culture and politics. I argue that Smith offers a kind of Nietzschean solution to the horrors of existence – the drive toward death and the exploration of that drive through art. Sometimes death is literally represented. More often, it takes a metaphoric form such as ‘the dark wood’, in ‘I rode with my Darling...’ or a personified embodiment such as ‘Black March’, in ‘Black March’. Death is always, however, presented as a desired solution to misery and injustice, and is a welcome solution to unhappiness in Smith’s poetry.

It could be argued that death became Smith's greatest muse. Unlike other poets of her era Smith lived in the margins, both professionally and in her personal life. Friends criticised her indulgence of the death obsession to such an extent that her novel *Married to Death* was never published. What then saved Smith from the same fate suffered by poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton for whom anxiety and desperation led to suicide? The death theme of her poems that was deemed so precarious by Smith's friends and colleagues seemed to allow Smith to embrace her marginality and avoid the despair of poets such as Plath and Sexton. In a sense, Smith experienced the emancipation that death brings through her poems. She didn't ever see her obsession to its awful, fatal conclusion, escaping it through imaginary constructs for her readers rather than at her own hand.

In analysing and engaging with her work, this thesis offers new insights into this odd, paradoxical poet, her obsession and her work.

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To Mum, Dad and Parham.

INTRODUCTION

Representations of Death in the Poetry of Stevie Smith

This PhD seeks to address why so little has been written about representations of death in Stevie Smith's poetry. Through my research I identify the poetics of these representations through my exegetical study and through the creative project's verse novel. Often, where metaphoric representations of death occur in Smith's poetry, it is interpreted merely as escapism, ambivalence or a penchant for the absurd. My exegesis will identify the literal and metaphoric ways in which death is represented in Smith's poetry and show how these representations make Smith arguably the twentieth century's most prolific poet on death.

Death has been a lasting fascination for poets. It permeates the major themes in Homer's epics; it inspired the Metaphysical poets, most notably John Donne; it is prevalent in the Romantic poetry of William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley and is a dominant topic in the Modern and Post-modern era through poets like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Charles Bukowski. What then makes the British poet Stevie Smith unique in her poetic representations of death? Certainly, her trademark childlike fairy-tale manner of exploring death in its many forms demonstrates a rare fearlessness in the face of 'the end' – but it is also the volume of poetry Smith wrote about death that is startling. The metaphors for death in her poetic catalogue are innumerable; from mysterious friends dressed in black chiffon, to northern winds outside the kitchen window, Smith adorned death in elaborate disguises, and delivered it to her readers as the ultimate gift of emancipation from the horrors of existence.

As well as exploring the representations of death in Smith's poetry in this exegesis, I have attempted to implement some of her representations and poetics employed in their delivery in the accompanying creative component: my verse novel entitled *Killing the Jay*.

The free verse of the manuscript borrows from Smith's characteristic formal poetic techniques including sporadic irony, half-rhyme and chiming, enjambment, black humour as plot device, and short line structure. The novel is written as a series of poems divided into chapters, each poem contributing to the greater narrative. It also employs narrative devices common to the prosaic novel including action and dialogue, mainly written from a third person point of view with sections of internal narrative in the first person. In addition to formal parallels between the creative and the theoretical components, the verse novel embraces Smith's attitude toward death as a relief from suffering. The novel's protagonist experiences the death of a youthful and passionate marriage. The narrative explores the destruction and abuse of the relationship, its eventual demise, a suicide attempt, and finally the protagonist's attempted reemergence into a life beyond the suffering of the relationship and her own state of mental health.

The shared themes between Smith's poetry and my creative project are encapsulated by the protagonists' knowledge of suffering, which is resolvable only by death or an experience of extreme distance and 'otherness' in relation to human existence. In the verse novel, the protagonist herself is a poet. In Smith's poems the protagonists often dream up absurd alternatives to life which signify death, so in both cases art and imagined constructs of death become what saves each character from their suffering. This narrative of suffering caused by knowingness, driving the hero towards a will for death, and finding consolation in art resonates with Friedrich Nietzsche's description of the hero in Greek tragedy. Therefore, Nietzsche is one of the theorists I draw from in the analysis and discussion of Smith's representations of death.

Stevie Smith seemed a natural point of focus for my research. I first encountered her in 2000, in the anthology *Emergency Kit: Poems for Strange Times*,¹ and the poem was 'Black March'. It opens with the lines:

I have a friend
At the end
Of the world
His name is a breath

¹ Shapcott, Jo. and Sweeny, Matthew (eds.), *Emergency Kit: Poems for Strange Times*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, p.113

Of fresh air...²

The poem immediately appealed to my own personal views on death, and also inspired a realisation of the potential of the free verse form. This realisation occurred between the poem's first and second stanzas where Smith implements enjambment – ending one stanza with the word “breath”, and beginning the next stanza with the phrase “Of fresh air” The immediate intuitive and intellectual experience that the Imagists describe as being the ultimate poetic image in their 1911 manifesto is realised in Smith's poem by her use of the literal and physical achievement of a breath within that simple inter-stanzaic enjambment. Specifically through poetics she led her reader to the experience of “death”. These two lines, a mere eight words, were to influence my own poetry and academic interest in Stevie Smith and the free verse form. I finally understood what the *big deal* was about poetry.

Like Smith, I had my first encounter with depression relatively early when at age twelve I was diagnosed with depression. Throughout my adolescence I saw psycho-therapists. I recall developing a kind of Smithian warmth towards the idea of death during these years. It gave me comfort to know that if nothing ever improved for me, I could always *leave* the pain behind. By eighteen I had learned on my own to control the black dog, and I could go many months without depression. At a few times in my life I have relapsed, and the old promise that *this isn't forever* has entered my mind, but as an adult my responsibilities and the complexities of suicide play a large part in my not indulging in old comforts. Writing this thesis and advocating for Smith's largely socially unacceptable views on death has been, at times, a harrowing experience.

I am not alone in my appreciation of Smith. Despite her often gloomy subjects, the interest in Smith is growing. There are a small number of Doctoral and Masters dissertations internationally that use her work as one of various case studies within the contexts of feminism and death in literature. There are few Doctoral theses written solely on Smith, and very little dissection of her poetry for its structural and technical value, its place in Modernist poetry or literary lineage. The majority of Smith research is from American universities, not

² Smith, S (MacGibbon, J., ed.), *Selected Poems*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1978, p.277

surprisingly given that Smith's personal papers are held at the University of Tulsa's McFarlin Library.

My interest in Smith has developed from my initial encounter with that miraculous enjambment between the first two stanzas of 'Black March' and I have been surprised to find that the poet who gave me my own poetic view on death was highly underrated for the majority of her career. Although the academic material on Smith is slowly growing she has few staunchly devoted readers and these are mainly from the 1970s and 1980s. Smith has received considerably less attention than poets such as Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton who also wrote widely on death during the same period. Furthermore, the type of attention she has received has largely been located in the realm of literary feminist theory, and not where it deservedly should be, for her poetic proficiency. Smith has contributed numerous finely crafted poems to the modernist movement and her treatment of free verse shows the genre at its most powerful. This consideration, along with my interest in her fascination with death, inspired the topic for this exegesis.

The combined creative and theoretical components of this PhD therefore address the broader concept of the validity of free verse as an important poetic form, mainly through a close examination of Smith's poetic techniques that construct her representations of death. By selecting a poet who is not associated with a modern scholarly or artistic faction, and who worked in a relatively solitary mode – it is possible to suggest Smith's influences were *of the times*, rather than directed by connections with a union of poets or other artists such as the 'Beat' poets, the New York School, the Imagists or Vorticists. Much of my analysis of Smith's representations of death is dependent upon, and reveals the extent of the poet's marginality. Her distance from the à-la-mode poets of her time, her relative isolation in suburban London, and her love of death cast Smith into the margins from which she wrote observatory poems exploring many of the absurd dichotomies associated with human existence, society and religion. Death shows itself to be the main feature of human existence that simultaneously marginalised the poet and unified her with the world.

Despite her marginality, Smith experienced wide-ranging modern influences including the poetic and literary trends of her contemporaries, and she was also stamped by politics and society, as well as her personal and family life. Accordingly, this exegesis attempts to place

Smith in a lineage of modern poetry, based on comprehensive analysis of the poetic techniques that exist in her work and how these techniques have been discussed and applied by some of Smith's contemporaries, both in Britain and overseas.

Each of the chapters that follow is dedicated to one concentrated aspect of death-representation, as observed in Smith's body of poetic work. These are:

Chapter 1 Death of the Self: Representations of suicide, death fantasy, internality and identity deaths.

Chapter 2 Sexual Death: The female left for dead.

Chapter 3 Death to the World: Poet as armed spectator

Chapter 4 The Death Pact: How Stevie Smith's death-drive inspired the thesis' Creative Component

I have used this separation by death-theme to demonstrate Smith's broader preoccupation with the idea of impermanence – that death applies to every facet of 'being'. This becomes increasingly apparent when reviewing the poems, each of which offers a unique insight into Smith's views of the life-struggle and the ever-present tug of death. Three or four focal poems in each chapter will become primary case-studies which exemplify the related chapter topics. These case-study poems also offer a means of dissecting Smith's use of formal poetic techniques to represent notions of death and to compose poetry in the free verse style. Such an analysis offers ways to juxtapose each poem's subject and style.

The formal poetic techniques I identify and analyse in Smith's poetry have roots in the tradition of pre-modern poetry, classics, ancient song and Aristotle's *Poetics*.³ Smith was, after all, one of the most significant of Britain's twentieth century poets, but has not always been recognised as such. Her greatest significance may rest in the ways in which she responded to and made her own form or epos of free verse innovations. She was a novelist as well as a poet, first published in 1937 by Cape Publishing House in London. Despite Smith's early success and popularity in the 1940s and 1950s, there is little academic material written about her poetics. She went out of favour for a few years in the early 1960s before winning The Cholmondeley Award for Poetry in 1966 and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in

³ Aristotle, *Poetics* (Trans. S. H. Butcher), ebooks@Adelaide.com, Adelaide, 2007
<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/poetics/> (accessed July 2008)

1969. Then the 1970s saw Smith resurrected by a film depicting her life in 1978, *Stevie*, directed by Robert Enders,⁴ as well as the republication of her work by Virago Press that introduced her to a 1980s readership. Now her moderate popularity as a poet continues to be expressed through a few dedicated ‘fan-sites’⁵ on the internet. The Enders film, a biography of the same title by Jack Barbera and William McBrien⁶ and her re-printed *Selected Poems* as edited and collated by her literary executor, James MacGibbon,⁷ are the primary public posthumous artefacts relating to Smith’s life and work. Perhaps of all of these, the most intimate insight into Stevie Smith’s character can be derived from Kay Dick’s published interview with her from 1971.⁸

Crucial to a comprehensive enquiry into Smith’s body of work is the recurrent death theme. The subject of death appears in many of Smith’s poems. In its different guises, it can be viewed as the common thematic thread of her extensive catalogue of published and performed poetry. This theme is not unique to Smith, of course. Numerous writers have investigated the theme of death in great literal and poetic works. These include *Charlotte Bronte’s World of Death*,⁹ *The Pursuit of Death: A Study of Shelley’s poetry*,¹⁰ and *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death*.¹¹ While many such studies on death themes and representations in literature have foundations in philosophy, theology, health and education, linguistics, and particularly psychoanalysis, the focus of my examination of Stevie Smith’s death phenomenon will be chiefly a poetic analysis and literary study, revealing and analysing the free verse techniques Smith employs to represent notions of death.

⁴ Enders, Robert (Director) and Whitmore, Hugh (Writer): *Stevie* (film). Performed by Glenda Jackson. BBC Production, UK, 1978

⁵ Bryan, Anne, *Strange Attractor Website, Stevie Smith Biography*, <http://www.strange-attractor.co.uk/stevibio.htm>

⁶ Barbera, Jack and McBrien, William, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985

⁷ Smith, S., 1978

⁸ Dick, Kay, *Ivy and Stevie: Conversations with Ivy Compton-Burnett and Stevie Smith*, Alison and Busby, London, 1983

⁹ Keef, Robert, *Charlotte Bronte’s World of Death*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1979

¹⁰ Putnam Kurtz, B., *The Pursuit of Death: A study of Shelley’s poetry*, Octagon Books, New York, 1970

¹¹ Calderwood, J.L., *Shakespeare and the Denial of Death*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1987

In drawing correlations between the poem's voice and the poet's voice, there is a risk of assumption overriding objective formal analysis – hindering the authority of the study. As such, the body of this exegesis will attempt to rely on the formal analysis of focus poems to illustrate Smith's philosophies on death in all its guises, separate from potentially supporting biographical information.

Introduction to Smith's Place in the Free Verse Movement

Stevie Smith's free verse technique is the conceptual framework for studying her death representations. Free verse offers various interpretations in the context of her canon and is worth defining here.

An early reference to the term *free verse* occurred in documents relating to the Imagism movement. Specifically, in the preface to the 1915 Imagist anthology, partly attributed to Richard Aldington and inevitably also to Ezra Pound whose contribution is particularly noted in the list of principles.¹² This mention is particularly important to the study of English free verse because the Imagists have been isolated as the first organised English-language modern movement in literature, according to T.S. Eliot who described the group as “The point de repère usually and conveniently taken as the starting-point of modern poetry...”¹³ The group was about free verse, and wrote in the preface to their 1915 *Some Imagist Poets* anthology:

The subject of free-verse is too complicated to be discussed here. We may say briefly, that we attach the term to all that increasing amount of writing whose cadence is more marked, more definite, and closer knit than that of prose, but which is not so violently nor so obviously accented as the so-called "regular verse."¹⁴

This excerpt briefly defines free verse according to Imagist doctrine. An interesting point of note is the contrast from prose that forms the basis for this definition. In many of Smith's poems, typically prosaic techniques such as characterisation and narration are implemented in

¹² Aldington, R., *Some Imagist Poets*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1915 p.1

¹³ Brooker, Jewel Spears, *Mastery and Escape: T. S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1996, p.46

¹⁴ Aldington, R., p.1

the delivery of the death theme. These will be analysed for their strengthening of several of Smith's characteristic poetics including the childlike voice and fairytale aesthetic.

One common critique of free verse is, in fact, that it should do away with line breaks that give the appearance of formal poetry, and become poetic prose instead. This notion can be particularly attributed to W.H Auden, who noted in an interview at Swarthmore University in 1971:

There are a few people like D.H. Lawrence, who have to write in free verse. I think they are a minority. Anyone who has played a game, whether it is bridge or baseball, knows you can't play games without rules. You can make the rules what you like, but your whole fun and freedom come from working within these. Why should poetry be any different? One of the things you so often notice when looking at a lot of poems in free verse is that you can't tell one author from another, far from thinking one more original. With rules it is so much more fun because they impose some kind of metrical quality, and they often suggest all kinds of things you haven't thought of before. It does free one a bit from the fetters of oneself.¹⁵

Auden's criticism of free verse echoes Robert Frost's assertion that "Free verse is like playing tennis without a net";¹⁶ both liken poetry to sport in an effort to demonstrate a definite need for rules. Auden suggests that with boundaries, freedom ensues – a concept that may be more commonly attributed to studies in law, democracy, sociology and psychology¹⁷ than to the arts, where it may be assumed creativity and innovation are of greater value than adherence to a set of rules. For Smith, traditions of rhythm and rhyme are inherent in most of her poems. Although the poems have irregular meters, they rarely stray from the rhythmic musicality she sets up in the opening stanzas, and these rhythms are punctuated with neatly placed rhymes. Further in the interview, Auden goes on to say that in order to make good

¹⁵ Interview with W.H. Auden at Swarthmore University <http://legacy.swarthmore.edu/library/auden/1971.html> (accessed 11th July 2008)

¹⁶ Bell, Marvin, "Back at You", *Mississippi Review* Vol. 6, No.1, University of Southern Mississippi, 1977, p.23

¹⁷ Cohen-Almagor, Raphael, "Exploring The Boundaries Of Freedom", Routledge, London. 2006
<http://hcc.haifa.ac.il/~rca/articles/Book%20Description-Ethical%20Space.pdf> (accessed on October 13th 2009)

free verse a poet must have a marvellous sense of line-endings, and that without that skill he cannot understand why many free verse poems are not published as prose poems. Departing from poetic structure, one particular poetic formality that many of Smith's representations of death depend upon is metaphor, which may be too easily lost in the prose format.

According to American poet and scholar Alicia Ostriker, William Blake's 'The Argument', one of the twenty-four plates from 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' written between 1790 and 1793, is the first known example of an English language free verse poem.¹⁸ Blake's poem follows no set formality, utilising elements of spontaneous internal rhyme, an irregular meter varying between 3 and 7 stresses per line, and stanzas of altering durations. Many writers, including Philip Larkin, have directly compared Smith's sense of poetics and rhythm with Blake's poetry.¹⁹

Assuming the major argument against free verse as a valuable poetic form is based on the indiscrimination of line breaks, a discussion on where line breaks occur in Smith's poetry and the poetic effect they have on Smith's representations of death will be a significant component of the poetic analysis within this exegesis. In particular I will examine where Smith implements end-stop and enjambment for different effects to demonstrate that line breaks have more use in free verse than simply to make poetic prose take the physical appearance of a poem.

Most importantly, I aim to show the complexity of Smith's trademark techniques, particularly her use of personification, tensions between masculine and feminine constructs, the childlike voice, absurd fairytale aesthetic and political irony. All of these characteristics are central to analysing Smith's poems, and this exegesis will examine how they each function to deliver different representations of death.

Context and basis for case-studies and research fundamentals

Given Smith's reintroduction to the contemporary reader through feminist initiatives such as Virago's republishing of her work, it would be impossible to write about Smith without

¹⁸ Ostriker, Alecia (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Blake*, Penguin Classics, 1977, p.8

¹⁹ Larkin, Philip. "Stevie, Good-bye." in: Sternicht, S. *In Search of Stevie*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1991, p. 114

examining sex and gender in her poetry. Catherine Civello's feminist study of Smith's novels attempts to dialogically examine Anglo-American mimetic, political perspectives on feminist literature within French, Lacanian, linguistic and philosophical feminist perspective.²⁰ Smith herself was not a self-proclaimed feminist. Many of her female protagonists were desolate and abandoned by their men, yet Smith was one of many female writers embraced by contemporary feminists for their female-centric writing. Civello rarely mentions Smith's poetry in her paper, however on representations of 'death' in Smith's writing, Civello makes reference to the protagonist in Smith's novel, *The Holiday*, who according to Civello, is passive in her dealing with questions of ego-identity and "separation from the mother figure".²¹ Smith's protagonist suffers from emotional paralysis which overcomes her to the point of suicidal fantasy – thus exemplifying sexually-charged death-drive themes in Smith's broader body of work. This particular discussion is integral to my chapter, *Sexual Death, the Female Left for Dead*. The poems I examine in this chapter revolve around the abandoned mother and wife, the embittered old woman and the masculine personification of death. Some of these poems overlap in the *Death of the Self* chapter, where the subject is suicide and the poem's protagonist is female, or distinctly feminine in voice and tone.

Despite the contemporary wave of feminist interest in Smith during the 1980s, she never benefited from her reemergence, having died some ten years earlier in 1971. William May's paper on posthumous collections of Smith's poems juxtaposes the study of Smith's life-preoccupations with death. May points out the discrepancies between different "choosers",²² who are described as the gate-keepers of literary publication after the writer is dead; particularly analysing the choices made by Smith's literary executor, James MacGibbon. The primary question May addresses is: to what degree do MacGibbon and other choosers employ Smith's own pre-death participation in "compiling and collating this final collection of her poetry".²³ For example, May refers to the decision to place Smith's poem, 'Come Death (II)', dictated on her death-bed and the final poem she wrote, at the closing of *Selected Poems*,²⁴ rather having it appear beside 'Come Death (I)'. Much of May's concern is with posthumous representations of the poet that are expected to survive the work published during her life,

²⁰ Civello, Catherine A., "Stevie Smith's 'Ecriture Feminine': Pre-Oedipal Desires and Wartime Realities", *Mosaic (Winnipeg)* Vol. 28, 1995 (accessed on Questia.com, March 2007) p.109

²¹ Civello, C.A., p.114

²² May, William, "The Choosers: Posthumous Collections of Stevie Smith's Poetry", *The Library* 2005 6, p.321

²³ May, William, p.5

²⁴ Smith, S., 1978, p.282

since *Collected Poems* has been out of print since the 1970s. This raises questions of bias when examining her poetry from posthumous collections. Since elements of the original collections such as Smith's odd drawings, the order of the poems, and even some of her punctuation have been discarded or altered, how changed or objective is the emphasis on death in Smith's poetry in the more accessible collections? And how has this altered emphasis affected existing studies on Smith's poetry?

Allusions to the romance of the 'dead poet' also colour this debate, particularly within the period in which copyright is sustained. The dead poet as a tragic character has always been represented in literature and popular culture. An article exploring studies on the average life-span of poets in *The New York Times* in 2004 merges major research findings surrounding the most common causes of death in poets, and compares poets to other artists in terms of lifestyle and mental health. One of the article's findings suggests that twenty percent of eminent poets died by suicide, in contrast with an average of four percent in other occupations.²⁵ A supporting study concluded that "female poets are especially more likely to have shorter lives"²⁶ according to the *New York Times* article. This is congruous with what we know of female poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton both of whom took their own lives. Stevie Smith offers both despairing poetry and brushes with suicide, yet it is her acceptance of the marginality caused by her love of death that may have saved her from a suicidal death and that allowed her to express unique perspectives on the internal struggle, the female gender role, and cultural values in relation to death.

The points raised by May on posthumous collections of poetry, along with the notoriety associated with impressions held on dead (female) poets and the dark mysterious lives of poets, suggest that any in-depth analysis that seeks to contextualise a poet's work owes some consideration to how much their public image both during life and after death alters reactions to their work. The majority of the poems in this exegesis come from Smith's posthumously published *Selected Poems*, as collated and edited by James MacGibbon. As May notes, many of the drawings in *Selected Poems* are displaced or not included at all. While many poems speak for themselves, there are instances where the drawing gives insight into the poem or its

²⁵ Lee, Felicia, "Going Early Into That Good Night", *New York Times* April 24th 2004
<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/24/arts/24POET.html?ei=5007&en=68e2fc8c95b30e26&ex=1398225600&pagewanted=print&position> (accessed 2007-2009)

²⁶ Lee, Felicia, 2004

origin. For example, Smith's poem 'Conviction (iv)' written during her friendship with George Orwell begins with the lines:

I like to get off with people,
I like to lie in their arms²⁷

In their biography, Barbera and McBrien draw parallels between accounts in Orwell's biography of a sexual encounter with a woman in a park in London because they had nowhere else to go, as in Smith's poem above. The rumor was linked to Smith by Kay Dick, author of *Ivy and Stevie: Conversations and Reflections*. 'Conviction (iv)' was to be published in a collection in 1942 with an accompanying drawing of a man and woman engaged in sex outdoors with an on-looking animal.²⁸ This fuelled speculation of an affair between Orwell and Smith. Without the drawing, the poem does not infer an outdoor setting.

Wherever Smith's drawings contribute to the analysis of focus poems in this exegesis, a point will be made of identifying (and where relevant, contrasting) how the poem was presented with the drawing both in first publication and as it appears in *Selected Poems*.

Finally, it is important not to discount the oracy of Smith's poetry in deep analysis. Smith frequently attended readings and also read her poetry on BBC radio (for the first time on April 20th 1949).²⁹ In most cases, the oracy of the focus poems in this exegesis will be examined through sound techniques including rhythm, assonance and consonance, rhyme and duration.

Central to this study is the concept that death permeates the majority of Smith's poems. I will examine the links between the more metaphorical and the literal representations of death to explore how the death theme is at the core of Smith's poetics. Where-ever she explores internal struggles, love, sexuality and feminism, social issues and cultural resistance, there is death – either personified as a mysterious lover or a god, or disguised through absurd metaphor, or offered as an absolute solution. Death was Smith's greatest poetic crutch and it seems that these representations of *the end* are what sustained her in life. Her acceptance of

²⁷ Smith, S., 1978, p. 99

²⁸ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p. 139

²⁹ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.165

the strangeness of her obsession with death manifests in the numerous ways in which she advocated for it, relied upon it, shape shifted it into whatever would most convincingly deliver it to her readers. The chapters that follow will show that Smith's politics and religion and romance were all tied up in her love of death.

CHAPTER ONE

Death of the Self:

Suicide, Internal Death and Fantasy

Stevie Smith once confessed to having a bizarre obsession with the death of the self. This obsession is evidenced in numerous of her poems as well as personal documents, letters to friends and in interview with Kay Dick.³⁰ Death, which Smith called her “friend at the end of the world,”³¹ manifests itself in countless metaphoric guises throughout her poetic catalogue. Suicide takes many different forms, according to Smith’s metaphors – it represents ultimate escape in her poem ‘Come, Death (I)’, and allows freedom from all the tethers that connect an individual to reality in a sense of absolution from all of life’s suffering. Smith’s poems about these desires for freedom from suffering are connected by a will to depart from life rather than a will to solve life’s torment within the frameworks of realism. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche states that:

The true knowledge, the glimpse into the cruel truth overcomes the driving motive to act, both in Hamlet as well as in the Dionysian man.

Now no consolation has any effect. His longing goes out over the world, even beyond the gods themselves, toward death. Existence is denied, along with the blazing reflection in the gods or an immortal afterlife. In the consciousness of once having glimpsed the truth man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of being...³²

³⁰ Dick, K., 1983

³¹ From *Black March*, Smith, S., 1978, p.61

³² Nietzsche Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy* (trans. Douglas Smith), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000 , p.

The objectiveness of knowing that is associated with marginality caused by a lifelong devotion to death is central to reading Smith's poetry and is the foundational idea in chapter three, 'Death to the World: Poet as armed spectator'. Knowing the chronic depression that a lifelong devotion to death entails is concurrent with Nietzsche's description of "true knowledge", and Smith's longing for death, it could be argued, is comparable with the Dionysian man and Hamlet. Further, Ruth Baumert in her essay 'Fear, Melancholy and Loss in the Poetry of Stevie Smith', notes that: "Speaking the abject or horror is a way of coming to grips with it rather than being controlled by it."³³ The absurd is a thing Smith approaches using irony and fairytale in her metaphors for death.

Nietzsche continues his exploration of the longing for death in relation to art:

...Here the will in the highest danger. Thus to be saved, it comes close to the healing magician, art. Art alone can turn those thoughts of disgust at the horror or absurdity of existence into imaginary constructs which permit living to continue. These constructs are the Sublime as the artistic mastering of the horrible and the Comic as the artistic release from the disgust at the absurd.³⁴

Smith's own affection for death will be discussed for its absurd and playful manifestations in later chapters, however by contrast, this chapter illustrates some of the more sombre explorations of the death-drive that occurs in her poetry. In order to appreciate Smith's more comic representations of death, it is imperative to investigate her private relationship with the subject, paying particular consideration to poems in which death is described in the first-person voice.

³³ Baumert, Ruth. "Fear, Melancholy, and Loss in the Poetry of Stevie Smith" in: Kutzbach, Kostanze. and Mueller, Monika (eds.), *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, Rodopi B.V, Amsterdam, 2007, pp. 198-199

³⁴ Nietzsche, F., 2000, p.36

To introduce the abundance of representations of the death of the self in her poetry a brief biographical examination shows the scope of Smith's strange attachment to the notion of dying, from a first encounter with the possibility of her own death in early childhood to suicide attempts later during her working life. A biographical investigation into Smith's character reveals the inner workings of a highly sensitive poet, perhaps as misunderstood as the man who "always loved larking" in her poem 'Not Waving but Drowning'.³⁵ To Smith, death was not some intangible philosophy she observed objectively. Instead, it was a deeply personal relationship she held near and depended upon. This relationship with death will be exemplified via a number of case-study poems throughout the rest of this chapter, with a strong eye for the free verse style and the poetic techniques that Smith employed to deliver her perspectives on the death of the self to her readers through a series of animated poetic voices.

Smith is sometimes described as a confessional poet and much insight into her personal convictions, history and psychology can be drawn from her poems. A certain catharsis reveals itself in the freeing power of death that emerges in many of her poems on the death of the self. Just as Nietzsche asserts, the suffering of the horror and absurdity of life is reconciled with imaginary constructs of a desired death which, it could be argued, was what saved Smith from a suicidal death like that of so many other female poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She created characters to communicate many of her feelings on death, some of which are literal or based in fact. 'Not Waving but Drowning', for instance, was written after Smith saw a newspaper article describing a drowning incident,³⁶ and others employ irony and naive imaginings, such as 'If I Lie Down'.³⁷

To contextualise Smith's representations of "death of the self", I make reference to other poets and writers whose work may assist in placing Smith in a canon of poetic thinkers on suicide and the experience of dying. Having lived through two World Wars as a female poet in suburban London and the psychology such a life-history entails, Smith has a unique place amongst English-language poets who wrote on dying and suicide. The metaphors for death that emerge in her poems are reminiscent of the metaphysical poets of the 17th Century, for

³⁵ Smith, S., 1978, p.167

³⁶ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.186

³⁷ Smith, S., 1978, p.98

example, points of contrast and contextual placement appear in very early examples of the personification of death by John Donne, particularly in the poem 'Death be not Proud'. Connections also exist between Smith's metaphorical representations of death of the self and her early-career contemporaries including a modern poem by e.e cummings, as well as the suicide poems penned by her late-career American contemporaries Sylvia Plath and Ann Sexton.

To explain why Smith's poetic 'death of the self' is the predominant theme throughout her work, one is naturally directed to the poet's personal life. According to the Barbera and McBrien biography, *Stevie*, Smith's preoccupation with death can be traced back to her childhood. As an adult, Smith admitted that an early relationship with the notion that one could take one's own life inspired much of her poetry.³⁸ She was often ill as a child, and when she contracted tuberculosis at age five she was sent away to a sanatorium where she stayed intermittently for a few years. In protest, at age eight, Smith stopped eating with the idea that the suffering might end if she died. When she did not die immediately, she abandoned that phase, but it could be surmised that the idea of death as a relief from suffering is likely to have established itself as a constant in the poet's psyche at that point. This attraction to the death of the self became a recurrent theme in Smith's work, and the poet's pleas in her final work 'Come Death (II)'³⁹ became her resounding last words to her readership.

Other than her explorations through poetry, Smith had a second life experience with suicide as an adult. It is well documented in her biographies that on July 1st 1953, Smith cut her wrists at the office where she was employed as a publishing house's secretary. In letters from her recovery bed to Kay Dick she wrote: "I am a Nervous Wreck, it appears, also anaemic. Hurra!..."⁴⁰ This kind of displaced joviality is found in much of Smith's poetry. In dealing with death, she is prone to paint a picture of despair with little emotion or drama, sometimes in a childlike voice, other times as happy sarcasm. Even deeply personal reflections are expressed matter-of-factly; "Why dost thou dally, Death, and tarry on the way?"⁴¹

³⁸ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.19

³⁹ Smith, S., 1978, p.282

⁴⁰ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.189

⁴¹ Smith, S., 1978, p.70

On the wrist-cutting at work, Barbera and McBrien assert that it was most certainly a suicide attempt and that the fact that it occurred in her office showed that the stress of working was the biggest driving factor in the attempt.⁴² Certainly many interviews and poems written both prior to and after the incident suggest Smith had a severe dislike of having to work. As a result of the incident her doctor ordered that she stop working all together a month after she cut her wrists, much to the poet's relief, marking the beginning of Smith's fulltime career of writing and reviewing. The incident itself can be seen as an irrational act of desperation, not dissimilar to the childhood experience of attempting to starve herself in that it was done in protest, with a view to being freed from an unbearable situation. This emancipation by death manifests in most of Smith's poetry on the death of the self and sexual death, sometimes explicitly, such as in 'Mr Over'⁴³ (discussed later in this chapter), and sometimes implicitly, disguised by metaphor as observed in the poem 'Lightly Bound'⁴⁴ (which I discuss in chapter two, 'Sexual Death'). The unmistakable voice of the child-savant, recognising the healing power of death, engaged in absurdist alternative universes to assuage the suffering of reality, resonates through many of Smith's poems. Despite the stylistic strength of these lighter representations of surreal death, it could be argued that some of Smith's most effective poems on dying are the ones in which the poet desists from her trademark sarcasm and ambiguity, and strikes at the truth of the emotions and fantasies that drive her death obsession.

It is possible that Smith's personal confrontations with mortality were not always as brave and determined as the poet would have us believe, and in her poetry we find one example of an apparent cry for help by way of suicide. Smith's most famous poem, 'Not Waving But Drowning' first published in a collection of the same title⁴⁵ and written in 1953 (the same year as her workplace suicide attempt), is probably the most appropriate introduction to Smith's explorations of the death of the self. The poem exemplifies one of Smith's most frequently expressed attitudes towards death that may be associated with her life-experiences in childhood and adulthood. But the poem also challenges romanticised suicide in many of her other works. The poem evokes a series of inherent questions about death, the dying, and the dead.

⁴² Smith, S., 1978, p.189

⁴³ Smith, S., 1978, p.144

⁴⁴ Smith, S., 1978, p.148

⁴⁵ Smith, Stevie, *Not Waving But Drowning*, Deutsch, London, 1957

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.⁴⁶

The reader confronts the question: How does a dead man moan? The contradiction offers more than one possible metaphoric interpretation. Perhaps the colloquial “dead man” is hopeless or doomed to die, or perhaps it simply implies that the protagonist’s death speaks of isolation and a life-time of sadness, therefore these curious lines in the poem in dead man’s voice are not literal:

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.⁴⁷

It is uncharacteristic for Smith’s representations of death to appear in such an ambiguous way. Her dealings with death are usually brusquely expressed through tangible imagery. Smith rarely makes concessions for the death of the self with sentimentality or suggestions of an after-life nor does she pay tribute to the dead one’s life-legacy as she does in this poem. For Smith death is finality, the complete end for the protagonist’s suffering. The emergence of ambiguity that balances between life and death in ‘Not Waving But Drowning’, appearing as it does immediately after her own suicide attempt raises questions about how the despairing desperately cry out. This poem suggests that suicide is not only a personal relief from the struggles of life as Smith most often recommends in her poems – but that it acts as a form of communication, a way for the sufferer to express her or his plight to the world, giving him a voice he did not have in life. The common belief that a suicide attempt is a cry for attention or help⁴⁸ is allowed some credence in ‘Not Waving But Drowning’, which may

⁴⁶ Smith, S., 1978, p.167

⁴⁷ Smith, S., 1978, p.167

⁴⁸ Caruso, Kevin, “Suicide Myths”, <http://www.suicide.org/suicide-myths.html> (accessed October 15th, 2008)

be more acceptable to the general public than Smith's absolutes. Perhaps this helps to explain the popularity of 'Not Waving but Drowning' above Smith's other works.

Did Smith have a lapse of faith in death as the ultimate saviour, perhaps due to her own unsuccessful suicide attempt, but which resulted in relief from the job that caused her grief?

⁴⁹ Even if this speculation has some legitimacy, we see from later poems, including 'Come Death (II)' that Smith's dedication to death as the ultimate saviour was eventually restored.

The great narrative strength of 'Not Waving but Drowning' rests in its alternation between first and third person in the first and third stanzas, the two key speakers in the poem can be identified as an onlooker-narrator and the "dead man". Smith's use of irregular meter (a common trait in her body of work) is achieved predominantly through varying line durations and consistent use of end-stop. This has the effect of clearly defining pauses and maintaining strong control over the otherwise intuitive rhythm. Combined with the use of internal chiming (particularly in the 1st line, 3rd stanza) and half rhymes (*moaning/drowning*), the overall result is haunting verse, aurally mimicking the rhythm and sound of the ocean. This forms the framework for the underlying message and meaning of the poem, which diverts attention back to the initial examination of Smith's philosophy on death and particularly death of the self: that death is a relief from the suffering of human existence. The third line in the second stanza offers insight into the assumptions of onlookers – the idea that one isolated event might be the causal factor for death of the self. The dead man's adamant repetition "no no no", the assertion in his own voice that he was "too far out all my life" points to a kind of innate sensitivity to life's suffering. Like Nietzsche's description of the Dionysian man and Hamlet, Smith's dead man has glimpsed the cruel truth of existence, the contrast being the dead man's drive to cry out his knowledge.

Smith's poetry is widely recognised for its mischievous sense of irony and its naïve voice in the treatment of dark themes. This light-hearted approach does not manifest through the poem stylistically, however it is paid some tribute in the second stanza, "He always loved larking/And now he's dead". Then in the third stanza, the dead man reveals he had always

⁴⁹ Later in this chapter, 'Come Death (II)' is discussed. In this poem written on Smith's death bed, she uses the line "Ah me, Sweet Death, you are the only god".

felt the water was “too cold” and that he was “too far out”. This is an integral lesson that should be applied when reading Smith’s more jovial poems on death. Where ever the poet employs larking to deliver imaginary constructs of death as an alternative to the suffering of existence, the message communicated is derived from a very sombre internal origin.

‘If I Lie Down’ offers an example of Smith’s characteristically childlike voice in the exploration of the death of the self. The simple, naive irony of this short verse is a trait that will appear more frequently in the following chapters about representations of other types of death in Smith’s poetry.

If I lie down upon my bed I must be here,
But if I lie down in my grave I must be elsewhere.⁵⁰

‘If I Lie Down’ appears in *Collected Poems* above one of Smith’s notorious accompanying “doodles”. The drawing depicts a bald person dressed in the kind of cover-all body suit a baby might wear, standing on a rug in a bedroom. The furnishings in the bedroom include a bed, a chair, a window, a picture frame and a crucifix on the wall. The person appears tentative, with his or her small frown, arms down and hands slightly splayed – presenting the character’s state of indecision. The window in the drawing looks as though it may be open, and the person’s head is cocked slightly toward it. The crucifix appears on the opposite side to the window. Laura Severin, author of *Stevie Smith’s Resistant Antics*, notes that:

The poems, so often end-stopped by their drawings, would seem to suggest that escape is impossible. And yet the poems and drawings work together to show that imaginative escape is possible, since Smith brings in other forms of culture: Whitman, Dickinson, and Turner all offer “windows of escape” through death, through nature, through art.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Smith, S., 1978, p.98

⁵¹ Severin, Laura, *Stevie Smith’s Resistant Antics*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1997, p.63

Indeed, in the literal window in the drawing that accompanies 'If I Lie Down' appears to lead to the "elsewhere" mentioned in the poem – a way out of the confines of "here".

The contradictions in the drawing (is the character an old person or a baby?) can be applied to the contradictory simplicity of the poem. The realisation that there exists a contradiction in the physical world, where the act of lying down signifies life or death is posed as an obvious juxtaposition of symbolic imagery in the lone couplet. The first line is expressed simply, with the tone of a children's bedtime nursery-rhyme. As Christopher Ricks notes in his chapter 'Stevie Smith: The art of sinking in poetry':

Perhaps it is not that children are more like adults than is generally assumed in that both can imagine death, but in that neither can (though it is the adult who can imagine the unimaginability of death). Imagination Dead Imagine intones the greatest of these modern writers who are grateful, as Stevie Smith was, to believe that there is no such thing as eternal life.⁵²

The repetition in the second line of "If I lie down" continues the nursery-rhyme aesthetic, but it is quickly broken by the image of the grave, the half-rhyming (*here/elsewhere*) where a regular end-rhyme should appear, and the extra beat that extends the duration of the second line. These cues alert the potential reader to a more sinister message beyond the literal one – the key question posed, perhaps, being: Where is "elsewhere"? In this poem, Smith does, in fact, allude to an afterlife.

In the following chapter on Sexual Death, more examples of Smith's nursery-rhyme and fairytale style of poetry dealing with mature, challenging themes will be discussed. The use of nursery-rhyme aesthetics in 'If I Lie Down' resonates with Nietzsche's assertion that the comic becomes the artistic release from the absurd. Smith takes this idea a step further in many of her poems by reclaiming the absurd through fairytale metaphors for death as a desirable release from the cruelty of human existence. Her approach is, at times, reminiscent of the Brothers Grimm fairytales of the 1800s, and the reviews that followed the Grimm's

⁵² Ricks, Christopher, "Stevie Smith: The Art of Sinking in Poetry" Rpt. in: Sternicht, S. *In Search of Stevie*, p.202

initial publications which suggested they were not suitable for children due to their inclusion of sexual and violent themes.⁵³ The major obvious difference between the Brothers Grimm and Smith is that Smith's poetry was never intended for a children's readership. She uses the childlike voice to a different effect. In 'If I Lie Down', for example, the innocent voice has the effect of a diversion, immediately setting a scene of a child's bedtime, an image with connotations of safety, family, quietness and routine. Then with a quick, subtle switch from the literal image of lying down in bed to lying down in a grave, and the following vague and ethereal subtext in the unfitting rhymed word "elsewhere", she suddenly takes the poem elsewhere, evoking feelings of uncertainty, coldness, fear and a universal end.

'Black March' offers more somber treatments of the death of the self, closer in tone to 'Not Waving But Drowning'. Aside from Smith's abandonment of humour and irony in the poem, Smith has used a kind of ethereal personification to express the intimacy of the speaker's relationship with the concept of death. This personification of death occurs in several other poems including 'Tender Only To One', 'Death Came To Me', and 'Do Take Muriel Out'.⁵⁴ The ethereal nature of the personification of death that appears in 'Black March' is consistent with Smith's gesturing towards death as God in other poems that are discussed in this chapter. The voice in the poem asserts a kind of absolute faith in the 'Black March' character, despite never having seen his face or known his real name. His place being at "the end of the world" also signifies a godlike character.

'Black March' reads as a portrait, the first stanza dedicated to the speaker introducing her "friend" to the reader, the following three stanzas describing this friend's mysterious physicality, and the incorporation of his speech. Further to being on the extremely somber end of Smith's poetic spectrum (perhaps even more so than 'Not Waving But Drowning'), 'Black March' is also one of her more personal engagements with the death theme. The consistent implementation of enjambment through the first two stanzas aids the fluidity of the diary-like internal narrative:

⁵³ Tatar, Maria, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2003, pp.15-16 (According to Tatar, the particular reviewer who recommended the Grimms' book was not for children was Friedrich Rühs in his article in 1815.)

⁵⁴ Smith, S., 1978, p.61, 38, 136

I have a friend
At the end
Of the world.
His name is a breath

Of fresh air.
He is dressed in
Grey chiffon. At least
I think it is chiffon.
It has a
Peculiar look, like smoke.⁵⁵

Combined with the brief, three to six syllables per line, the first two stanzas are reminiscent of the haiku form, which leads the reader to contextual cues of nature, observation, and meditation – setting the mood and foreshadowing the seasonal imagery to come in later stanzas.

In the spirit of free verse, an inconsistent rhyme-combination appears in ‘Black March’. The poem opens with end rhyme (*friend / end*). The end rhyme in the third stanza is more palpable (*place / face*). This nursery-rhyme style end-rhyme is typical of Smith’s poetry, usually with the effect of providing relief through irony in representations of the horror and absurdity of existence. In ‘Black March’, however, Smith uses the nursery-rhyme modality to break up the description of a dark and mysterious personification of death with a sense of calm and safety through the scattered, simple rhymes.

Death personified appears in several other of Smith’s poems. In ‘Death Came to Me’,⁵⁶ death appears as a charming mysterious character, presenting the voice in the poem with alternative ways to suicide. Again, in ‘Tender Only to One’ Smith talks of dedication to a mysterious romantic character, using imagery and semantics commonly associated with love poems – particularly the picking of petals on a flower to find clues to a lover’s identity. ‘Black March’ is perhaps the most overt character sketch of the group of death-personified poems. Central to

⁵⁵ Smith, S., 1978, p.277

⁵⁶ Smith, S., 1978, p.38

the poem is the surrender of the dominant speaker to a death that is a kind of dark knight: powerful, romantic, and most of all, godlike.

Whereas the other poems wherein death is represented as a person tend to indicate a relationship to the death character, and show his (always a male character) interaction with the dominant speaker in the poem, 'Black March' is so called after the name the main voice of the poem has given to death, and gives detailed description of his physicality and how he appears to her. The directness of this approach with personal evocations of friendship, the end of the world and the freshness of change may play on the reader's emotional response more effectively than some of the other examples of Smith's death-personified poems.

The personification of death is not unique to Smith's dealings with the subject. John Donne personified death in 'Death Be Not Proud', from the *Holy Sonnets* in the seventeenth century.⁵⁷ Contrastingly, Donne's poem dismisses death as a religious eternal awakening, and the quest to abolish the mystery and power death carries in the minds of many people. Smith's references to death as a person are quite the opposite, submitting gladly to 'his' finality and embracing the romanticised embodiment. But which poet expresses the lesser fear of death? Both poets embrace death in their poems to some extent – Donne through religion, and Smith through cynical anticipations of avoiding eternal life. Perhaps the answer is found in the tone and semantics prevalent in each poem. In 'Black March', Smith uses soothing phrases such as "I have a friend" at the beginning of the opening stanza, and the refrain "Breath of fresh air", repeated three times throughout the poem, and a most amorous description of the eyes "As pretty and bright / As raindrops on black twigs / In March..." These images combined, though, result in a beautiful, haunting poem.

Donne's expression, on the other hand, is scornful, addressing Death directly with lines that cut even from the first two lines of the first quatrain "Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so". Certainly from the antagonistic tone of Donne's sonnet a kind of resistance to the notion of death demonstrates a passion for life. This is not at all present in Smith's late-winter landscape where 'Black March' is the shadowy beloved.

⁵⁷ "Representations of Death in Poetry." <http://library.thinkquest.org/16665/art2.htm> (accessed October, 2008)

Contextually, it is important to note that Donne's poem is in the sonnet form, whereas Smith was not bound by a regimented iambic pentameter, regular end rhymes and fourteen lines. The flexibility in free verse to extend phrasing and apply rhyme where it might contribute to the softness of the poem's underlying tone is indispensable in 'Black March'. Smith's dedication to the relief of life from death is overwhelming in strength when put against this classic example of death-personified by Donne. We realise there is no preaching in Smith's representations of death of the self, only deeply personal reflection and the depiction of a very real relationship to the notion of death. This highlights the relevancy of the personification technique as a valid and effective means for dealing with death of the self.

More relevant to Smith's era, Anne Sexton also personified death in sections of her poem on the suicide of Sylvia Plath, 'Sylvia's Death'.⁵⁸ Particularly resonating in the parenthesised phrases, are Sexton's references to "our boy", the word "our" appearing always in italics, as if to infer a secret pact between the poet and her friend. This kind of intimate personification of death in Sexton's poem can be strongly likened to Smith's own death-personification in poems like 'Black March'. The key point of dissimilarity between 'Black March' and 'Sylvia's Death' is the consistency of voice in each poem. Whereas Smith maintains the relationship with death is like the relationship with a well-drawn character, Sexton alternates between the "our boy" refrain, and a series of more universal (not personified) representations of death, for example from lines fifteen to thirty-two in 'Sylvia's Death':

Thief --
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
the death we said we both outgrew,
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,
the one we talked of so often each time
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,
the death that talked of analysts and cures,
the death that talked like brides with plots,
the death we drank to,

⁵⁸ Sexton, A. *Sylvia's Death*, (first published 1963)

the motives and the quiet deed?
(In Boston
the dying
ride in cabs,
yes death again,
that ride home
with *our* boy.)⁵⁹

Here we see the switch from a number of universal incarnations of death, from a philosophy the two poets discussed (up to the parentheses), to the brief reference to death as “our boy” (within the parentheses). Even the illusive representation in the words “our boy” do not quite match the commitment to death’s humanness in Smith’s rolling narrative on her friend ‘Black March’ and her connection to him. The stressed point of contrast here is on the detail given to the physical and ethereal attributes of the death characters. Even the conversational deliverance in Sexton’s poem, however intimate, allows for the externalisation of conjuring the death character, whereas Smith’s ‘Black March’ is grounded in sensual imagery of the internal and the utmost private fantasy.

The broader note of interest is the preoccupation with death these three female poets of the same era shared: Plath as the suicide subject of Sexton’s poem, who throughout ‘Sylvia’s Death’ expresses jealousy that her friend indulged in the death-wish they both had, and Smith as the primary case-study of a poet obsessed with death. Why should it be that the most observable connection between several eminent female English language poets of the Twentieth Century is a preoccupation with suicide?

Although the personified death usually appeared in Smith’s poems as a suicidal romantic fantasy character, like Donne’s sonnet, and, as suggested earlier in the discussion on ‘Black March’, the character she created also occasionally had roots in religion. On her death bed, Smith wrote about death of the self as a relief from terminal illness, and here we see a more firm and final releasing of God in favour of death.

⁵⁹ Sexton, Anne. “Sylvia’s Death” (poem), <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/annesexton/599> (accessed October 15th 2008)

‘Come, Death (I)’ and ‘Come Death (II)’ are about the death of the self, where death is referred to as an autonomous being, with nuances of godliness and the reprieve from eternal life. These characteristics are evident from the first stanza of ‘Come, Death (I)’, through the pleading tone and the capitalisation of “Death”:

Why dost thou dally, Death, and tarry on the way?

When I have summoned thee with prayers and tears, why dost thou stay?

*Come, Death, and carry now my soul away.*⁶⁰

It should be noted that ‘Come, Death (I)’ was not published in *New Selected Poems*. The two poems only appear in the same publication in *Collected Poems*, but not as a sequence. ‘Come Death (II)’ was famously written upon her death bed, its brief two stanzas, nine and ten syllables per line (with the exception of the line ending “you know,” which reads like a tired sigh) contrast vastly from the argumentative joust against the Church in ‘Come, Death (I)’. The two poems can be juxtaposed to show whether Smith changed her steadfast dealings with death in her final hours.

Since the two poems share a title, the title becomes the first point of comparison. The overall resignation in ‘Come Death (II)’ suggests the title is literal – a definite request for death to come. This is confirmed in the final line of both stanzas, particularly with the refrain “Come, Death,” with a proceeding request for action: “and carry me away”, “Do not be slow”. ‘Come Death (I)’ begins with a similar instructive voice, a plea for death to come in the opening two stanzas. However, the voice in these two stanzas does not have the immediacy of the voice in ‘Come Death (II)’, the plea may be interpreted as a hindsight struggle for understanding the purpose of life. Particular attention to the first two lines of the first stanza suggest a longevity in the quest to die, death’s “dallying” and “tarrying” “along the way” indicate time passing. The summons by “prayers and tears”, too, indicates more than one isolated incident of praying and crying for death.

The closing couplet of ‘Come Death (I)’ suggests that the poem as a whole is intended to be taken philosophically rather than literally. The poem becomes increasingly more focused on notions of fear and the impotency of life, than on the immediate will to die. This change is

⁶⁰ Smith, S., 1978, p.70

introduced in the third stanza that moves from directly addressing the death character for answers, to a commentary on the broader context of death according to Christianity:

How foolish are the words of the old monks,
In Life remember Death.
Who would forget
Thou closer hangst on every finished breath?
How vain the work of Christianity⁶¹

Considering all this, it is possible to conclude that the title ‘Come, Death (I)’ is not solely meant to imply an immediate action. Rather, it may be read to mean “in the event that death should come”, or “when death comes to all people”, or “do not fear death’s coming”. Contrastingly, ‘Come Death (II)’ can certainly be read in the literal sense – a request for death to come now:

I feel ill. What can the matter be?
I’d ask God to have pity on me,
But I turn to the one I know, and say:
Come, Death, and carry me away.⁶²

Generally, suicide fantasy and God (particularly the Christian God) have been mutually exclusive in discussion – the admonishment of suicide by Christian doctrine as a sin results in the automatic rejection of alternative spiritual views on self-death as in much of Smith’s writing on the subject. This is noted in both ‘Come, Death (I)’, where the entire third stanza is dedicated to argument against the Christian sentiment on death, and Come ‘Death (II)’ where Smith states unequivocally that death is the true God:

Ah me, sweet Death, you are the only god
Who comes as a servant when he is called, you know,
Listen then to this sound I make, it is sharp,
Come, Death, Do not be slow.⁶³

⁶¹ Smith, S., 1978, p.70

⁶² Smith, S., 1978, p.282

⁶³ Smith, S., 1978, p.282

These are not the only poems in Smith's body of work on death as God. In chapter three, *Death of the World*, the internal struggle becomes political and Smith's critical commentary of orthodoxy, death and God shows the poet to be consistent in her defiance of traditional approaches to death.

Smith was not the only poet of her time to elicit the contradictions of Christian doctrine in support of the argument for a suicidal death. Anne Sexton, in her poem 'Suicide Note', likens her desire to die before she is aged and sick to Jesus seeking out death in Jerusalem:

Once upon a time
my hunger was for Jesus.
O my hunger! My hunger!
Before he grew old
he rode calmly into Jerusalem
in search of death.⁶⁴

This excerpt is from the fifth stanza of Sexton's poem. Later, in the seventh stanza, she refers to her own will to die before she encounters old age and disease. The parallel between her death-wish and Jesus' fate is not posed in a refrain, which might have implied arrogance of comparing oneself to Jesus or to a god. Rather, Sexton paraphrases the biblical parallel, offering the suggestion that the speaker in the poem is inspired by Jesus' intentional/suicidal journey towards a foreshadowed and youthful death. This in itself is an inferred criticism of Christianity's views of suicide. Sexton's implication that Jesus' death was a suicide is perhaps equally as extreme as Smith's more explicit argument against the orthodox repugnance about it.

Sexton stops short of calling death her god, unlike Smith in 'Come Death (II)', and overall, Sexton takes a far more traditional approach to her representations of God and Christianity. In the above stanza, there is a familiarity and acceptance of the notion of Jesus, and an adherence to the conventionality of the narrative surrounding Him, despite Sexton's alternative translation of the dogma. Contrastingly, Smith addresses Christianity with a

⁶⁴ Sexton, Anne. "Sylvia's Death" (poem), <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/annesexton/599> (accessed October 15th 2008)

distant, flippant tone, casting off the traditional dogma as “vain” and “foolish”, asserting a refusal to work within the frameworks of the teachings of the Church.

Although in her dealings with death Smith often casts off Christian belief, as in these examples, other poetic evidence to support the common belief that the poet’s agnosticism was, at times, a struggle. For example, in the series of short poems titled ‘Conviction (I)’ through to ‘Conviction (IV)’⁶⁵ Smith conveys a trust in the Christian faith as it is manifested through ordinary life experiences. However, typical to Smith’s use of poetic irony, in the context of other more scathing poems on the Church, combined with themes in these poems of sex and chimera, it is ambiguous as to what extent these poems are reliant on literal representation to deliver their true meaning. At least it is possible to conclude that in Smith’s poems, the representations of the Church and organised Christianity were most often replaced by unique spirituality. Also integral to her writings on the desire for the death of the self, God is most often replaced by Death.

Replacing God with Death is not unique only to Smith’s poetry. During the first half of the 20th Century, for example, e.e. cummings asks at the end of his poem ‘Buffalo Bill’s’: “How do you like your blueeyed boy / Mister Death” – presenting strong imagery of death as the protagonist’s divine keeper in the after life. Smith’s poem ‘Mr Over’ continues the discussion on themes of death personified, and death as God:

Mr Over is dead
He died fighting and true
And on his tombstone they wrote
Over to You.

And who pray is this You
To whom Mr Over is gone?
Oh if we only knew that
We should not do wrong.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Smith, S., 1978, pp.98-99

⁶⁶ Smith, S., 1978, p.144

Smith does not assert directly that death is God, as she does in 'Come Death (II)'. In fact, this poem may be read as a poem on God, rather than a poem on death, up until the final couplet where a devil encourages the death drive represented in the stanza immediately before it: "And a devil's voice cried: Happy / Happy the dead." Cues in the first four stanzas that allude to God include the repetition of the word "You" with capitalisation, and the juxtaposing of the "We should do no wrong" and "We all of us..." with the vast, inexplicable "You", as well as the reference to "our father". This is one implied character in the poem. Contrasting Sexton's poem, the character of 'Mr Over' may be representative of Jesus and by example all people, having died "fighting and true" then returning to "You" (God). The image that the voice in the poem is being spoken to from above to follow "where he has led" speaks to the inner death-drive of the individual. The implied biblical references in this poem will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three, 'Death of the World'. However these questions about divinity form a context for the more striking element of 'Mr Over', which is the tempting nature of the inner death-drive, the way the speaker is seduced by the uncertainty of the afterlife. The focus is on the speaker's desire for answers on the death of the self, rather than on the answers themselves.

An alternate reading of 'Mr Over', setting aside all religious connotations, might simply translate to: Mr. No-longer Alive. In this case, Smith may be commenting on the insignificance of the dead one, and giving weight to death itself instead. This idea resonates in the third and fourth stanzas, if the "You" is taken to be a godlike death, particularly in the lines how vast death is in comparison to our understanding of it/him: "A sea-drop in a bucket / Taken from the ocean".

Amongst the ambiguity of 'Mr Over', in the fifth stanza we find the clarity of a death-wish, and in it, an implied madness. The voices softly above the protagonist's head mimicking the voice inside her/his heart that summons the death of self are haunting in their direction to "Follow / Where he has led". The following reference to the devil's voice is reminiscent of historical representations of suicide being the devil's work.⁶⁷ Is Smith inferring a kind of madness related to being possessed by the devil? Or, is the devil symbolic of an indulgence she is associating with the will to die, and therefore acknowledging a degree of shame is involved in the death-wish? In this sense, it is the personal devil, the devil on one's shoulder

⁶⁷ Murray, Alexander, *Suicide in the Middle Ages: Volume 2*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p.317

that is referenced, rather than the antithesis of the god the poet may be exploring in the earlier part of the poem.

Interestingly, e.e. cummings' poem 'Buffalo Bill's', also uses the title "Mister" in the portrayal of a godlike death. Both poems open with an introduction to the death of the title-character in the first two lines. Like Smith's poem, cummings pays tribute to the vast absolution of death, however, cummings' approach is to contrast a great historical soldier with the far superior death that conquered him. Smith chooses to begin with a modest man, who is yet fighting and true, paralleling the character of Buffalo Bill, and goes on to show his fragility and helplessness under the great death-god.

Smith's explorations of death of the self mark her out as one of the Twentieth Century's most metaphoric writers. Not for her gauzy playfulness of landscape, or close study of love, but because Smith tussled with death in most of her work, arguing with it, classifying it, begging it, calling it forth, identifying with it. It was as though she was engaged in a life-struggle from that early childhood acquisition, and the power of being able to call forth death to her final acceptance.

In summary, Smith's sometimes somber poetic voice, which appears in 'Not Waving But Drowning', 'Black March', 'Come Death (I)' and 'Come Death (II)', has been introduced as less characteristic of Smith's tone and style than the more childlike poetic voice of 'If I Lie Down'. 'Not Waving but Drowning' demonstrates Smith's flexibility for acknowledging within the text that suicide can be as much a method of communication as it is a personal end to suffering. The poem is unique to Smith's body of work because it dwells in the grey-area between life and death, and the cried for help that should not be ignored, rather than a complete, certain death which occurs in most of Smith's other poems on death of the self. The suggestion that suicide may be seen as a cry for help within 'Not Waving but Drowning' offers a more socially accepted view of the taboo, and accounts for its popularity over those of Smith's poems which glorified the notion of the death-wish.

We find that Smith's death, compared to the death in the work of other poets, is a deeply engaging character that haunts and seduces and is embraced. The personification approach to death introduced the point raised in this chapter on death as God. Crucial to this discussion were Smith's poems 'Come, Death (I)' and 'Come Death (II)'. Smith's tendency to exchange

the Christian notion of God with her own notion of death is referenced specifically in ‘Come, Death (I)’, where Smith bluntly dismisses Christianity’s teachings on life and death as nonsense. This antipathy to Christian belief does not occur in all of Smith’s poetry, suggesting she had not abandoned the religion entirely, only in her dealings with death does she often cast off religion in favour of her dedication to her own philosophies on death.

In a vaguer poem on God and death, the case-study ‘Mr Over’ continues the discussion, contrasting from the dismissal of God in ‘Come, Death (I)’ and ‘Come Death (II)’. Despite this subtler approach, the depiction of the death wish and siding with the devil’s whispers strengthens the argument that Smith was liable to put her concept of death above the Christian God.

This chapter also introduced Smith’s trademark: the childlike voice. In the short verse ‘If I Lie Down’ the effectiveness of the diversion of Smith’s childlike speaker. By using an innocent tone, the somber underlying questions about death are masked in (initially) simple, familiar images. The catharsis of light-hearted imaginary constructs of disillusionment and questions about the “beginning” and the “end” expressed ironically through the naïve voice offers Smith’s readers relief from the absurdity she investigates within the otherwise confronting couplet and accompanying drawing.

Each of these characteristics is fundamental to the discussions on ‘Sexual Death’ and ‘Death of the World’. The poet’s imaginary love affair with the death-character is outside the bounds of private fantasy, where death is the relief of silent suffering; the fact is, death is inevitable, however Smith dressed it up. What is most unusual is the poet’s ability to fearlessly embrace this fact in private, and continually challenge herself and her readers to explore death with courage and openness.

CHAPTER TWO

The Sexual Death:

The Female left for Dead

This chapter is dedicated to representations of the “sexual death”, not sexual death in the sense of autoerotic asphyxia, or any other morbid physical reaction to sexual intercourse, but sexual “death” in Stevie Smith’s poems. Smith’s women “die” through the loss of their feminine identity and sexuality in various guises. Sexual death is also referenced in the capacity that Smith’s women abandon their sexuality and prescribed gender roles in favour of physical or spiritual death. Most importantly, death will be shown to be Smith’s ultimate preference over the fulfillment of any female sexual role, be it fundamentally feminist or traditionally gendered. Finally, sexual death will locate the personified character of Death introduced in the first chapter of this exegesis, as a sexual being, or alternative to other sexual beings, for instance, a husband.

The masculine personification of death is a modern ethos that is not unique to Smith. Poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton also gave death a masculine guise, contrasting from the classical Greek representations of Atropos, the female Fate who cuts the thread of life – an image that resonates in many of Smith’s poems in which the female protagonist cuts her ties with real life.⁶⁸ Writer Rik Loose states that:

In classic literature, mythology and art, death is often represented in the form of a woman. What is the connection between woman and death? Why is she so often placed at the conjunction between life and death? Death is what is radically ‘other’ in human existence. The terror of this radical otherness stares us in the face and captures our gaze, due to our fascination for this realm beyond life... Man has to defend himself against his desire for annihilation and death. Is the

⁶⁸ Loose, Rik, “Toxicomania and the Death Drive in Lacan”, *Death Drive: New Life for a Dead Subject?* (Weatherill, R. ed.), Rebus Press, London, 1999, p. 65

aesthetic beauty of the feminine figure one possible barrier
against this terrifying otherness?⁶⁹

Smith's representations of death are contrastingly male and desirable, compared with Loose's description of death in classical literature as being female and terrifying. Later in this chapter, I will demonstrate once again how Smith responds to Greek mythology from the perspective of the otherwise illusory woman. Despite the contrast of gendered death between Smith's poems and classical Greek myth, there is a strong connection in her poems to the idea of the woman as a barrier between man and death. In many of her poems, the men defend themselves against death as the women protagonists exist in the margin between life and death.

Smith was not the only female English-language poet writing on sexual death during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Dorothy Parker is said to have influenced Smith's work before she was known for her poetry, specifically the Americanisms and rhythm in Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*, although Smith would later regret this influence on her work.⁷⁰ Smith was still writing on death as a desirable solution to feminine gender roles and death as the masculine romantic after World War II at the same time that American Confessionalists Plath and Sexton penned their poetic responses to dying and suicide.

Smith's trademark techniques for her portrayals of female sexual death include explorations of marriage, ageing, abandonment, and motherhood. Poems such as 'The Sea-Widow', 'Childe Rolandine', 'The Queen and the Young Princess', and 'The Lady of the Well Spring'⁷¹ warn against conforming to the traditional expectations placed upon women. The protagonists in each poem experience the death of their sexual-selves, or literal death brought on by aspects of their femininity. Contrastingly, 'This Englishwoman',⁷² one of Smith's earliest published poems, mocks the perceptible masculinity of the archetypal Englishwoman who *does* appear to conform to traditional gender roles. In terms of physicality, we tend to think of "woman" as breasts and bottoms and hips and curves, whereas the depiction of the "proper woman" along with the drawing that accompanies it in 'This Englishwoman', are

⁶⁹ Loose, R., pp.65-66

⁷⁰ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.75

⁷¹ Smith, S., 1978, p.280, 189, 175, 173

⁷² Smith, S., 1978, p.48

essentially phallic in description. This poem shows the death of femininity itself in women who seek to meet the sexual expectations of a refined female. Julie Ann Sims notes that the feminism debate between essentialists and social constructionists is mirrored by Smith in the conflicted viewpoints of all of these poems.⁷³ More importantly, both the urge to cast off the burden of femininity and the desire to be female and to be accepted for it, are equally represented in Smith's poetry, but the desirability of death is overwhelmingly represented in poems on both sides. By and large, Smith's poems on gender dabble in the debate for a while, before leaping into the void and electing for death above a present-life solution.

The re-publication of Stevie Smith's works, both poetic and prosaic, by the distinctly feminist publishing house *Virago Press*, introduced Smith to a contemporary feminist readership. This posthumous acquisition of Smith's writing acted as a kind of public statement: that Smith fitted the feminist mold and was embraced as such by a new wave of feminists in the early 1980s. The end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s marked a change in feminism, with an increase in academic feminist study, coinciding with new struggles for the feminist social movement in light of the new conservatism of the 1980s.⁷⁴ Smith's work entered into the feminist academy after this time, and some thirty years later, a great deal of the academic writing on Smith remains gender focused. Writers including Civello and Severin have drawn attention to Smith's apparent feminist perspectives in various articles and books. Jan Montefiore calls Smith's poem 'Eng.', on the changing nature of male gender roles, "angry feminism".⁷⁵

Here stands a point of contention regarding approaches to Smith studies. Much of this chapter demonstrates Smith's desire to be perceived as a poet above and beyond any feminist political identity. It is her death-theme which prevails over gender both within individual poems and throughout her body of work. In each poem on gender in this chapter, I will demonstrate that death is the constant linking all her work, including that which appears to support a gender-based narrative.

⁷³ Sims, Julie Ann. *Poet in a Hardhat: Stevie Smith and Gender Construction* (Dissertation). Rice University, 1995, p.1

⁷⁴ Dever, Carolyn, "The feminist abject: Death and the constitution of theory", *Studies in the Novel* 32 no. 2 pp. 185-206. 2000 (accessed on Proquest.com, February 2009), p.188

⁷⁵ Montefiore, Jan, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: the dangerous floor of history*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 129

William May's journal article on the posthumous publications of Smith's poetry, discussed in my introduction to this thesis, focuses specifically on the choices made in publications collated by Smith's literary executor and her biographers.⁷⁶ In the context of Smith's entrance into the consciousness of later third-wave feminists through *Virago's* publication of her work, questions can be asked about the image of Smith that has arisen from these friends and supporters. As May emphasises in 'The Choosers', the presentation of a text including all the decisions made by the publisher and the publisher's own identity, strongly influences the ways in which a reader may interpret the text. Since Smith was identified as part of the feminist movement most fervently after the *Virago*-association, and therefore, without her own voluntary involvement, we must look for evidence occurring during the poet's life to answer the question: "Was Smith a feminist?".

During her life, Smith was sometimes subject to requests for her own critique on women's writing, both feminist and distinctly anti-feminist. In Smith's review of a women's poetry anthology by Joan Murray Simpson in 1968, for example, she encourages women poets to "...take heart and prove that they are poets notwithstanding the fact that the greatest poets are men".⁷⁷ Smith's disapproval of the anthology was that the compiler valued typical feminine ideals over the integrity of the poetry itself, and made publication choices accordingly. Indeed, to prove her point, Smith admits in the same article that twenty lines of her own poem were cut by the compiler without permission or consultation. Here we find an example of Smith's most prevailing stance in relation to feminism: that she was a poet, first and foremost.

In a public show of her onlooker relationship with mainstream feminist literature, Smith's review of Simon De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in *Spectator* in 1953 is regularly quoted in articles questioning De Beauvoir's brand of feminism. Smith wrote: "Miss De Beauvoir has written an enormous book about women and it is soon clear that she does not like them".⁷⁸ The irony of this comment is that many of Smith's own poems paint dreary portraits of unhappy women. Poems such as 'Wretched Woman'⁷⁹ satirise the repellent nature of a

⁷⁶ May, W., p.321

⁷⁷ Dowson, Jane. and Entwistle, Alice, *A History of Twentieth Century British Women's Poetry*,. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p.96

⁷⁸ Tarrant, Shira, *When Sex Became Gender*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2006, p.184

⁷⁹ Smith, S., 1978, p.147

housewife, or 'The Hat'⁸⁰ which romanticises the idea of making an affluent marriage do not express an overwhelming positive view of her gender. Rather, Smith's writing on women in society is usually characterised by accounts of their apparent dependency on men and their sorry state in the case of abandonment and ageing.

In a famed article by Sylvia Plath in the *London Magazine* in 1962, Plath sites Smith as one of the living poets that influenced her, with particular mention of being "possessed by their rhythms as by the rhythms of their own breathing. Their finest poems seem to be born all-of-a-piece, not put together by hand..."⁸¹ This article was published prior to a letter from Plath to Smith in which she admits to being "addicted" to Smith's poetry.⁸² In response to this letter, Smith infers an ignorance of Plath's poetry by admitting to not reading much contemporary poetry. This distancing from contemporary female poets exemplifies Smith's non-compliance with a particular social faction or political bent; particularly her disconnection with poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, who, despite their shared interest in the subject of death and free verse style, are credited with advancing the 'Confessionalist' style through expressions of gender issues. An example of this is Sexton's 'Woman with Girdle' published in her 1962 collection, *All My Pretty Ones*.⁸³

In her poems, Smith describes women who are subjugated to such an extent that death becomes the appealing alternative to their entrapment. Sometimes she writes from the perspective of the indignant female, as in the poem 'Lightly Bound'⁸⁴ in which the speaker censures her child and husband and threatens to leave with "the north wind" – a metaphor for suicide. What is most striking about this poetic voice is that despite the evident antagonism toward her husband and child, it is in fact, her role as a wife and mother that receives Smith's greatest condemnation in the short verse. In other poems, Smith narrates third-person accounts of desolate women, usually alone, abandoned, misunderstood and verging on death. Often these poems are characterised by an event such as a superstitious curse; the woman in the poem encounters either lights, angels, or fairies who lead her away from a man and

⁸⁰ Smith, S., 1978, 149

⁸¹ Anderson, Linda. "Gender, Feminism, Poetry: Stevie Smith, Sylvia Plath, Jo Shapcott" in: Corcoran, Neil, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p.173

⁸² Anderson, L., p.173

⁸³ Sexton, Anne, *All My Pretty Ones*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1962

⁸⁴ Smith, S., 1978, p.148

toward a cursed place, and then to death. This can be seen in such poems as ‘Cool as a Cucumber’, ‘The Lady of the Well Spring’, and ‘I Rode with my Darling’.⁸⁵ True to Smith’s tendency to embrace death, these representations of paranormal forces entice the archetypal troubled woman to a kind of mystic death, and one romanticised by the poet. An image of a ceremonial sadness celebrating the woman’s death often closes these poems. Smith’s representations of the man in mourning after the woman has abandoned her feminine role in favour of death is resonant of Nietzsche’s description of the tragic hero consumed by illusions of his lost love:

If we think of Admetus, lost in thought as he remembers his recently deceased wife Alcestis, and consuming himself entirely in mental contemplation of her – when, suddenly, the image of a woman, similar in form and with a similar walk, is led, veiled, towards him...⁸⁶

Whereas in the Greek tragedies, the hero is the suffering man overcome by his obsession with the woman, Smith offers her readers suffering heroines who are overcome by their fascinations with death. In a sense, she delivers the woman’s untold side of the classic tragic narrative, reconciling the despair of those left behind with the revelation that for the woman, death was inevitably desirable. On the other hand, the poems which close with the point of view of the male, and the family left behind also act as a kind of moral lesson, showing external disapproval of the protagonist’s dalliance in such paranormal phenomena or as a warning to other young women not to be open to seduction by fantasies that lead to death.

Having never been married herself, Smith’s poems on the subject act as a spectator’s commentary on her surrounding society. Strong references can be drawn between the marriage poems and Smith’s mother’s experiences of matrimony and her abandonment by Smith’s father. Indeed, Smith’s romantic life remains relatively mysterious, aside from the mention of lovers “Karl” and “Freddy”, as previously noted. Biographers also occasionally allude to an alleged affair with George Orwell during the war years. Barbera and McBrien, in *Stevie*, use accounts from Smith’s friend Norah Smallwood on the topic of Orwell, and quote

⁸⁵ Smith, S., 1978, p.129, 173, 142

⁸⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich, (Geuss, R. and Speirs, R., eds), *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (trans. Ronald Speirs), Cambridge University Press, New York, 1999 , p.45

Smith saying: “I was living with George Orwell, and it wasn’t easy”.⁸⁷ Smith never literally lived with George Orwell, who was married at the time but admitted to having been unfaithful to his wife.⁸⁸ However, poetic references in Smith’s work from that time coincide with Orwell’s stories to friends and indicate that a romantic relationship of some kind may have existed. Certainly there is evidence that the friendship between Smith and Orwell was a tumultuous one, specifically on Smith’s part. In 1942 Smith accused Orwell of thwarting her BBC poetry reading, and lying about misdirected messages, and in later years she criticised his work publically.⁸⁹

There is little to say on the topic of Smith’s romances insofar as they inspired her body of poetic works, other than the brief appearances of characters Karl and Freddie in her writing. The fact that the poet spent her life in Palmers Green with her aunt even after her mother’s death, indicates a relatively solitary existence. As a child, Smith endured her father’s abandonment of the family, and witnessed her mother’s subsequent struggles. Whilst many people have gone from such experiences to live normal, happy lives, for Smith this was not a choice. Thus, her known history with men is largely limited to negative experiences. This has had a documented bearing on her novels, including references to Orwell and his wife in *The Holiday*.⁹⁰ In Barbera and McBrien’s biography, it is stated that Orwell was the inspiration for two of the characters in the novel, which is known to be largely autobiographical. While there exist strong common themes between Smith’s own abandonment by her father, her spinster adulthood and her poems on women, there is not a great deal of first-hand documentation examining the links between the two. Nor has Smith in interviews told of many substantial tangible links between her life and her poetic work as she had done with her prose work.

Perhaps the most noticeable evidence of Smith’s preference to disengage from gender identity, be it feminist or traditional, was her choice to almost exclusively go by the nickname “Stevie”. Her surname is also very common and as such it offers a kind of anonymity. This opting for on-paper androgyny has numerous implications. In her article on *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Julie Sims Steward asserts that Smith was concerned with the gender identity

⁸⁷ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.139

⁸⁸ Crick, Bernard, *George Orwell, A life (2nd edition)*, Secker and Warberg (Originally from the University of California), London, 1980, p.332

⁸⁹ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.138

⁹⁰ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.140

women have created for them, by men.⁹¹ Although this point manifests in some of Smith's poems on female roles, there are as many (if not more) poems in which Smith censures women for the roles they accept or impose upon themselves and their sex. Examples of this include 'My Hat',⁹² in which a mother imposes traditional gender roles onto a daughter who opts for escapism, and 'This English Woman'⁹³, a lone couplet mocking the "unfeminine" physicality that many upper-class English women considered to be "refined". I posit that the reason for this choice to retain a masculine name is another indication that Smith's preferred public identity was not Feminine Stevie, nor Feminist Stevie, but Poet Stevie.

How Smith's personal life and public associations or lack of them engaged her with the more active feminist poets of her time is difficult to weigh. This imposed political gender identity is important to consider when conducting a textual analysis of her work. To what extent do questions of gender and affiliation influence meaning and intent within her poems? From a creative writing perspective, some of the most important clues influencing the analysis of her poetry are in the letters and interviews that offer moments of self-critique.

The traditional expectation that a woman would marry was paramount to much of Smith's writing on the sexual death. In 1937 she wrote a novel called *Married To Death*. To Denis Johnston, she wrote:

Here I was thinking of my next, and going to call it Married to Death, I'm nuts on death really. ... But this Death idea, it is very prominent, rather a running-away in my case I am afraid, not very strrrong of me. (Sic)⁹⁴

The novel was never published, perhaps in part due to feedback from David Garnett, who wrote: "I think it is absolutely fatal for you to write about yourself anymore."⁹⁵ Garnett went

⁹¹ Steward, Julie Sim, "Pandora's Playbox: Stevie Smith's Drawings and the Construction of Gender", *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 22, 1998 (accessed on Questia.com, June 2007) , p. 235

⁹² Smith, S., 1978, p.176

⁹³ Smith, S., 1978, p.48

⁹⁴ Prichard, William, "Not Joking But Writing", *New York Times* May 16th 1982

<http://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/16/books/not-joking-but-writing.html> (accessed November 22nd 2008)

⁹⁵ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.109

on to assert: “Write about anybody but yourself. Somehow you must escape from this poisonous daydream...”⁹⁶

So, while Smith’s female peers took the marriage tradition seriously, Smith mocked the ideal with her own brand of romanticism: Death. This is not to suggest that Smith’s very personal marriage to death with a manuscript paying tribute to that romance were necessarily intentionally mocking of traditional societal values, but on the other hand the implication seems unavoidable. More importantly, in her letter to Johnston, Smith openly admits the significance of her death-obsession.

In Smith’s poems, death takes the place of a man in several instances. Smith’s poem ‘I Rode with my Darling...’, first published in 1950, is one such poem. The female protagonist’s struggle represents her choice between conventional romance, and the mysterious attraction to a dark wood:

My darling grew pale he was responsible
He said we should go back it was reasonable
But I wished to stay with the angel in the dark wood at night.⁹⁷

In a literal representation, Smith exemplifies the disparity between the male’s logic and restraint, and the female’s desire for adventure, seduced by an unknown and fatal “angel”. Perhaps more significant are the many voices warning the speaker against staying in the dark wood, which emerge to represent warnings of the taboo nature of such a morbid fetish. Several cues within the poem point to the dark wood being a frightening yet enchanting metaphor for experiential death. Firstly, the depiction of the angel guiding the woman through the dark wood has spiritual implications, coinciding with the protection of one’s soul after death:

And suddenly there was an angel burning bright
Come with me or go far away he said
But do not stay alone in the dark wood at night.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.110

⁹⁷ Smith, S., 1978, p.142

⁹⁸ Smith, S., 1978, p.142

If on the other hand, the angel is the protector and guide, it is the dark wood which becomes a metaphor for death.

Secondly, Smith introduces the cornfield symbolism, with roots in Native American Indian traditions and notions of the gestation of life,⁹⁹ and referenced as a symbol of death in the work of Vincent Van Gogh in Paul W. Miller's 1965 article.¹⁰⁰ The cornfield represents the space between life and death for Van Gogh, and also for Smith's protagonist before she enters the dark wood.

Third is the image and representation of the dark wood itself. Jo Gill states that: "the dark wood does not immediately offer the insights expected of it; the poem closes with a series of rhetorical questions and the emphatic last line..."¹⁰¹ Gill goes on to attribute the dark wood to the silence and privacy the protagonist in the poem seeks as an escape from harassment. While the dark wood certainly is a place of silence, an alternative suggestion is that it is the woman in the poem who harasses. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche describes the femininity of the female in the Semitic myth of the Fall:

...the origin of evil was seen to lie in curiosity, mendacious pretence, openness to seduction, lasciviousness, in short: in a whole series of predominantly feminine attributes.¹⁰²

Nietzsche continues to contrast this view of feminine evil with the Aryan conception of "sin", and surmises that:

the ethical foundation of pessimistic tragedy, (is) its justification of evil in human life, both in the sense of human guilt and in the sense of the suffering brought about by it...
The curse in the nature of things, which the reflective Aryan is

⁹⁹ Tigerman, Kathleen and Ottery, Jim, *Wisconsin Indian Literature: Anthology of Native Voices (illustrated edition)*, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 2006, p.245

¹⁰⁰ Miller, P.W., "Provenience of the Death Symbolism in Van Gogh's Cornscapes", *Psychoanal. Rev.* 1965-66, 52D pp. 60-66

¹⁰¹ Gill, Jo, *Women's Poetry*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p.97

¹⁰² Nietzsche, F., 1999, p.50

not inclined simply to explain away, the contradiction at the heart of the world presents itself to him as a mixture of different worlds, e.g. a divine and a human one, each of which, taken individually, is in the right, but which, as one world existing alongside another, must suffer for the fact of its individuation.¹⁰³

Warned against staying in the dark wood at night repeatedly, still Smith's protagonist goes, paying no heed to the voices of reason, a hysterical and "typically female" reaction to reason. Like Nietzsche's illustration of the Semitic female, the woman in 'I Rode with my Darling...' is painted as evil for being seduced by the "angel" of the divine world. The "darling" is portrayed as faultless in the poem, suffering in light of the woman's openness to seduction. He is merely the representation of the human world which the woman leaves in favour of the divine dark wood. It is the representation of nothingness (that Gill refers to in place of insight) that offers the ultimate suggestion that the dark wood implies death. In the final stanza, all worldly attachments are as good as forgotten.

'I Rode with my Darling...' offers further examples of a woman's sexual death. The protagonist finds herself more attracted to death than to a male lover, and thus shrugs off her corporeal femininity in favour of an ethereal escapism. Not only does she lose her lover, but also her role as daughter, sister and niece – all distinctly feminine relationships:

Loved I once my darling? I love him not now.
Had I a mother loved? She lies far away,
A sister, a loving heart? My aunt a noble lady?
All all is silent in the dark wood at night.¹⁰⁴

There is a distinct sense of detachment in this closing stanza, the speaker shows no sense of grief for having left her life and family. Smith is trading feminine compassion and nurture for finality and peace.

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, F., 1999, p.50

¹⁰⁴ Smith, S., 1978, p.142

Correspondingly, in Smith's poem 'Lightly Bound', the female protagonist wishes to abandon the female gender roles of wife and mother. This poem provides a literal voice, asserting dissatisfaction at the woman's "bindings":

You beastly child, I wish I had miscarried,
You beastly husband, I wish I had never married.
You hear the north wind riding fast past the window? He calls me.
Do you suppose I shall stay when I can go so easily?¹⁰⁵

This is a far more abrasive representation of a woman's abhorrence for her roles of mother and wife. Existing somewhere between liberal feminist normative and descriptive claims, the voice in the poem simultaneously disavows her female roles as mother and wife and calls forth death as an escape. Her voice is livid leading to her ultimate resolution in the final line. The north wind may an upwards gust of wind, personified as male, and a seducer of the protagonist. As noted in chapter one of this exegesis, Smith often gave death a masculine identity.

The most confronting idea in 'Lightly Bound' is the rejection of the child, and of motherhood. Smith (who was never a mother herself) presents readers with a woman protagonist who regrets giving birth to her child, and in fact is advocating the child's death through abortion. Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, references Céline's *Death on the Installment Plan* on the mother who "...did all she could to keep me alive, I just shouldn't have been born..."¹⁰⁶ Kristeva writes on the relationship between mother and child, and life and death:

...I have already mentioned that birth-giving is, for Céline, the privileged object of scription. In its miscarriage, too, in abortion, the writer discovers, quite naturally, the basic fate and abominable tragedy of the other sex.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Smith, S., 1978, p.148

¹⁰⁶ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982 (quoting: Céline 1966, p. 55), p.159

¹⁰⁷ Kristeva, J., p.159

Smith's poem aligns with Kristeva's impression of the Célinian mother's hypocrisy – giving life that is not eternal. Thereby the mother becomes the dark figure who points the child towards death. Just by giving birth, she kills. In 'Lightly Bound' we find precisely this scenario, except that the mother is not drawn as a martyr, rather a convict under the guard and punishment of traditional gender roles. Yes, she gave birth, but she openly regrets the fact and wishes that not only had she simply not had a child, but that she should have aborted. Here we find the female writer, albeit inexperienced in the matter of childbirth, but articulating what many women feel but never express. She voices the same tragedy Kristeva finds in Céline's male-perspective representation. Further, the protagonist admits an attraction to death, represented by the north wind, suggesting the child's brush with death from birth. This provides an immediate example of the duality of the written mother in Céline's literature according to Kristeva – the mother who gives life and sacrifices, but who is also to blame for the inevitability of death.

However, Smith's mother in 'Lightly Bound' is extremely detached compared to Kristeva's description of the Célinian mother. She does not rely on the child to save her, nor does she hold onto the notion that she is the giver of life and therefore is owed some kind of relief. The mother in 'Lightly Bound' wishes death on her immediate surrounds without negotiation – she wishes her life as mother and wife never had begun, and threatens to end it by exposing her lack of commitment to it. She has not a martyr-mentality; she is independent of every tie that makes her conventionally valued and only depends on the idea of being freed by the north wind. Kristeva's "abominable tragedy" for Smith rests in the traditional female roles of mother and wife, but all is saved for Smith by the most traditional "abominable tragedy" of all – death. Here, again, we find an example of Smith dabbling in the feminist before submitting ultimately to her death-obsession.

In Smith's poem 'My Hat', is another female character oppressed by the expectation to marry, with contrary results:

Mother said if I wore this hat
I should be certain to get off with the right sort of chap
Well look where I am now, on a desert island
With so far as I can see no one at all on hand
I know what has happened though I suppose Mother wouldn't see

This hat being so strong has completely run away with me
I had the feeling it was beginning to happen the moment I put it on
What a moment that was as I rose up, I rose up like a flying swan
As strong as a swan too, why see how far my hat has flown me away
It took us a night to come and then a night and a day
And all the time the swan wing in my hat waved beautifully
Ah, I thought, How this hat becomes me.
First the sea was dark but then it was pale blue
And still the wing beat and we flew and we flew
A night and a day and a night, and by the old right way
Between the sun and the moon we flew until morning day.
It is always early morning here on this peculiar island
The green grass grows into the sea on the dipping land
Am I glad I am here? Yes, well, I am,
It's nice to be rid of Father, Mother and the young man
There's just one thing causes me a twinge of pain,
If I take my hat off, shall I find myself home again?
So in this early morning land I always wear my hat
Go home, you see, well I wouldn't run a risk like that.¹⁰⁸

According to Julie Ann Sims in her thesis, *Stevie Smith and Gender Construction*, the hat is an accessory which “operates to signify ‘woman’”.¹⁰⁹ Sims asserts that a hat places its wearer within a scope of prevailing fashions and the company of similar people who wear those fashions. She goes on to suggest that Smith was an example of a woman who chooses to “ignore fashion, and in fact, wants to step outside of the parameters of gender her culture deems appropriate”.¹¹⁰ In ‘My Hat’, Smith reveals precisely these two sentiments. Firstly, in the opening two lines, the hat signifies woman, specifically the type of woman who should attract a desirable man. Later in the poem the hat takes on its own identity, diminishing the sexual identity of the wearer. The hat has not become accessory to the woman, rather, the

¹⁰⁸ Smith, S., 1978, p.176

¹⁰⁹ Sims, J. A., p.92

¹¹⁰ Sims, J. A., p.92

woman has become accessory to the hat. In this case, the hat, no longer signifying “woman”, comes to signify the death of the wearer’s feminine gender role.

Paralleling the protagonist’s journey in ‘I Rode with my Darling...’, the character in ‘My Hat’ also sets out with expectations of marriage, and by some wraithlike force is taken away from the male suitor and is left with only vague and distant memories of her other corporeal relationships. Smith never attempts to rationalise or elucidate the reasons behind these peculiar attractions to death. She offers only the complexity and sensitivity of her characters to wear the attraction, and of the attraction itself to be all-encompassing – not unlike powers signified by the hat and the dark wood, and equal in seductiveness to the experience of falling in love.

Another link between all three poems is the finality expressed within the closing lines. The repetition of the word “all” in ‘I Rode with my Darling...’ delivers the Imagistic experience of an echo into a void. Jo Gill describes this particular repetition and the questions preceding it as “a series of rhetorical questions and the emphatic line”.¹¹¹ Instead this repetition can be read not as emphatic, but as resigned. Further, the questions posed ahead of the final haunting line may be literally rhetorical, but they also follow the style of a conversation piece in the tradition of W.H. Auden’s ‘Letter To Lord Byron’ (first published in 1937, incidentally, the same year Smith’s first volume of poetry was published). The effect of this is an informal tone dealing with solemn subject matter, softening the poetic voice to the reader and appealing to the reader’s own experiential internal dialogue. Thus the closing lines of ‘I Rode with my Darling...’ are not unsatisfying to the reader in so far as a definitive ending. Rather they may be unsatisfying as a result of more conformist expectations sustained throughout the poem for ending in which the protagonist either meets a devastating end, or turns back to follow her darling. Instead Smith delivers an ending inside her death fantasy of a silent void where nothing matters anymore.

In Smith’s poem ‘A Dream of Nothing’,¹¹² the precise tension between a philosophical imagination of nothingness (resulting in a love of death), and the more pragmatic view that it is impossible for someone to be able to imagine nothingness (resulting in a love of life) is represented through a conversation between Eve and Mary. In this example Eve’s attraction

¹¹¹ Gill, J., p.97

¹¹² Smith, S., 1978, p.175

to the notion of nothingness reflects the visions of each of the protagonists mentioned in ‘I Rode with my Darling...’, ‘My Hat’, and ‘Lightly Bound’ – while Mary’s disengagement from the philosophical death dream and non-acceptance of the desire for nothingness reflects Smith’s death theme critics.

The deliverance of finality is administered with the same conversation piece technique in ‘My Hat’. Again, before the closing line, questions of a serious nature are posed in a casual, ‘chatty’ mode, before the definitive conclusion that the woman must remain on the island permanently. As such, her deliberate exile from the man she was expected to live with, and her family, negate any future such attachments, and once again show the protagonist to have elected a sexual death above conventional marriage and romance. Sylvia Hadjetian, in her 2001 paper, flags this abandonment and denial of convention, family and life in ‘My Hat’ for its encapsulation of the desire for freedom, arguing that one must always be bought at the cost or ‘death’ of the other.¹¹³ It also could be argued that Smith’s desire was for freedom from the suffering of life, since the her character trades her life for a peaceful existence.

The closing of ‘Lightly Bound’ differs in its tone and implication, but also conveys a threat of absolution despite reading as a conversation piece. The poem in its entirety evokes the image of a woman, bags packed and saying her piece. The unhindered regret she reveals to her husband and child is so unrelenting in its honesty it can only be interpreted as the lead-up to a final departure. This scene is set quickly and in time for the final line, which, although threatening in tone, as good as asserts that the protagonist will leave with the north wind and has been swept into its void.

Another likeness between these three poems is the resonance of each of the protagonist’s voices. All three are written in the first person and from the perspective of women embarking on journeys of liberation in various forms. Despite this, the tone in each is significantly different; ‘I Rode with my Darling...’ is melancholic, the word “and” repeated acts as caesural notation, placed at the beginning of lines the techniques effects a sense of the lost

¹¹³Hadjetian, Sylvia, “Stevie Smith: The poems of Not Waving but Drowning are punctuated everywhere with a strong will to freedom”, <http://www.grin.com/e-book/43119/stevie-smith-the-poems-of-not-waving-but-drowning-are-punctuated-everywhere-2001> (accessed on March 12th 2010)

voice, caught between her darling's abandonment, the warnings of the cornfields, and the death drive calling her into the dark wood. The voice in 'Lightly Bound' is heated and incensed in its taunts. The simple designation of one line to a subject, divided the abuse of the husband from the abuse of the child and tormenting them both with the threat of the north wind calling, almost as a secret lover might call on a disenchanted housewife. The effect is shock, and the inevitable silencing of the other characters, preventing them from offering a defence – the voice in this poem is livid and unwilling to compromise. The voice in 'My Hat' uses punctuating words like "it", "and", "ah", "I" to open each line, similar to the use of "and" to begin many lines in 'I Rode with my Darling...'. The effect however is different here. While these seem like disposable words, they have a modifying effect on the phrases they initiate – contributing to the aforementioned conversational tone of the voice. In a poem whose voice is indignant, these punctuating words help to express the protagonist's annoyance in a more indirect manner. For example, compared with 'Lightly Bound', which begins each line with "You", expressing aggression and direction, the voice in 'My Hat' is considerably calmer and more suggestive in her assertions that she gladly rejects her family and her home.

Much has been written on the topic of Smith's dealings with fairytale nothingness and "the void", in particular Catherine A. Civello in the context of what she calls Smith's "ambivalence" toward gender – neither caring to commit to her role as "female", nor wishing to change the gender role;¹¹⁴ and Ruth Baumert's essay on abjection and Smith's fear of the void, applying Julia Kristeva's work on the denial of loss and its relation to language and melancholia.¹¹⁵ Baumert talks about the fairytale worlds Smith's female characters retreat into, stating that they are faced with an impossible choice between the Semiotic fairytale and the Symbolic real; if the women choose the fairytale, they do so at the expense of losing everything real. Like Gill's interpretation of the dark wood, Baumert interprets the literal semiotic of the fairytales in Smith's poems with the assumption that the characters truly are embracing the absurd in place of the real pressures of life, the natural conclusion being that Smith was a fence-sitter. Baumert and Civello both have given numerous examples of Smith's spilt stance on many aspects of existence: "Delighting in Life / Rejoicing in Death", "Craving Companionship / Longing for Isolation", "Believing in God / Believing in

¹¹⁴ Civello, Catherine A., *Patterns of Ambivalence – The Poems and Fiction of Stevie Smith*, Camden House, New York, 1997, p.2

¹¹⁵ Baumert, R., pp.197-198

Uncertainty”.¹¹⁶ Whilst these contradictions exist in Smith’s work, the question is, to what effect? Are these opposing viewpoints solely indicative of ambivalence and the fear of committing to one side or the other?

While this is crucial to a discussion of Smith’s writings on the “the void” and representations of nothingness in the fairytale semiotic, Smith’s contradictions might also be taken as a sign of natural human complexity, thus humanising her otherwise socially unacceptable obsession with death. As W. Somerset Maugham wrote in his short story *A Friend In Need* (1925):

Why novels and plays are often so untrue to life is because their authors, perhaps out of necessity, make their characters all of a piece. They cannot afford to make them self-contradictory, for then they become incomprehensible, and yet self-contradictory is what most of us are. We are a haphazard bundle of inconsistent qualities.¹¹⁷

Certainly for the purpose of keeping her women characters comprehensible, Smith might have made them all of a kind, circumventing the contradictions that ensue from showing a diverse range of female attitudes in different poems. In each of her individual poems, one certain viewpoint is generally expressed, un-contradicted, that of defiance in ‘My Hat’ and seduction in ‘I rode with my Darling...’, for instance. However, by diversifying the nature of each of her poetic female protagonists and through each of them offering a different imaginary construct of death, Smith strengthens her argument in favour of death. She appeals to Maugham’s idea of people as “haphazard bundle(s) of inconsistent qualities”, refusing to reduce her explorations of the human condition down to just one viewpoint. To relate to Smith’s love of death is near impossible. But when it is presented as a complex internal tension through characters whose attractions to death manifests through a variety of normal human experiences such as guilt, self-consciousness, openness to seduction, vulnerability and determination, the death-obsession becomes relatable to the reader.

¹¹⁶ Baumert, R., p.204

¹¹⁷ Maugham, W. Somerset, *Collected Short Stories*, Penguin Books, New York, 1951, p. 286

Further to this argument, to accept the vagueness and mystery of the fairytale settings in Smith's poems as simply "absurd" would be to imply that the vast majority of her work depended upon literal imagery. In fact, the fairytale settings Smith offers are metaphors for death. These metaphors represent the radical 'otherness' that Loose describes in relation to Greek myth, in the face of the absurdity that is human existence. Contrary to Baumert's assertion that Smith's women characters feel the loss of their real-world lives, the dark wood, the north wind and the deserted island are spaces in which Smith's female characters barely remember their former lives, find peace and solemnly refuse to ever return to reality. It could be argued that this is another of Smith's attempts to placate the reader's fear of death, by choosing symbols that are based in fairytale and therefore not so confronting as literal representations of death.

Smith's women characters are braver than the masculine heroes in classical myth who defend themselves against the desire for annihilation.¹¹⁸ Her characters satiate their fascination with death in order to leave the oppression of traditional gender roles, and human existence. This technique might be likened to the voice of the child-savant, or the idiot-savant, in the tradition of providing comic relief in dealings with extremely serious issues. If the death-obsession can override the female gender role within the realm of fairytale, ever-acknowledging its dangerousness then it becomes readable. The fairytale death evokes escapism for the reader just as the surrender to death evokes escapism for the poetic protagonist. Additionally, the reliance on sound and syntax in the construction of fairytale representations of death, and Smith's use of conversational tradition and foundations of gothic romanticism in these poems on gender are an overlooked credit to her unique poetics.

Despite the poet's alleged ambivalence toward gender identity, Smith's desire to mock and challenge notions of female sexuality above the everlasting safety net of a romance with death certainly places her poetry in the outer circle of recognisably feminist writers. The second wave of feminists and Suffragists in Britain preceded Smith's adulthood, she remained unmarried, without children her whole life and chattel marriages had been out of fashion for many years by the time Smith began publishing. Despite all this, there is an overwhelming sense that the poet was opposed to conventional marriage, and that she had an awareness of the potential for suffering and oppression within conventional female gender

¹¹⁸ Loose, R., p.66

roles. Smith never fought against this perceived oppression through her poems: she toyed with it, made fun of it, exaggerated it, portrayed it as absurdist fairy-stories, and in doing so offered various versions of death as a natural and viable solution to oppression. The poet was at odds with feminists of her time, such as Simone de Beauvoir, but she was at odds with life too. Smith simply did not rely on either feminist convention or traditional prescriptions for what “female” should entail. Instead, she handed herself over to her love of Death, and portrayed the death character as masculine and romantic.

CHAPTER THREE

Death of the World: Poet as Armed Spectator

Stevie Smith lived through turbulent times. She was born just before World War I and during visits to Germany in the late 1930s, she watched Europe degenerate into the darkness of World War II. Yet unlike many of her contemporaries, she avoided the overtly political in her poetic work. Twentieth century London was a hotbed of political poetry that challenged the injustices of British society and culture with poets and authors such as W.H Auden, Siegfried Sassoon and George Orwell presenting a strong criticism of their country and of wartime. Smith's poetry is contrastingly non-activist. Instead, she offers poems in her characteristically fairy tale style, borrowing from the absurd and using the childlike voice to comment on cultural resistance and societal responses to war, God and the ruling class – the one notable exception to this treatment of political poems is 'Voices Against England in the Night'. As her biographers point out:

When Stevie appeared on the literary scene, the Georgian poets were yielding to the Auden generation and to Dylan Thomas. "Stevie Smith... stands outside any tradition of the day", writes on critic, "and in so doing acts as a comment on what is happening elsewhere." ... "There are always certain people who are aware of their epoch but don't let themselves get done in by it, Mrs Mitchison wrote... "Shelley was done in, but Blake was not... Such people don't have to be 'we'; they can be 'I', proudly and bouncingly as Blake was... Stevie Smith bounces with Blake."¹¹⁹

The marginality that resulted primarily from Smith's perpetual preoccupation with death, the childlike treatments of death and culture, as well as the depression and suicide attempts, jointly prescribed Smith's place in society and in the literary world as somewhat of an

¹¹⁹ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.101

outsider. As such, her poems on politics, religion and culture are from the unique perspective of the spectator. What is interesting is that Smith's ambiguous place on the boundaries of social norms and the á-la-mode poets of her time might actually be viewed as what sustained her as these types of comparison with Shelley and Blake, and contrasts with Thomas and Auden ultimately cement her place in English language poetry, however marginal that place might be. As Ruth Baumert asserts in her chapter, 'Fear, Melancholy and Loss in the Poetry of Stevie Smith':

Unlike other women writers of her time – Silvia Plath, Anne Sexton, even Virginia Woolf – Stevie Smith seems to have found a coping style that saved her from ending her own life. Part of this is undoubtedly due to the way she developed her own strategies of handling language and poetic form, but perhaps the most important factor was that she learned to accept her marginality and even to make a virtue out of it. Realising early in her career that she would never find a place in the mainstream, she withdrew to the margins, thus avoiding all head-on confrontation... As Kristeva points out in her theory of marginality, the margin is an ambiguous place; it is both an outer edge, a frontier which protects what it surrounds, but at the same time it has access to whatever lies outside and beyond it.¹²⁰

An understanding of Smith's marginality is essential to a wider understanding of why much of her poetry about societal values and responses to state and church appear, at first glance, to be ambivalent or overly simplistic. A preoccupation with death, insofar as it is socially undesirable, casts the poet into a margin that allows her, as Kristeva suggests, objective access to the society which regards her death-drive as morbid or indulgent. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche likens the Dionysian man to Hamlet, asserting that:

...Both have had a real glimpse into the essence of things. They have understood and now it disgusts them to act, for their

¹²⁰ Baumert, R., p.216 (On Kristeva, Baumert cites Moi, 1985, p.164)

actions can change nothing in the eternal nature of things. They perceive as ridiculous or humiliating the fact that it is expected of them that they should set right a world turned upside down. The knowledge kills action, for action requires a state of being in which we are covered by the veil of illusion.¹²¹

It could be argued that the objectivity associated with her marginality is the reason for Smith's non-activist treatment of politics and society. Just as the Greek chorus and Hamlet, the poet knew suffering intimately, and from her spectator position, her insight extended beyond activist ideals in the realisation that she could not change her social surrounds, she could only depend on death to come and end the suffering.

Simultaneously, Smith negates her marginality through her poetic challenges of the society in which she is a spectator. It could be argued that creating artistic representations of death – the thing that outcast her – within the society from which she is marginalised, has the paradoxical effect of sustaining her place within that society, enabling her enough first-hand experience to comment on society and to include herself in her poetic explorations of its norms. Smith applies her protected death obsession to the problems she encounters with suburban England, Judeo-Christianity and Europe as a means of self-determination and also self-critique, for she never fully separates herself from her societal surrounds despite existing largely on its outskirts.

Although she offers a number of insights into her politics and religion through poems such as 'The Suburban Classes', 'Night-Time in the Cemetery', 'God and the Devil', and 'Private Means is Dead',¹²² Smith tends more toward absurdist micro-narratives with strong themes of death that reflected an ironic dissatisfaction with many aspects of European society. Although she does not shy away from challenging societal responses to politics and God, only rarely is there a hint in her poetry that her objective may have been to actively bring about social change through her work. Instead, we find a pattern of mockery and humor in her explorations of politics, religion and society. Nor does Smith put a particularly personal

¹²¹ Nietzsche, F., 2000, p.36

¹²² Smith, S., 1978, pp. 27, 29, 30, 51

perspective on social injustice. Her political poetry can neither be distinguished as being in the realm of activist poetry, nor is it completely aligned with her confessional poetry.

When viewing Smith as someone who was socially marginalised, as compared to other marginalised poets in twentieth century England and America, there exists a contradiction in terms. Smith detached herself from society by choice, whereas Caribbean-American lesbian poet Audre Lorde, for instance, penned many poems during the 1960s oscillating between the political and the confessional on her experiences of isolation based on race and sexuality. Lorde was known for her activism and particularly for her criticisms of white feminists. In ‘An Open Letter to Mary Daly’, Lorde wrote:

Within the community of women, racism is a reality force in my life as it is not in yours. The white women with the hoods on in Ohio handing out KKK literature on the street may not like what you have to say, but they will shoot me on sight.¹²³

Poems such as ‘Coal’¹²⁴ show Lorde’s complex disparity between fervently activist assertions against racism in feminist theory and a sense of the poet/speaker’s overwhelming vulnerability and sensitivity in the face of the injustices that she was subject to during her life. Contrastingly, Smith who was a white heterosexual woman living during wartime when women in England were depended upon to work men’s jobs, had little reason to be marginalised to the extent that she was – except for her near-fatal depression which she nursed with her misanthropic fantasies of death. As well as her death obsession, Smith’s isolation might be partially attributed to aspects of her life such as her father’s abandonment or her childhood illness, but she was never subject to the kind of social or cultural prejudice that poets like Lorde experienced in her lifetime. Rather, in some ways, it was Smith’s prejudices against society that kept her detached from it.

The point of Smith’s marginalisation has been important to discussions on her representations of death in my previous chapters, but it is in the study of her poetical “killing” of society that

¹²³ Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider: essays and speeches*, Crossing Press, Berkley, 1984, p. 70

¹²⁴ Lorde, Audre, “Coal” (poem), <http://english.emory.edu/Bahri/Ryan.html> (accessed on May 1st 2010)

the poet's ultimate individualism becomes central. Whereas a poet such as Shelley, who wrote poems on death to the ruling class in 'England in 1819' one century prior, describes death in terms of revolutionary gruesomeness, Smith's modernist death to politics and society is largely satirical and detached. It could be argued that this passive treatment offers a persuasiveness that a more emotive poem might lack. Smith's personal lust for death emerges through explorations of public life. Just as in *The Pleasure Principle* Freud surmised that "the aim of all life is death",¹²⁵ in Smith's poetry we find a life-cycle in her typically childlike voice embracing the steadfastness of death – simultaneous representations of the childish 'beginning' and the death at the 'end', in poetic exploration of the triviality about what happens in the politics of the 'middle'. Whereas to Shelley death is a thing to be feared and used as a weapon against the enemy, to Smith, death is freedom and therefore an agreeable solution to political and social struggles. The contrast between the impermanency of the politics of life, and the ultimate freedom delivered by death naturally conjures the childlike voice in Smith's poetry around politics, as though she is privy to something the rest of us are not. Poets such as Shelley and Donne express tortured feelings about death, whereas Smith was far more tortured by life and used fairy tales, irony and the childlike voice to reconcile the life/death struggle. In his chapter 'Plays, Fantasy, and Strange Laughter: Stevie Smith's Uncomfortable Poetry', Martin Pumphrey asserts that:

Smith used fairy tales to confirm her identification with the nursery and children's culture. She used them also to explore the existential ramifications of cultural resistance.¹²⁶

It could also be argued that Smith relied upon the childlike voice and the fairy tale technique in order to achieve the Freudian binary of life and death as mutually dependent within each poem that explores cultural resistance. The point about Smith's existentialism is reminiscent of Jean Paul Sartre's response to De Beauvoir's question on death and the Resistance in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*:

¹²⁵ Freud, Sigmund, (Strachey, James. ed.) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, (trans. James Strachey). W. W. Norton, New York, 1961, p.31

¹²⁶ Pumphrey, Martin, "Play, Fantasy and Strange Laughter: Stevie Smith's Uncomfortable Poetry" Rpt. in: Sternicht, S. *In Search of Stevie*, p. 106

Sartre: ...It was around 1943. *Being and Nothingness* is a book about freedom. I then, like the old Stoics, believed that one was always free, even in exceedingly disagreeable circumstances that might end in death...

De Beauvoir: Wasn't that the idea of the resistance also that there was always another possible way out in death?

Sartre: Certainly, there was a great deal of that in it. This idea of putting an end to one's life, not by suicide but by an action that may end in death and that will bear fruit insofar as one is oneself destroyed, was an idea that was present in the Resistance, and it was one that I appreciated.¹²⁷

The most blatant poetic example of Smith's alignment (however ironically intentioned) with the idea of the fruitful suicide as the solution to social problems is 'The Suburban Classes',¹²⁸ which Kristin Bluemel describes as "voicing an absurd extreme of the anti-suburban logic that was so common in 'highbrow' publications."¹²⁹ While this might frame the context of the poem, the question remains as to what Smith's intention was when she wrote this comical proposition that the suburban classes should be manipulated into mass suicide using their many unsophisticated vices. The absurdist tone of the poem overshadows some of its allusions to the view that the suburban classes are inferior in their conformist ideals through their newspapers and their governments. Parallel themes resonate between 'The Suburban Classes', first published in 1937, and Smith's representations of the often limited perspective of English suburban culture and psychology in *Novel on Yellow Paper*. The two works are thematically linked with references to the Holocaust, literally in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, and implicitly through the offered solution of genocide to the problems plaguing 'The Suburban Classes'. In essence, Smith is ironically advocating for Sartre's idea of death as "oneself destroyed" in a collective sense for an entire subculture of people.

Despite her own life-long residence in the outer London suburb of Palmer's Green, Smith is very harsh on her neighbours in this poem, although the stressed absurdity of the poem's

¹²⁷ De Beauvoir, Simone, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, (trans. Patrick O'Brian) Penguin Books, 1985, p.358

¹²⁸ Smith, S., 1978, p.27

¹²⁹ Bluemel, Kristin, "'Suburbs are not so bad I think': Stevie Smith's Problem of Place in 1930s and '40s London", *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, Fall 2003, p.9 (of article)

suggestion to killing them exposes an ironic affection for her surrounds. It could be argued that this poem is far more complex than just a repressed contempt for suburbanites. The problems Smith presents with suburban culture are quite real and justified, particularly during the two years prior to the start of World War II, when the English people appeared to be influenced by the State in their complacency about Germany and prejudice throughout Europe and Britain against Jews. The use of concentration camps to eliminate enemies in Germany is mirrored in an English suburban landscape in 'The Suburban Classes' highlighting the absurdity of the extreme cruelty of the times.

Aside from the contextual point that as a poet she is acting as a commentator on her immediate society, Smith offers clues that she does, to some degree, make a distinction between herself and the suburban classes she expresses such exasperation about:

There is far too much of the suburban classes
Spiritually not geographically speaking. They're asses.
Menacing the greatness of our beloved England, they lie
Propagating their kind in an eightroomed sty.¹³⁰

In her opening two rhyming couplets, two points immediately distance the poet from her subject. Firstly, Smith makes an unambiguous distinction between suburbanites as a geographical population, as opposed to the spiritual implications of life in the suburbs (that there is "far too much of"). The poet is making an allowance for suburban living, on the condition that lifestyle does not dictate the residents' spirit. Second is the metaphor of suburbanites living like lavish pigs and breeding. Smith's lifestyle was modest and childless, thus separating her from her neighbours in 'The Suburban Classes'. The setting for the poem is London during the depression of the 1930s: a population deceleration was met with a simultaneous house-building boom, and yet the housing shortage persisted; the middle-class had greatly increased access to electric household goods at this time.¹³¹ As a resident of Palmers Green, Smith made firsthand observations on the fast changing nature of suburban life, as depicted in the biographical film, *Stevie*,¹³² which showed Smith's long-term residency in a suburb where she maintained a distinctly different lifestyle from her

¹³⁰ Smith, S., 1978, p.27

¹³¹ Constantine, Stephan, *Social Conditions in Britain 1918-1939*, Methuen & Co, New York, 1983, p. 20

¹³² Enders, R. (director), 1978

neighbours. In her writing Smith seems to suggest that she accepted her marginality, even that she revelled in her individuality. In the BBC film, Smith is presented as a stubborn character who must live by her own values in order to live at all. 'The Suburban Classes', for all its irony, brings to light those aspects of society that she rejected during her life.

The sardonic point Smith makes in the opening lines of the bestial nature of the suburbanites brings us back to the discussion on her poems on women. I argued in the previous chapter that Smith was not a feminist in any traditional sense, rather that she preferred death to a life of mediocrity and that included gender specific stereotypes and societal expectations. In 'The Suburban Classes' we see more evidence of this in line 4, where the poet censures an entire socio-geographic class, both male and female, for setting up in oversized houses like swine only to spend their time spawning offspring. Smith's apparent dislike of any conventional adherence to the expectations of society was not limited to women, in this poem we see that it extended to a whole cross-section of British culture that simultaneously surrounded her and in many ways excluded her.

Written wholly in rhyming couplets, Smith once again shows mediocrity and complacency to be the greatest offenses of all, and death to be the manic solution. The poet does not accuse the suburban classes of any greater crime than gullibility and the inability to think for themselves, such as in the lines: "There's this to be said for them, they do as they're told, and, If they see it in print it is bound to stick / 'Your King and your Country need you Dead'."

The final two couplets of 'The Suburban Classes' strike directly at Smith's internal struggle between a distaste for society at large and retaining a sense of patriotism:

For the rest of the gang who are not patriotic
I've another appeal they'll discover hypnotic:
Tell them it's smart to be dead and won't hurt
And they'll gobble up drugs as they gobble up dirt.¹³³

This closing is powerful for its encompassment of the suburban classes beyond the patriotic stereotype, and its simultaneous mocking of the follower-culture that permeates even the

¹³³ Smith, S., 1978, p.27

suburbanites who fancy themselves to be free-thinkers. The suggestion is that to live in the suburbs is to live within the bounds of certain social norms, and that any rebellion is controlled and accounted for. Smith suggests appealing to the ego of the unpatriotic man to influence him, because the ego-identity of the unpatriotic intellectual is as reliable a vice to manipulate as the vices of the patriotic herd. The question this poses, then, is: does Smith self-consciously include herself in this last group who value intelligence over patriotism? Almost as though she will not have the suburbanites enjoy death without her, the poet is already known to be convinced of the truth within these final lines. Smith appears to be including herself in the comical image she creates of the suburbs, which is uncharacteristically generous of the poet. Here is a rare example, that despite her defiant individualism, Smith was not arrogant in her unique standpoint on society and death, and she reveals this modestly through the same ironic tone she uses in her treatment of the suburban masses.

Few modern poets approach death in society in such ironic terms as Smith does in 'The Suburban Classes'. German born Charles Bukowski, who moved with his parents to America in 1923 after the post-World War I collapse of the German economy,¹³⁴ is one of the few poets who, like Smith, was marginalised from conventional society, distanced from poetic movements, and cast aside as a non-serious poet (the rejection became the subject of many of his later works). Through poems such as 'The Meek Shall Inherit The World', 'Alone With Everybody', and 'The Ice-cream People', themes of suicide, mortality and isolation penetrate both the poet and his society. Even Bukowski, renowned for his brash realism, usually addresses these somber themes with a degree of melancholy in his tone, whereas Smith fully commits to the subversive irony she sets up in poems like 'The Suburban Classes'.

For Smith, religion would become a kind of politics. The social and spiritual were interwoven and her challenging of political systems parallels her challenging of God. Like many writers who witnessed the massacre that was World War I, Smith knew just how arbitrary "fate" or an uncaring God could be, and any faith she may have retained from her childhood was put into question during the war years. At the cessation of the war, how could anyone not challenge a God who "allowed" these cruelties and injustices to happen? T.S. Eliot's poem 'Ash Wednesday' was first published in 1930, after his conversion to Anglicanism, and

¹³⁴ Sounes, Howard, *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of Crazy Life*, Grove Press, New York, 1998, p. 8

Smith was one of Eliot's harshest critics at this time, censuring the religiosity of his writing and specifically disapproving of his play *Murder in the Cathedral* as being "a remarkable evocation of Christian fears". She felt Eliot was responsible for changing "human dignity to degradation".¹³⁵ For her part, Smith seemed aware of the dangers of submitting to "fear" in relation to Christianity, the power play fear entailed and the violent prejudices that could result from instilling fear into the gestalt of a society – particularly in light of the time she had spent in Germany.

Having essentially declared herself an agnostic as an adult, Smith's religiosity journeyed in the opposite direction to Eliot's. In poems like 'God and the Devil' and 'Mrs. Simpkins', and 'Mr. Over', Smith reveals her struggles with a Christian God, opting for a deliberated spiritualism above organised religion. In poems such as the above, Smith dialogically explores the horrified reactions of the agnostic-convert protagonist's social peers and the true identities and fickle intentions of "God" and the "Devil", illustrating that the two icons had lost control of a simple debate about the potential of humanity, and that humankind was the meaningless result of the social experiment.

Smith's conservative life and her dabbling with ideas about poetic death conflict with those poems that are more embracing of existence – or at least, politically and socially invested, to some extent. This might be viewed as a modern manifestation of Apollonian and Dionysian intellectual tension. Smith's intoxication by surreal fantasies of death often overshadows her articulated reasoning and literal representations of the day to day. It could be argued that sustaining the disparity between reason and fantasy is, as Baumert described it, a "coping" style for Smith, since she resolves this tension in many of her poems on politics, religion and society by deferring to death as the (at times, bizarre) solution to injustices and dissatisfactions in a jovially pragmatic voice. Smith calls upon ultimate freedom through Death, her dark knight, evocative of Dürer's knight as Nietzsche describes him in 'The Birth of Tragedy':

Here a disconsolate and solitary man might choose no better
symbol than the knight accompanied by Death and the Devil,
as Dürer has drawn him, the knight in armour with the gaze of

¹³⁵ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, pp.224-225

iron, who is able to make his way along the terrifying path,
undisturbed by his horrific companions and yet bereft of hope,
having only a horse and a hound at his side.¹³⁶

In the case of death and society, perhaps Smith herself is the solitary knight, ever aware of her perverse travel mates (Death and the Devil), her brave resolve is a mask of candid vernacular mimicking the inner child.

The devil in Smith's poems is not the promoter of great evil; rather he is most often a mischievous creature, an embodiment of mediocrity and inaction. This has correlations with England's inaction in the years preceding World War II, the privations and poverty of London's suburbs during the Great Depression and the anti-romantic social expectations of the time in relation to marriage, fashion, and female identity. The poems 'To the Tune of Coventry Carol', and 'The Devil-My-Wife (To the tune of 'Golden Slumbers')', show similar correlations between romantic love and the evil that John Donne touched upon in poems such as 'Holy Sonnet XVII: Since She Whom I Loved', and 'Love's Exchange' some three hundred years earlier. In her poems, Smith demonstrates the dissatisfaction she feels for passionless romantic relationships, likening the complacency of an unhappy union with the devil. This is an extension of Smith's antipathy to a Christian God; it could be argued that the poet is expressing the struggle of desiring to be whole-hearted in one's beliefs as an agnostic and the complacency of blind faith that can lead to ultimate dissatisfaction. The obvious contrast between Donne and Smith being the somberness with which both poets expressed their respective struggles with the love, faith and the devil. The aforementioned poems by Smith are linked by their suggestions for musical accompaniment in their titles, rendering any intensity in Smith's dealings with the subject obsolete, contrasting with Donne's stern circular religious predicaments.

Smith's marginalisation was equally as pronounced within the poetic and literary world as it was in the real world. Her invitation to read at a poetry event was denounced as "tasteless" by Dylan Thomas, the drawings which accompanied her poems were criticised for being "frivolous" by Philip Larkin, and the reputation she held as a lightweight poet endures some forty years after her death. Smith's perceived ambivalence to the grave issues surrounding

¹³⁶ Nietzsche, F., 2000, p.110

oppression and war unjustly eclipsed her position as a leading female poet. She was a survivor of two World Wars; she had visited Germany in the early 1930s and had first-hand experience of the tensions between England and Germany preceding World War II.¹³⁷ This experience coloured Smith's personal life, specifically her relationship with "Karl", the German man who was the muse for the character of the same name in *Novel on Yellow Paper*. According to her biographers, a Jewish friend of Smith's, Suzannah Jacobson, referred to Karl as "the Nazi boyfriend" and Smith was tainted by her association with him.¹³⁸ Yet having spent some time in Germany between 1929 and 1931, Smith was known to have loathed the country, its political directions and the resultant social atmosphere. There is particular mention in Barbera and McBrien's biography that Smith said she only felt safe again once she had "boarded the Channel ferry and headed for England".¹³⁹ Here again we find evidence of Smith's marginality; an English woman from the suburbs in a romantic relationship with a German man before World War II, never embracing his country or politics, nor judging him for them despite being judged herself by friends for entering into the romance.

In her book 'George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London', Kristen Bluemel flags the suggestion that Smith, like Orwell, had earned a reputation for anti-Semitism because of the provocative representations of Jews in her writing.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, as a suburbanite spectator in London, Smith's writing showed genuine insight into her perceptions of the London-suburban ambivalence towards the horrors of concentration camps in Germany. As her biographers point out:

...before the Second World War, Jews in England and their non-Jewish countrymen did feel alien to each other... Most of those who knew Stevie well think that her attitude toward Jews in *Novel on Yellow Paper* was the usual pre-war attitude of the English...¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W, 1985, pp.55-56

¹³⁸ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W, 1985, p.56

¹³⁹ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W, 1985, pp.56-57

¹⁴⁰ Bluemel, Kristin, *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2004, p. 27

¹⁴¹ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985 p.81

Despite the isolation involved in identifying and warning about the shortcomings of her own immediate surrounds, Smith did not exclude herself from ironical representations of her society. She refused to deny anything, preferring to challenge her own prejudices through frank poetic examinations.

In the section that follows I elect to discuss another of Smith's early poems, 'Night-Time in the Cemetery' which contrasts so exceptionally with 'The Suburban Classes' in its treatment of death and society. Mark Storey describes the poem as "one of (Smith's) most moving poems because it acknowledges the bitterness of death even as it recognises the affinity."¹⁴² Certainly this is one of the most apprehensive poems on death in Smith's catalogue, but the apprehension is largely directed at the mourners rather than at the dead:

I have a horror of this place
A horror of each moonlit mourner's face
These people are not familiar
But strange and stranger than strange peculiar
They have that look of a cheese do you know sour-sweet
You can smell their feet.¹⁴³

This exaggerated uneasiness with the mourners and the particular use of the word "horror" is very curious. It poses the question of why the speaker is more confronted by the living than by the dead. The voice is clearly affected by the consequences of death for the loved ones left behind, but interestingly, in the final rhyming couplet, the speaker alludes to the grave being her own, and then quickly contradicts this by saying it is her lover's. Perhaps this is a comment, again, on the consequences of death for the living – showing Smith's sensitivity toward the mourners' empathic internal deaths. It could be argued that this poem has a broader connection to World War I survivors, the nighttime symbolising the cessation of the war and the subsequent impact felt by a country in mourning.

'Night-Time in the Cemetery' does not shy away from the absurdist mockery of society and death that Smith uses in 'The Suburban Classes'. Indeed, it might be the very same suburbanites who so horrify the speaker in 'Night-Time in the Cemetery', and while there is

¹⁴² Storey, Mark, "Why Stevie Smith Matters", Rpt. In: Sternlicht, S. *In Search of Stevie Smith*, p. 193

¹⁴³ Smith, S., 1978, p.29

no comedy in her dealings with them here she emphasises their awkward strangeness though the “cheese” simile. Smith embraces her marginality once more in this poem; the speaker talks of the unfamiliarity of the mourners’ faces as though they are ghosts and she is somehow separate, different, and she takes on their collective pain. Perhaps, it is Smith’s adoration of death that instills this sympathy for the living.

In these two poems we see Smith’s death evolved beyond the personal experience. Smith did not reserve her dark knight only for herself in private fantasy, rather death is the inevitable shared absolution that connects the otherwise isolated poet with the human race. Smith offers death as a satiric solution to the limitations of mainstream British culture, just as she larks about death in the guise of alternate realities to solve the problem of internal suffering. The poet also touches on the sentimentality of coping with the deaths of others, demonstrating her accountability, her personal desire for death as discussed in earlier chapters.

The apparent duality between the satiric and the somber in Smith’s poems on death and society correspondingly manifests in her poems on God, religion and the church. Smith divulges an ambivalent position toward creationism in ‘Egocentric’, ‘Mr. Over’ and ‘God and the Devil’.¹⁴⁴ Each of the poems does not reject the existence of a God, and each of the poems pragmatically repudiates the adulation of God. In ‘The Bishops of the Church of England’¹⁴⁵ the reader finds the poet’s trademark sardonic mockery of the church, and once again (as in ‘The Suburban Classes’) is left unsure of Smith’s intentions. In ‘The Weak Monk’ and ‘Mrs. Simpkins’,¹⁴⁶ Smith uses blithe character sketches to illustrate the marginalisation entailed in attempts to question the relevancy of a Christian God.

It is the proposed insignificance of human kind that forms the pinnacle of the poem ‘God and the Devil’. In a sense, Smith amalgamates all her light-hearted treatment of the human condition, all her trademark flights of fancy, into this explanatory poem that asks the reader: “...why should bowels yearn and cheeks grow pale? / We’re here to point a moral and adorn a tale.”¹⁴⁷ Even the specifics of a purportedly moral humanity are designed to demonstrate the irrelevant. Left ambiguous in the first half of the poem they paint the human experience as

¹⁴⁴ Smith, S., 1978, p.23, 155, 30

¹⁴⁵ Smith, S., 1978, p.62

¹⁴⁶ Smith, S., 1978, p.137, 25

¹⁴⁷ Smith, S., 1978, p.30

fleeting and disinterested. While this contrasts with poems like ‘The Suburban Classes’ and ‘Night-Time in the Cemetery’ which claim a vested interest in social resistance and assimilation, it excuses the brusque comedy implemented in dealing with topics of society and morality. It is as though the poet is telling us to “lighten up”, which indeed Smith herself does often when dealing with the darker elements of human existence.

The poem ‘God and the Devil’ detaches its two protagonists from their conventional Christian roles and delivers them to the realms of science wherein God and the Devil are performing an experiment, objectively and emancipated from tensions between good and evil. Indeed, Smith paves a near-secular path for creationism in the poem by the implication that human life is an experiment. Essentially, she kills the biblical God and Devil in favour of two more academic characters and in doing so she frees humanity from the responsibility of being vital to the world. Perhaps this desire to be freed from such responsibility is, as in ‘Night-Time in the Cemetery’, another means to pardon the internal death-drive. The contradiction, of course, being that should the literal suggestion in the poem stand true, then why should a person take life so seriously as to wish for an early end to it? As well as instilling a sense of freedom, the acceptance of the meaninglessness of life carries with it the burden of feeling that all the suffering is in vain.

Denial of a strict interpretation of biblical ontology is also prevalent in ‘Mrs. Simpkins’. In this poem the protagonist abandons the traditional Christian dogma of the Trinity for simpler spiritualism in which a burden-free afterlife exists. The first couplet in the poem is typical of Smith’s self-effacing entry into controversial territory: “Mrs Simpkins never had very much to do / So it occurred to her one day that the Trinity wasn’t true,” directly appeals to Christian doctrine on the dangers of idleness. In this way, the speaker in the poem joins the ranks of the disapproving of unorthodox spiritualism, and it is as though the poet is holding up a mirror to reflect conservative reactions to unorthodox spiritualism. This kind of modest straying from precise Christian teachings is also iterated in ‘The Weak Monk’, another character sketch that describes a monk who writes a manuscript that defers from orthodox Catholicism:

One day the thought struck him
It was not according to Catholic doctrine;

His blood ran dim.¹⁴⁸

Just as in 'Mrs. Simpkins', at no point does the monk reject the existence of God. Both these characters embrace their own spiritualism, and both poems end with the oppression of alternative individualistic faiths through death. Irony plays a hand in the demise of both Mrs. Simpkins's spiritualism and the monk's manuscript. In the case of 'Mrs. Simpkins' it was not the protagonist's resistance to Christianity that drove her husband to suicide, but that he was horrified by her revelation that they would be together eternally. Again we see Smith's absurdist leap into death at work, ridiculing conservatism and weaving fantasy into realism with the additional character of the unnamed spirit who speaks to the protagonist. This is nicely juxtaposed by the realism in the final brazen image of Westminster County Hall, revealed so matter-of-factly to close the poem.

In this example, Smith explores death as an afterlife similar to notions of heaven, a vast contrast to most of her other fantastical representations of dying wherein absurdist motifs replace the sufferings of realism. The section of monologue in the voice of the spirit that reveals the truth about death is consistent with many of Smith's poems on death of the self:

You've heard it before but in case you forgot death isn't a passing away
It's just a carrying on with friends relations and brightness
Only you don't have to bother with sickness and there's no financial tightness'¹⁴⁹

Rarely does the poet offer death without the promise of some vague representation of an afterlife. Smith's obsession with death was for the end of corporeal suffering, and took many of her poems into surreal alternative universes. In 'Mrs. Simpkins' we find an alternative that conjures images of a Christian heaven, but without judgment or exclusion.

True to form, Smith injects another symbolic anomaly in the protagonist's Christian name, Maria. What does the poet mean by using the Judeo-Christian name of the mother of Christ? Perhaps this character naming is meant to denote familial legacy, to authenticate the extremeness of Mrs. Simpkins' rejection of the Trinity. Or perhaps Smith is merely toying with her reader, or adorning the verse with biblical images to juxtapose the heaviness of

¹⁴⁸ Smith, S., 1978, p.137

¹⁴⁹ Smith, S., 1978, p.25

orthodox Christian faith with the lightness that encompasses Mrs. Simpkins on her emancipation from it.

In the poem 'Mr. Over', Smith once more grapples with God and the devil. Still, the poet does not reject the existence of either, but the approach is unique to both 'Mrs. Simpkins' and 'God and the Devil' in that the two characters are referenced as implicitly interchangeable with death itself.

The poem is a kind of identity quest, as posited in the second stanza: "And who pray is this You / To whom Mr Over is gone?" As discussed in the chapter on 'Death of the Self', here the symbolic capitalisation of the word "You" denotes ties to a Christian God, and in the third stanza there is an implied general knowing of this with the inclusion of another Christian title for God, "father", expressed subtly sans-capitalisation. In the fourth stanza, after alluding to Christianity, the poet's summary of "You" turns spiritualist. A second scan of the poem finds many parallels between this "You" and the death character who appears in many of Smith's poems, perhaps most notably in 'Come Death (II)':

Ah me, sweet Death you are the only god
Who comes as a servant when he is called, you know,
Listen then to this sound I make, it is sharp,
Come, Death. Do not be slow.¹⁵⁰

Almost a perfect reversal of the "You" in 'Mr. Over', wherein God is suggested to be death, in this second stanza of 'Come Death (II)' Smith prays to Death, asserting that Death is God, and the proper noun is reserved as such.

The devil that emerges in the final stanza brings the poem to a dubious close. The devil here is not so much a voice of deception, as it is a voice of indulgence, given the enamored portrayal of God/death by the speaker. The devil reinforces the speaker's natural tendency toward death, and since death and God are almost transposable, Smith's construction of a metaphysical trinity opposes the Christian version in its tendency toward a naturalist ontology, particularly taking into account these lines in the third and fourth stanzas:

¹⁵⁰ Smith, S., 1978, p.282

But who is this beautiful You
We all of us long for so much
Is he not our friend and our brother
Our father and such?

Yes he is this and much more
This is but a portion
A sea-drop in a bucket
Taken from the ocean¹⁵¹

Again, Smith offers her readership a somewhat bizarre substitute for conventional organised religion, without fully deserting the broader parameters of Christian theology. The poem 'Egocentric' recapitulates Smith's apprehensive agnosticism in much more literal vernacular from the opening three couplets:

What care I if God be
If he be not good to me,
If he will not hear my cry
Nor heed my melancholy midnight sigh?
What care I if he created Lamb
And golden Lion, and mud-delighting Clam,¹⁵²

In these lines are biblical references to Lamb and Lion, and no apparent desire to deny the existence of a Christian God, rather a denial of his significance for the speaker and for human kind. The self-consciousness of the desire for divine vindication of the self is expressed in the title, and the poet opts not to dwell on the egocentrism of this perspective on the functionality of faith throughout the poem.

In 'Egocentric', Smith plainly criticises the arbitrary nature of faith, drawing attention to the injustices a hypothetical god allows. Smith's friend Reverend Gerard Irvine describes the poet's relationship with religion as:

¹⁵¹ Smith, S., 1978, p.144

¹⁵² Smith, S., 1978, p.23

... ambivalent, neither a believer, an unbeliever nor agnostic,
but oddly all three at once... One could say that she did not
like the God of Christian orthodoxy, but she could not
disregard Him, or ever quite bring herself to disbelieve in
Him.¹⁵³

This complex religiosity was evidently far from clinical or purely theoretical; emotion and visceral experience play a foundational role in Smith's poems that grapple with God. Once again, ambivalence guides her explorations of religion, never wholly believing or unbelieving, confined to the margins of religiosity. In 'Egocentric', Smith interrogates the relevancy of the exaltation of a nescient God for a mortal who is sensitive and suffering. Her particular use of the word "nescient" plays with double meanings; labeling God's will ignorant and simultaneously inferring God's own lack of religion.

Smith's degradations of the intellect and intent of religious figures extend to the mortal world in 'The Bishops of the Church of England'. In this poem, however, the poet inflicts a passive, sarcastic attack on perceptions of the Church's oppression of the lower middle class. The poet plays a kind of passive-aggressive devil's advocate, coming dangerously close to explicitly affronting the Bishops, then withdrawing suddenly, and so the dance around the issue persists:

No man can be a Bishop of the Church of England
And a fool.
A man can be a Bishop of the Church of England
And a knave.
But
Fortunately
Few if any of the Bishops of the Church of England
Are men of ill will,¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Smith, S., 1978, p.19

¹⁵⁴ Smith, S., 1978, p.62

The repetition of the title refrain is evocative of the taunting of a schoolyard bully, and the single-word lines (quite a rare modality in Smith's poetry catalogue) sustain the suspense before the eventual backpedalling of the final lines. What does Smith mean by walking such a line between defending the Bishops and simultaneously jibing at their integrity? This dance is broken in the two closing lines, which, without any overt elucidation, enforces the ultimate point of the poem on The Bishops of the Church of England, and an overarching aspiration to make amends for the sufferings and oppression of the lower middle classes.

In his essay on Smith's religious skepticism, John L. Mahoney draws on examples from 'How Do You See?' to demonstrate Smith's "taking issue with what she regards as conventional simplistic beliefs".¹⁵⁵ Indeed this poem, and specifically the final stanza, the poet discards her trademark playfulness in favour of an unembellished statement on the shortcomings of orthodox Christianity: "I do not think we shall be able to bear much longer the dishonesty / Of clinging for comfort to beliefs we do not believe in,"¹⁵⁶ Smith closes the lengthy critique in the most cathartic way she knows: "And, armed as we are now, we shall kill everybody, / It will be too much for us, we shall kill everybody."¹⁵⁷ Once more, death is offered as the inevitable consequence of a society that continues to subscribe to the contradictions and discrepancies of orthodox Christianity.

It is in the closing lines of 'The Bishops of the Church of England', accentuated with capitalisation to denote the title of the make-believe movement, "*the Amelioration of the Sufferings / Of the Oppressed Members of the Lower Middle Classes*",¹⁵⁸ which we find some of Smith's most campaigning sentiment amongst all her writings on politics and religion. The poem's close is fervently unlike the other poems on the dilemma of organised Christianity which end in death: the husband in 'Mrs. Simpkins', the monk in 'The Weak Monk', society in 'How Do You See?', Mr. Over and the speaker herself in 'Mr. Over', and so forth.

Perhaps the poem with the greatest resounding activist aesthetic from Smith's poetry catalogue is 'Voices Against England in the Night',¹⁵⁹ which does not appear in the 1978

¹⁵⁵ Mahoney, J.L. (ed.), *Seeing into the life of things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1998, p. 324

¹⁵⁶ Smith, S., 1978, p.243

¹⁵⁷ Smith, S., 1978, p.243

¹⁵⁸ Smith, S., 1978, p.63

¹⁵⁹ Smith, Stevie, *Mother, what is man?: Poems and drawings*, J. Cape, London, 1942

edition of *Selected Poems*, but was first published in *Mother, what is man?: Poems and drawings* and appears in Smith's novel, *The Holiday*.¹⁶⁰ A section of the poem was most recently featured in Allan Bennett's 2004 play *The History Boys*.¹⁶¹ The poem is mostly regular in meter and written as seven half-rhyming triplets, standing out as one of Smith's more visually and evenly proportioned poems. This structured presentation delivers a sense that the poem means business, and the ensuing content delivers a strong critique of England during wartime, without completely disposing of Smith's characteristic lightness of tone that offsets the darkness of despairing for one's weakened nation.

Interestingly, despite the poet's staunchly unique voice, Smith is once more compared with William Blake. Mahoney refers to Smith's "Blake-like illustrations of the poems" on religion.¹⁶² Philip Larkin contrasts the spectrum of Smith's work thusly:

She showed her heart by blurting things out, artlessly, in faux naïf style, as in "Voices Against England in the Night", that enabled her to slide from Daisy Ashford/Lorelei Lee mannerisms at one end of the scale to a strong and sternly pure rhetoric at the other, a reminiscence of Lawrence and Blake...¹⁶³

Larkin exemplifies the stern pure rhetoric in the final triplet of 'Voices Against England in the Night'. Smith's inner poetic romanticism emerges from the form and sound devices in this poem, forming part of a larger body of work on religion and English culture, Smith often shares in Blake's hostility toward the church. Even her representations of the devil are at times evocative of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In 'Voices Against England in the Night' the reader finds a pleading criticism of the nation's weakened state and the exhausting impact of a contemporary war on a country so fixed in its traditional customs. This is reminiscent again of Blake's opening line: *England! awake! awake! awake!* However, in the closing of this poem, Smith offers once again the proposition of death to console England's troubles:

¹⁶⁰ Smith, Stevie, *The Holiday*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1949, p. 128

¹⁶¹ Bennett, Allen, *The History Boys*, First performed Lyttleton Theatre, 2004

¹⁶² Mahoney, J. L., p.322

¹⁶³ Larkin, P., p.114

But they cried: Could not England, once the world's best,
Put off her governing garment and be better dressed
In a shroud, a shroud? O history turn thy pages fast!¹⁶⁴

The clever extension of the metaphor of clothing to traditional burial garments in the stanza's final lines is an unusually subtle descent into death for Smith. The use of "shroud" after references to Germany evokes contextual references to Jewish culture, and maintains the tension of the poem in a way that an abrupt, explicit deferral to death could not.

When contemplating British war poetry from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, poets such as Wilfred Owen, Matthew Arnold, Herbert Read and Siegfried Sassoon come to mind; male poets who evoked in their work images of battlegrounds and the senseless death of soldiers. As a female poet who spent time in Germany between the two World Wars, a poet to whom death was not something to be feared and who had an inclination to challenge her own perceptions and biases along with her readers, Smith's writings about war offer unique insights. Phyllis Lassner calls attention to the point that some years prior to Nazi Germany's emergence as a global threat, Smith was one of two female writers "assessing the cost of denying it".¹⁶⁵ Lassner refers to *Novel on Yellow Paper* and *Over the Frontier* to demonstrate Smith's literary railing against "'the cruelty' of Britain's 'outrageous aloofness'".¹⁶⁶ It is interesting to note that 'Voices Against England in the Night', first published some seven years before it appeared in *The Holiday* (Smith's novel that questions the status of post-war Britain), remained relevant to the times. This shows considerable insight on the part of the poet.

A more difficult question is how Smith reconciled her affection for death with the horrors of death in war which so many other wartime poets painted so grimly and emotionally. Smith's poems on war kept distance from the battlefields. It is possible that her experience contributed as much to the sensitivity with which she treated death in the instance of war as it

¹⁶⁴ Smith, S., 1942

¹⁶⁵ Lassner, Phyllis, "A Cry for Life: Storm Jameson, Stevie Smith, and the Fate of Europe's Jews" In: Holsinger, M. P. and Schofield, M.A. (eds.), *Visions of War: World War II in Popular Literature and Culture*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992, p. 181

¹⁶⁶ Lassner, Phyllis, p.181, (quoting Smith, S. in "Over the Frontier", 1938, p. 266)

did her overall love of death. Certainly seeing Britain through two World Wars; as a child she watched her mother lose her father to a life abroad at sea (albeit, for business, not for battle), her friendship with George Orwell who fought in Spain for the Republicans and served in the Home Guard in the Second World War, as well as her trip to Germany between the wars and numerous other experiences and alliances contributed to Smith's poetic authority on war and politics. Yet, as demonstrated earlier, Smith used her diverse observations ambivalently as though from a spectator position beyond which she could see both sides at play in every argument about war, religion and society.

A year prior to the publication of *Over the Frontier* and the year after *Novel on Yellow Paper* was published, Smith's first book of poetry was published. *A Good Time was had by All*¹⁶⁷ emerged in 1937, a few years prior to the start of World War II, and in it three poems stand out for this establishment of the poet's use of absurd character sketches to mockingly make social and political statements. These poems are: 'Lord Barrenstock', 'Private Means is Dead', and 'Major Macroo'.

'Private Means is Dead' exemplifies Smith's implementation of irony and wordplay in dealing with the senselessness of war. The multiple inferences of the opening line, their suggestion of depleted resources, of the death of reason, losing sight of the main goal – all resonate with antiwar sentiment. The final line offers an insight into the alternative to death on the battlefield: "Lies in the Generals Collapse Debility Panic and Uproar / Who are too old in any case to go to the War."¹⁶⁸

Lord Barrenstock is one of Smith's most shadowy characters. From the opening quatrain the Lord is embroiled in evil:

Lord Barrenstock and Epicene
What's it to me that you have been
In your pursuit of interdicted joys,
Seducer of a hundred little boys.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Smith, Stevie, *A Good Time Was Had By All*, J. Cape, London, 1937

¹⁶⁸ Smith, S., 1978, p.52

¹⁶⁹ Smith, S., 1978, p.48

In the poem's opening lines the speaker accuses her subject of pedophilia, punished by the Roman Catholic Church, likening the little boys to wider crimes against humanity, immediately emasculating the protagonist. The poem continues on laying charges against Lord Barrenstock. His deceptions and acts of oppression are cited and the conspicuousness of these injustices is noted: *The sins are red about your head / And many people wish you dead.*¹⁷⁰ After four rhyming couplets in this vein, the poem changes tack. The speaker expresses such repugnance at Lord Barrenstock that she deems they are unworthy of her attention – that it is his nonchalance, extravagance, and love of the gruesome that begs attention. It is a clever analogy, calling the aristocracy to order about the horrors of the ruling classes. The ruling classes are not the only ones criticised. Smith also attacks lower-middle class attitudes towards them, and they are equally culpable in their indifference and kowtowing. The figure of Lord Barrenstock is aligned with another poem from the same collection. The illustration that accompanies 'Beware the Man' depicts a bulbous, smug man "*whose mouth is small*"¹⁷¹ standing beside what appears to be Smith's self-portrait looking very displeased.

Also in this selected trilogy of character sketches is 'Major Macroo', Smith's poetic parody of the last tale in the Decameron about the Marquis of Saluzzo who puts his wife, Griselda, through numerous tests to determine her loyalty. Smith is in the company of Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Dekker in borrowing from the tale. In a sense, this poem might be more appropriately discussed in the earlier chapter on sexual death; however the title of Major given to the character Hawkaby Macroo adds a political dimension to a poem about a downtrodden wife. When reading, one considers the established analogy of the heavy luxuriant male from 'Lord Barrenstock' and 'Beware the Man', Smith offers her readers another such portrayal in Major Macroo: "He's fads and he fed them fat / And she could lump them and that was that."¹⁷² The mention of the military rank in the poem lends a sense of unyielding aggression to the character, and separates the poem from the Decameron tale through its implication that, unlike the Marquis, the Major, who is homosexual and has no intentions of eventually relieving his wife and that he acts sadistically from selfish indulgence rather than to test her. This could be taken as a statement on the unjust suffering caused by

¹⁷⁰ Smith, S., 1978, p.49

¹⁷¹ Smith, S., 1978, p.59

¹⁷² Smith, S., 1978, p.51

wartime, I would argue, particularly the suffering of women. The Griselda wife lives with an essentially dead husband, and remains faithful all the same.

What is the essential value of examining the representations of death in Smith's political and religious poetry, given that she largely retains a sense of ambivalence in her explorations? Aside from the revelation that death infiltrates the poet's consciousness beyond her more confessional poems on internal suffering, Smith's diverse treatment of the subject in especially its social and cultural sensitivities is particularly pertinent to its times. Death is never forsaken in an effort to appease social taboos in dealings with war, orthodox Christianity, or government. It is simply offered in a distinctly unique mode. Smith uses death in conjunction with politics and religion to symbolically assess the senselessness of war and its inevitable weakening of nations, as in 'Voices Against England in the Night' and 'Private Means is Dead'; to challenge absurdity within society on the topic of orthodoxy with an equal dose of absurdity as in 'Mrs. Simpkins'; and to explore the troubling disparity between social and economic classes in poems such as 'The Suburban Classes' and 'Lord Barrenstock'.

Most importantly, however, in analysing Smith's exploitation of death in an effort to reach ultimate truths of war and God, Smith's readers find tangible examples of the poet's ability to simultaneously interrogate flawed cultural norms and to challenge her own biases and shortcomings. Rarely does the poet impose her beloved death onto a society without self-consciously rebuking herself for it in some capacity, or without including herself as part of the problematic whole. It could be argued that there is a potential for arrogance when a poet so marginalised in her death-obsession and social values opts to critique the society from which she is distanced. However, to her credit, Smith is as severe in grappling with her own views on politics and religion as she is severe on the society which her poems critique.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Death Pact:

How Stevie Smith influenced *Killing the Jay*

I cannot recall which came first, my personal fascination with or my appreciation of Smith's multi-faceted representations of death. In 2001, as a young playwright in Canberra, my first three-act play *A Tribute to Black*¹⁷³ was performed – the title reminiscent of the first poem of Smith's I had read, 'Black March'. The "Black" in both titles represents both physical and spiritual metaphors for death, signified by the absence of light. For the better part of the decade that followed, Smith's death phenomenon became the subject of many of my undergraduate and postgraduate papers, and was to then inform my treatment of the death theme in my creative work.

Smith never wrote a verse novel. However, her work encompassed steadfast narrative voices, conversational technique, and fairytale conclusions. Perhaps if she had lived into the 1980s and 90s when the verse novel came back into favour with writers like Vikram Seth in America and Dorothy Porter and Alan Wearne in Australia, Smith might have lent her treatment of death, daily life and politics to the writing of such a novel.

I might have elected to submit a series of independent poems for the creative component of this thesis but I have always been inspired by poetic story-telling. Poetry that is arranged as a narrative is an ancient concept spawned by the epic form. The most famous literary examples of epic poetry are Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Homer's *The Iliad*. I am more specifically inspired by the great Victorian story-teller poets including Tennyson and Browning whose long-lyric verses have roots in mythology and dramatic monologue. The classic *Shahnameh* (or, *Book of Kings*) written by Ferdosi in Iran approximately one thousand years ago, consisted of 50,000 couplets written over sixty years.¹⁷⁴ The narrative is partially factual, partially fictitious, and strongly nationalistic. The work had the important historical and linguistic effect of bringing the Persian language back into focus after years of infiltration by

¹⁷³ Mokhtari, Tara, *A Tribute to Black*, Performed at Tuggeranong Arts Centre Theatre, 2001

¹⁷⁴ Ferdosi, A., *Shahname*, Reprint of Moscow edition, Hermes Publications 4th edition, Tehran, 2008

Arabic languages. Continuing the tradition, *The Lover is Always Alone*, translated from the Persian by Karim Emami, is a book of epic poems by modernist poet Sohrab Sepehri.¹⁷⁵ Sepehri's collection appeals to me for its strongly metaphorical confessional style which is not dissimilar to some of Smith's poems of the same genre despite obvious cultural contrasts, and also for its tonal creation of atmosphere. As a Persian-Australian poet, the epic has great significance to me. All of these writers shaped me and my work by offering beautiful formal techniques with effective narrative, therefore I feel strongly about sustaining this important and often overlooked genre for its historical, political, artistic and linguistic significance.

It seemed serendipitous to me that these poetic passions, Smith, and my own experiences of depression collided at a particular point in my creative development. My research into 'The Death of the Self' proved to be a confrontational experience, and directly aligned with my increasing curiosity about why certain individuals live most of their lives with a kind of inherent death-drive, when it seems so perverse in contrast with what is deemed to be normal human or animalistic survival instinct. Smith spoke of this in numerous of her poems, shedding light on the darkness of suicidal tendencies. I was inspired to explore these themes further in a contemporary Australian context, and apply poetic formality to the exposition of a character who not only appears to suffer from a type of mental illness (depression and anxiety) which elicits her own death-drive, but who also goes through a common traumatic life-experience (marital break-down) and draws upon the death-drive in a quest for emancipation from the suffering she incurs.

When Stevie Smith wrote the manuscript *Married to Death* in the year 1937, she was met with criticism for publically indulging her death obsession and writing about herself to the detriment of both her literary image and her mental health. The advice she received from David Garnett was so adamantly against the work that it was never published.¹⁷⁶

Subsequently, my own work, *Killing the Jay*, has met with similar criticisms – not only for the degree to which the piece is auto-biographical, but also for the perceived idealisation of suicide, and the exploration of death as a welcome resolution to the suffering of life. This thematic point of contention is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, how does a writer engage readers with representations of the rejection of life, negating the more accepted instinct for survival in times of suffering? Secondly, for a protagonist with an ongoing mental illness to

¹⁷⁵ Sepehri, Sohrab, *The Lover is Always Alone* (trans. Karim Emami), Sokhan Publishing, Tehran, 2004

¹⁷⁶ Barbera, J. and McBrien, W., 1985, p.109

be portrayed in the truest way, the writer must reject certain narrative conventions of character development, insofar as the protagonist is unlikely to come to an acceptable denouement wherein he or she is cured of the depression and anxiety that may have driven the inciting incident and climax of the narrative. Likewise, a personal philosophy favoring death seems unlikely to turn into fear or resistance in the realm of realism, and this point prevails in Smith's life and work, has been discussed in relation to Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath in previous chapters of this exegesis, and resonates in *Killing the Jay*.

Smith's creative treatment of the first of these difficulties is through engaging the reader with agreeable metaphors for death. Smith offers themes of suicide and dying as fanciful solutions to the suffering of life either through surrealist escapism such as in 'The Lady From the Well Spring'¹⁷⁷ in which the character Joan leaves her life forever to be voluntarily made captive by a beautiful woman, or through personifications of death as a charming, romantic savior, as in 'Black March'. There is joy in many of Smith's absurdist representations of death in her characteristically child-like voice. Smith celebrates the emancipation that dying brings about, and although it is sometimes expressed in irony, it is often bravely sincere.

As Mikhail Bakhtin wrote on Rabelais, "The theme of birth of the new was organically linked with death of the old on a gay and degrading level."¹⁷⁸ This tradition of embracing death with life and the degradation of suffering and laughter can be applied to Smith's perceivably lighter treatments of death. Her poems do not trivialise death through humorous metaphors, they simply show a familiarity and affection for death that prevails over societal taboos. Through the sometimes childlike voice that emerges in Smith's poems on death, we find the connection between innocence and mortality softens the potentially unrelenting sadness of a discussion of such dark themes. Rabelais understood the absurdity and comedy of suffering and the marriage of life and death and ironically, centuries later in dull and suburban London, a mousy, self-effacing and depressed woman argued exactly for this in some of the twentieth century's most potent and least acclaimed poems.

Although the parallel between youth and mortality exists in *Killing the Jay*, my approach to the problem of entreating readers to suspend their resistance to the confronting subject of suicide differs from Smith's tendency toward absurdist metaphors for death that portray its

¹⁷⁷ Smith, S., 1978, p.173

¹⁷⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and his World*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1984, p. 79

freeing power. In his book *The Death-Ego and the Vital Self*, Gavriel Reisner asserts that "...between the live-drive and the death-drive, the death-drive constitutes the weaker desire, but yields the stronger romance."¹⁷⁹ While this paradox emerges in many of Smith's poems that explore the death-drive (particularly the romance of death as it is personified in poems like 'Black March'), there is little romance in my treatment of the protagonist (Jay) and her submission to the death-drive, as it occurs twice in the verse novel. Jay's desire for death is portrayed as a weakness, through sections such as the foreshadowing premonitions she has of her mother's reaction to her potential suicide, the pathetic image of Jay in the hospital both in parts One and Five of the verse novel, and the stages of self-hatred that she experiences during Part Five.

Jay's desire to die is portrayed as ambivalent; I intended to emphasise her desire to escape from suffering at any cost above illustrating the character's death-drive. This results in a somewhat weak protagonist who is passive in her actions and desires. To a large extent, Jay is a victim of fate brought on by her own complacency. This was a conscious decision on my part in an effort to illustrate a loss of confidence and a sense that the protagonist had become intimidated by the prospect of another "bad decision" in life after separating from the abusive husband. It could be argued that it was this complacency that Smith challenged the emotional and social repercussions of in many of her poems on female sexuality. The devilish desire for death emerges in Smith's poems on the unhappy wife and mother, just as the death-drive takes hold of Jay in *Killing the Jay* during her marriage breakdown.

The choice to resist Smith's absurd and humorous treatments of death came about partly as a result of writing in a different era. In a contemporary context, after the emergence of the grunge genre, there is greater scope for more brash dealings in realism in writing on the darker aspects of life. It is also partly due to the fact that *Killing the Jay* is a novel based wholly in realism, whereas Smith's poems are self contained micro-narratives that borrow from the absurd to encapsulate the attraction to death through metaphor. Indeed, as discussed earlier, Smith's own novels were also essentially semi-autobiographical realism.

Smith uses the absurd effectively in her poetic calls for death. Her many metaphors, such as a dark wood in 'I Rode with my Darling...', and the north wind calling in 'Lightly Bound',

¹⁷⁹ Reisner, Gavriel, *The Death-ego and the Vital Self: Romances of Desire in Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, Massachusetts, 2003, p. 25

romanticise death in a way that will either recruit readers to her unique affection for death, or alienate them with their ambiguous suicidal suggestiveness. There is also much immediate escapism to be taken from Smith's fantastical representations of death which present as more ambiguous flights for freedom. Perhaps the narrative device in *Killing the Jay* that is nearest to those Smithian metaphoric calls for death is the mosquito in the opening chapter, which taunts Jay and escapes her attempts at killing it. The mosquito seems to release the death-drive within Jay. Like the north wind in 'Lightly Bound', the protagonist is motivated to escape from the suffering of an unhappy marriage, and an unhappy life.

A great deal of Smith's own voice emerges in her stranger poems on death as a welcome relief from suffering. Her poems read as deeply personal confessionals which are sometimes devoid of rationalism. This is easily forgiven, since personal views on life and death are most often entangled with spirituality and emotion, however for the task of writing *Killing the Jay*, I felt it was important to separate the phenomenon of a subtle internal death-drive from perceived spiritualism which often emerges when writers offer surrealist alternatives to the afterlife. The reason for this is that in my verse novel, mental illness and the wish to die are strongly linked, and I felt a responsibility to avoid embellishing a romantic notion of suicide in order to authentically lead the reader through the internal processes preceding a suicide attempt.

In light of my personal experiences with depression, both first and second hand, I am driven to challenge the taboo treatment of suicide and suicide attempts of many Western societies. It could be argued that the willingness of many to reduce acts of suicide to selfishness or attention seeking behavior has become an extension of discrimination against people living with mental illnesses. Chapter two, 'Urination and Sympathy', in *Killing the Jay*, is one example taken from real life that examines this discrimination as it is basically formalised within the health sector. This chapter has two aims. Firstly, it mirrors a potential reader's own biases toward people suffering from suicidal thoughts, and secondly it relates to the sufferer's experience intimately enough that some sense of empathy might be achieved. These aims run through the narrative in some way, opening the verse novel to the grunge realism genre. Not only for the freedom the genre entails insofar as describing dark and disturbing events, but also for its frankness and the ability to strike directly at challenging truths that emerge throughout the novel. These aspects of *Killing the Jay* form the most significant divergence from Smith's poetic influence on my work.

Another reason for my avoidance of the absurd is that Smith's poetry about death and the self is largely based in fantasy and distant longing, whereas there is a sense of immediacy in *Killing the Jay*. Smith's death is often a passionate conviction, while the moments when my protagonist is faced with death are submissive; desperation for release and forfeit to life's suffering. Ultimately, when death is posed in Smith's poems as one of many possibilities it is welcomed for its 'freeing power'. When the suffering is so intense that death becomes the only option (or is perceived that way, as it is in *Killing the Jay*), then it becomes devoid of romance and mystery.

One technique which I borrowed from Smith in her treatment of death was to implement a degree of distance in the speaker's voice. The task of adding light and shade to such a fundamentally dark subject proved challenging. There is a desire to make the text readable, and to rescue the reader from a journey of unrelenting gloom, but there equally exists a strong need to remain faithful to the depth of the emotions of the protagonist. Smith relies on the voice of the child savant to achieve this to great effect. The childlike speaker in many of Smith's poems has leeway to approach death with innocence and earnestness, but also challenges the reader's sense of mortality by identifying death with birth.

My attempt at implementing distance in the speaker's voice throughout *Killing the Jay* was quite different. I used the rhythm of musical cadence with internal rhyming and chiming in my narration to maintain some consistency through a naturally volatile plot line. This circumvents any alienation of the reader when presenting darker themes and ideas. The most confronting section in my verse novel is in Part Five, which describes the days and weeks leading up to my protagonist's second suicide attempt. Through this brush with her own mortality, I attempted to intersperse Jay's internal monologues of self-loathing with grounding external action sequences, all the while retaining the rhythm of the piece – accelerating and intensifying the cadence only for the panic sequence that takes place on the tram in chapter four, 'The Big Crash', and limiting the length of each chapter so that the weightiness of the subject matter would not slow the section down too abruptly.

Whilst writing my second draft of *Killing the Jay*, I read Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*,¹⁸⁰ written entirely in Onegin stanzas. Prior to this, *Killing the Jay* had a much freer varying meter, and very sparse rhyming. The fluidity of Seth's iambic sonnets, and the reassuring nature of more consistent sound techniques during the more emotionally heightened sections of *The Golden Gate* inspired me to implement the same techniques in my own work. I attempted to strengthen my narrator's voice as the novel progressed. In part five, for the first time, the narrator becomes self-referencing. I used this technique to divert attention away from the conversation between Jay and Gray at the bar, and draw the reader's attention to the broader scene of how the two main characters were being perceived by onlookers, how they fitted into their immediate setting as well as how they were located within their society in general. This technique is another trait that links my work to Smith's influence. In her poetry, Smith is known for her use of multiple speakers within one poem (such as in 'Not Waving but Drowning'). Smith's sound techniques are often either sporadically placed, or quite neatly resonant of fairytales, as in 'Away, Melancholy' which varies between rhyming couplets and *abab* rhyme schemes, and depends upon the title refrain appearing within each stanza.

In structuring the poetry for *Killing the Jay*, I aspired to use free verse to its greatest strength – implementing poetic techniques to enhance the text rather than restricting the text to a prescribed form as Seth does in his decision to commit to the Onegin sonnet. This economical use of poetics in free verse is something I originally discovered through reading Smith's work. As mentioned in the introduction of this exegesis, the first poem of Smith's that I read was 'Black March' and the use of enjambment between the first and second stanzas altered my understanding of the value of free verse poetry. The irony here is that Smith's sometimes profound technical mastery is largely overlooked by academics and critics.

In 2009 I sent a section of my verse novel to literary journal *Heat*. One criticism of my work in the earlier drafts, has been that the protagonist is prone to repeating her mistakes, both in her interpersonal relationships and in her relationship with death and dying. There was concern that not enough internal monologue was included throughout some of the more confusing or somber sections to explain Jay's behavior. My intention was to explore Jay's motives through action, relying on sequences of cause and effect to reveal her character in the first few sections of the verse novel, interspersing occasional brief sections of narration in

¹⁸⁰ Seth, Vikram, *The Golden Gate*, Faber and Faber, London, 1986

Jay's own voice. As the novel progresses, and Jay's narration ceases, the narrator's voice gradually intensifies to over-the-shoulder third person, and more sections of poetry describing Jay's internal processes are introduced – particularly during the emotional break-down that occurs in part five.

Although many of Smith's poems are written in the first person, there exists a similar tendency in her work to introduce the poetic narrative with external descriptions before disclosing the speaker's internal processes that result in either a literal or metaphoric suicide. This gradual exposition of character is found in poems such as 'My Hat', in which the first person speaker describes the events leading up to the hat running away with her, before the revelation that she is, in fact, quite delighted with having left her life behind to spite her mother. Smith sometimes offers a summarising denouement to close these poems (in 'My Hat', the denouement occurs in the closing rhyming couplet: *So in this early morning land I always wear my hat / Go home, you see, well I wouldn't run a risk like that*), and together with her clever character sketches, the poet reveals her firm grasp of narrative structure even in relatively short, self-contained poems. Perhaps the more gauzy, playful poems that influence the way in which Smith's poetic style is perceived are not always given the opportunity to stand up to thorough textual analysis. This point contributes to my chosen approach to the discussion on representation of death in Smith's poetry. My instinct is that even when it appears that Smith is being non-committal and ambiguous in her poems, each of her works retains an undercurrent of conviction in her explorations of themes of death.

This is the extent to which *Killing the Jay* has been directly influenced by Smith in terms of poetic style. Overall, my poetry tends to be more seduced by characteristically barefaced, impactful poets who invest in literal representation more than Smith does. Although Smith is often described as a confessionalist, many of her representations of death, and of life, are heavily layered with wordplay, double meaning, irony and fantasy. While all of these traits are worthwhile for shorter, self-contained poems, the interpretative nature of this type of writing can be less accessible in longer narrative poetry forms which rely on poetics to drive a succinct plot.

In developing the poetic narrative structure for *Killing the Jay*, I looked to the contemporary Australian verse novelist Dorothy Porter, particularly as a guide to including dialogue within

the poetry. In her highly regarded verse novel, *The Monkey's Mask*,¹⁸¹ Porter uses the first person voice to narrate the story and intersperses significant dialogue between the characters, all of which conforms to the considerably short lines and utilises sporadic end-stop and enjambment to negotiate the rhythm of the speech within the short lines. This is particularly effective for the casual-conversational Australian vernacular of each character, which is typically made up of short phrases and mono-syllabic words. In writing the dialogue for *Killing the Jay*, I attempted to keep the phrasing to a similar rhythm to the rest of the poetic narrative, without altering line-lengths too dramatically. There were some instances, however, where I allowed a section of dialogue to present almost as it would appear in prose, for example Jim's brief emotionally heightened lecture to Jay in Foray into the 'Pond with the Other Fish': "You think he doesn't have a hundred models to keep him busy in England? You're just another place to stay in another city in the world to him! He's practically famous, what are you?" The choice to abandon the line-breaks in this section of speech was a deliberate attempt to depart from measured control over the rhythm of the lines, and to give the impression of Jim's rage in blurting out the abuse.

Another point of contrast between *Killing the Jay* and *The Monkey's Mask* (as well as many of Porter's other verse novels) is the choice to depart from the convention of creating the whole narrative out of short, individually titled poems. Even Vikram Seth presents two self-contained sonnets on each page which are numbered and divided into chapters. Instead, I opted to dedicate one long (essentially epic) poem to each chapter with changes in setting annotated by stars and stanza breaks within the single poem. Each chapter title encompasses the whole poem that follows. The primary reason for this macro-structural choice was to avoid the stop-start impact of reading one short poem then moving onto the next. I attempted to maintain the reader's engagement with each chapter, using the longer poetic form to deliver the strongest possible sense of setting and mood within each section. In one sense, this may create a more challenging experience for the reader who may be expecting pauses between sections of poetry. Conversely, it makes the experience of reading the *Killing the Jay* more akin to reading a prose novel which is structured using lengthier chapters. One factor that influenced this choice was seeing *The Monkey's Mask* performed in an onstage

¹⁸¹ Porter, Dorothy, *The Monkey's Mask*, Picador/Pan McMillan, Sydney, 2000

adaptation,¹⁸² and feeling that some of the tension of the plot was lost through the obvious breaks between poems.

Other poets who inspired the writing of *Killing the Jay* include modernist American poets, and it is perhaps these influences that are most prevalent in my poetic style. I look to Charles Bukowski, a poet who suffered similar criticisms to Smith for not being a ‘serious poet’ during much of his career. Opposing Smith’s fantastical poetic embellishments, I admire Bukowski’s frankness, economical imagery and simple, encompassing closings, particularly in poems like ‘Hello There!’ which closes with the stanza:

when death comes with its last cold kiss
I’ll be ready:
just another whore
come to
shake me
down.¹⁸³

Bukowski infuses descriptions of action and the external with reflections that are almost self-conscious and questioning, without becoming consumed by elaborate internal monologue and emotionality. I intended the same balance of internal and external in the bar and pub scenes of *Killing the Jay*, so that the reader would be engaged in the setting and dialogue, as well as the characters’ perceptions of the action. I was also influenced by John Ashbery’s more contemporary poems, particularly the work published in *A Worldly Country*,¹⁸⁴ for their sensual conjuring of place. The settings in *Killing the Jay* are deliberately concise representations of real localities in Australia, including Sydney’s inner suburbs, Newcastle in New South Wales, Lake’s Entrance in Victoria and Melbourne and its western suburbs. My treatment of everyday marginality and disturbia are inspired by the Beat poets, and particularly Alan Ginsberg’s poems, such as ‘Howl’¹⁸⁵ and ‘A Supermarket in California’.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Davis, Joanne and Porter, Dorothy, *The Monkey’s Mask*, Performed at 45 Downstairs, 2006

¹⁸³ Bukowski, Charles, *Come On In*, Harper Collins, New York, 2006, p.110

¹⁸⁴ Ashbery, John, *A Worldly Country*, Carcanet, Manchester, 2007

¹⁸⁵ Ginsberg, Allen, *Howl and Other Poems - Introduction by William Carlos Williams*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2006 edition, p. 9

¹⁸⁶ Ginsberg, Allen, p.29

I looked to the Confessionalists, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton for their portrayals of feminine internal distress, and Robert Lowell for his dreamlike rolling rhythms.

Stylistically, *Killing the Jay* is more influenced by my readings of these poets than by Smith, but thematically I have, in a sense, carried on Smith's fanciful affection for death to the action of indulging the affection, reminiscent of her more immediate, somber representations of dying in poems like *Not Waving but Drowning*, and also the poems that encompass all the struggles of loneliness and isolation.

What then do I largely owe to Smith, and how does she continue to speak down the poetic generations?

Firstly, Smith's work exemplifies the contemporary relevance and potency of employing a balanced tension between Apollonian and Dionysian traits in the poetic treatment of Death – particularly suicidal death and attitudes toward the death of the self. There exists a push to either commit to a wholly self-conscious, comedic realisation of the topic of death, in order to sustain a break in tension within which to rationally explore a taboo subject, or to submit to the reckless abandon of the emotionality and passion evoked by instinctual responses to the desire or the opposing fear of death. Smith's approach represents both these treatments, an ironic balance of the two that emerges through her strong narrative voice. For example, in the section of *Killing the Jay* after Jim reveals his secret about having starred in a pornographic film, Jay's reaction of uncontrolled and manic laughter precedes the quiet revelation that a part of her has died. This is intended to show the absurdity of the denial of a rational response, and the simultaneous alleviation of the tension of something coming to a point of absolution. There are also sections throughout *Killing the Jay* that reveal the protagonist's ennui, her depression and anxiety, and her simultaneous intoxication by things like music, nature and chaos. By developing a character who is equally as self-aware as she is reckless, I was able to explore both the logical thought processes associated with the inner death-drive, as well as the irrational feelings and actions that manifest as a result of the death-drive.

Secondly, I examine Smith's courage in challenging her own values in relation to conventional gender roles and problems of complacency toward socially accepted forms of prejudice such as reactionary impulses in certain political climates, particularly in suburban London prior to World War II. Smith's perceived separatism manifested in her non-

involvement in modernist poetic movements, the isolation brought on by a life-long commitment to an idea as culturally perverse as the adoration of death, and the geographical and lifestyle distance she maintained from her peers. Despite this marginality, Smith held herself to the same poetic critiques of the society in which she lived and worked. Each poem in which she challenges political, religious and cultural conventions she is equally challenging her own values.

As discussed in my third chapter, to many critics this aspect of Smith's work is taken as indecision or ambivalence. It may be argued, however, that the courage and deeply reflective sensibility of Smith's refusal to compose absolute postulations on political, religious and cultural issues achieves a potentially complex treatment of the subjects that might otherwise be lost. The freedom to challenge social injustices and simultaneously observe and question my own biases toward controversial themes was instrumental in writing *Killing the Jay*. I was able to probe questions around themes such as Jay's suicidal tendencies, the Australian drinking culture, depression, anxiety and the psychoses of a poet, as well as the failed shotgun rock and roll wedding. This allowed greater scope for a more complex exploration of themes, independent of a conclusive moral to the story which I felt would have been unfaithful to the reality of my protagonist's situation.

Thirdly, Smith's marginality contributes to her unselfconscious poetic formality. As one of the few modern poets whose work was not linked with a prescribed experimental style, Smith's poetic forms do not draw attention to themselves; they act as a vehicle for the communication of meaning. In this way, her poems exemplify the greatest strength of the free verse genre – that is to implement sound and structural techniques to enhance the meaning of the poem, rather than shaping the meaning to fit a villanelle or sonnet, for instance, or accentuating poetic experimentation for more abstract representations of meaning. This may be argued to be a purist perspective on free verse poetry, but Smith's formal control and communicative verse taught me the power of so many sound techniques, such as internal rhyming, as well as the impact of structural choices like end-stop and enjambment. While I drew inspiration from other poets for the style of verse in *Killing the Jay*, Smith's poems taught me how to punctuate my natural poetic rhythms, which is perhaps the most important influence I take from this eccentric poet whose obsession with death spawned some of the most touching, insightful and technically excellent poems of the twentieth century.

At its core, *Killing the Jay* is about a female protagonist who is drawn to death as a relief from the absurdity and suffering brought on first by an oppressive marriage, and then by intense internal anxiety and depression. This narrative of the pull towards death resulting from a desire to end suffering reveals itself in all of Smith's poems examined in earlier chapters of my exegesis. In my chapter 'Death of the Self', the internal complex of emotions associated with the human fascination with death in Smith's poetry informed my own protagonist's emotions and thoughts directly preceding her suicide attempts. In my chapter 'Sexual Death', the sense of freedom that submitting to death's seduction entailed for Smith's female protagonists inspired what ultimately drove Jay to submit to death's seduction. Therefore, the resonant core of Smith's poetics of death has informed the delivery of death in *Killing the Jay*.

CONCLUSION

The Significance of Representations of Death in the Poetry of Stevie Smith

This exegesis has demonstrated that since her first collection of poems was published in 1937, the one constant theme in Smith's work is death. In interviews with Kay Dick, and in numerous of her letters to friends and colleagues, Smith admitted her obsession with death openly and frankly. The manuscript *Married to Death* never made it to publication because of David Garnett's insistence that the death obsession was becoming indulgently dangerous. There are many literal and metaphoric representations of death as a relief to life's suffering for the individual facing the absurdity of societal norms and gender roles, as well on a cultural level in the face of political and religious injustices.

The following five key representations of death have shown to be prevalent in Smith's body of poetic work:

1. The personification of death, depicted as the masculine construct of a hero, a dark knight, a friend, a lover, and as interchangeable with God.

2. Representations of female protagonists who are seduced by the fascination with death, which is often manifested through the male personification of death. The women in Smith's poems know suffering and leave their present-world male lover to indulge the desire for "extreme otherness", in poetic response to the female identity given to death in classical Greek narrative. Whereas the classic Greek hero must resist his pull towards death, Smith's heroines are torn between the man and the male-personified death. Smith reclaims the ideology of the hysterical woman who is easily seduced and reduces the role of "male" to simply be a signifier for the present world.
3. Absurd metaphors for death in Smith's poems are signified by the speaker or protagonist within the poem permanently and deliberately leaving the realm of present-world realism. The characters are faced with the possibility of a world that is an alternative to human suffering and mediocrity, adorned in Smith's trademark fairytale aesthetic. By choosing the fairytale world, the characters experience the emancipation brought on by dying.
4. Representations of death that manifest as comic, or childlike in tone and vernacular show Smith's "artistic mastering of the horrible and the Comic as the artistic release from the disgust at the absurd."¹⁸⁷ The childlike voice in Smith's poetry on death serves many poetic functions, including achieving distance in the speaker's voice, marrying the notions of birth and death to show the absurdity of life, and softening otherwise harsh perspectives on life and death.
5. Representations of death to society in Smith's poems are often ironic critiques of European culture. Through offering death as a solution to the shortcoming of her society, Smith reconciled her own marginality caused by the death-obsession. Although in life, the poet existed within the margins, in death all is resolved.

¹⁸⁷ Nietzsche, F., 2000, p.36

Each of the case study poems in this exegesis has been analysed for its exemplification of an aspect of one or more of these five key representations of death. The direct relationship between death and the use of techniques such as personification, masculine and feminine tensions, absurd fairytale constructs, childlike tone and vernacular and irony, establishes a new way of reading other of Smith's poems which also apply these techniques.

Despite the abundance of the death theme, the majority of existing research into Smith's poetry hinges on feminist theory, and largely assert that her trademark childlike voice, fairytale aesthetic as well as the drawings accompanying many of her poems each have the effect of rendering her meanings ambivalent. Contrary to this idea, through the in-depth exploration of Smith's death poetics, my exegesis has demonstrated her sophisticated use of traditional conversationalist technique, gothic romanticism, poetic narrative and characterisation, and complex responses to some of the fundamentals of Greek tragedy as laid out by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. It could be argued that by revealing death as it is represented through each of the five key techniques, we resolve previously perceived weaknesses in Smith's poems such as ambiguity and the use lightweight aesthetics.

Writers like Ruth Baumert accurately identify Smith as a poet who was marginalised.¹⁸⁸ Her marginality was strongly connected to her death-obsession, her depression, and her refusal to meet social expectations such as marriage and motherhood, as well as her strange poetics which distanced her from the á-la-mode of her time. Julia Kristeva talks about the unique perspective that marginality entails – that existing in the margins allows a person ultimate access to whatever lies outside the margin,¹⁸⁹ which implies a certain objectiveness of observation. Given that Smith's marginality was, at least, in part due to her sensitivity to the suffering of human existence, I have argued that her lifelong fascination with death can be likened to Nietzsche's description of the Dionysian man in Greek tragedy who is overcome by the absurdity and horror of human existence and is driven toward death. Therefore, what is often interpreted as ambivalence in Smith's poetry is actually the poet reconciling her marginality with the death-obsession that is so unacceptable to her social and professional peers.

¹⁸⁸ Baumert, R., p.204

¹⁸⁹ Baumert, R., p.216

Throughout this exegesis I have shown that death emerges as the personified mysterious lover, as a savior, and as God, and also through metaphors which evoke images of escape and freedom, like the housewife who breaks her tethers to husband and child to go out the kitchen window and be drawn upwards and away by the North wind. Through these imaginary constructs of death, expressed through ironic childlike voices and using fairytale aesthetics, Smith consoles the horror and absurdity of existence using art, just as Nietzsche's Dionysian man is forced to do in order to survive the death-drive. In a sense, Nietzsche offers art and comedy as an alternative to suicide. Concurrently, Smith is one of the few female death-obsessed poets who survived a suicide attempt and died of cancer in old age. The dangerous indulgence that David Garnett warned of in relation to *Married to Death*, it could be argued, was what saved Smith from a suicidal fate.

Smith's poetry goes one step further than Nietzsche's statement that "Art alone can turn those thoughts of disgust at the horror or absurdity of existence into imaginary constructs which permit living to continue."¹⁹⁰ by reclaiming the absurd and celebrating the fascination with dying.

Borrowing from many of Smith's poetics, including the notion of death as a desired solution to the suffering of human existence, my verse novel *Killing the Jay* delivers a female protagonist's seduction by death to a present day setting in the grunge realism genre through literal representations of suicide. The dream sequences are inspired by Smith's absurd fairytale scenarios. All form a complex exploration of the predominant theme that drove her body of poetic work through to her final poem 'Come, Death (II)'.

¹⁹⁰ Nietzsche, F., 2000, p.36

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Killing the Jay

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KILLING THE JAY

BY

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PART ONE

1. Mosquito madness

Of the tubes and needles
puncturing skin,
curing the toxic sea within,
Jay has little memory.

A day and night
spent hospital bound
with sounds of real emergencies
outside the ward,
she was alone there
floored from the drugs –
the ones she'd taken
or the ones they'd given? –
No sleep,
no wakefulness,

had she actually died?

They sent in a shrink,
Or a welfare person
who left when she wouldn't cry
or admit she tried to die.

Jay still doesn't know what's true
not caring for consequence
a moment of mosquito-madness
a night of sad words
on empty pages
the last stages of a cancerous marriage,
painkiller-carriage into peace

and quiet.

A dark realisation -
the moment may have passed.
she had a small window
to squeeze out of
now the window may have closed,
'til the next turn
he leaves her.

The misery is stable
disabling,
maybe weeks from now.
she'll have to stay here
in this place
in this world
stay
for weeks, perhaps.

She called Gray,
mid-way through the pack of thirty
feeling dirty and like
a punch in the back of the throat,
damn mosquito buzzing by
not once or twice
but constantly from midnight
til 4 in the morning.
Soaring past her left ear
then her right, not fearing
its plight if she caught it
and crushed it, wings and head
in her sleepless trance.

Lights on, then off again.

And Jim in the lounge,
set up to sleep,
getting up every half hour
pacing around the creaking
floorboards preparing her...

CRASH

another of her ornaments or
vases smashed against a wall,
muttered swearing
brewing her fear of calling out.

Fear.

The name of the night.
Or was it Agitation?
Alone beneath the covers,
livid lover in the other room
breaking things and threatening
to leave her soon,
sleeplessness,
and worst of all
an unrelenting mosquito calling her
to end the madness.

Jay bought the pills a day ago
she usually wouldn't keep
such temptation near,
she must have known.
Reaching for the hiding place
she considered whether to crush
to enhance the race
toxicity to the veins and liver

or to grace the end
with what in life sustained her:
writing and poetry.

The choice was clear:
to write and take the pills
try not stir her dear who was
breaking a plate in the kitchen
in the dark.

Jay was thinking of Gray
and what he'd tell her about apathy
this day that she'd lost her curiosity
for tomorrow.

Gray knew apathy well,
since their high school days
when he'd be late
without fail
the teachers cracked jokes
it was so consistent.

Gray would say it was funny, too
though he got blue about his
insomnia post-scarlet fever,
age sixteen, he was
never mean to anyone,
just grumpy in the mornings.

She must have called him
knowing he'd be awake at 4am,
just to see
what last words
he had for her
or she had for him...
Mobile phone hot at her ear,

she didn't know what Gray was saying,
suddenly distracted
by the frayed leopard-print throw
and the numbness growing
down her calves,
then the echo of footsteps
coming closer,
“What? Gray?”
she must have said
before the phone slipped
from her tingling fingers,
which was when Jim stormed in.

“Fuck, Jay!
What have you done?
What did you take?
Where are the rest?”
Between rage and concern.

The next moment
Jim was stroking Jay's back
as she leant over the bowl
heaving a whole lot of nothing,
his attempts at soothing
increasing the nausea
but at least it was touching.

The next minute,
passing the phone,
to call Alex,
Jay shouldn't be alone,
she should get to hospital,
Jim wouldn't take her...

Alex raced across town

found her in a ball in the corner
cried with her.
gathered her up
like a baby
into the truck and to emergency.

The sight must have amused,
dressed in a crocheted poncho
and embroidered flair jeans,
busting at the seams sick
already spewed once on the way,
hair a mess
eyes blood-shot, teary
stumbling to the pristine
white and disinfected plastic desk –
where the triage nurse,
framed in windex-smearred glass,
matching her bombastic entry
not looking up from the form, asked:
“WERE YA TRYIN’ TA KILL YASELF?”
Loud enough for the waiting room to hear.

Jay cleared her throat and said:
No.

2. Urination and sympathy

There were few quiet moments
in the hospital between riots
of patients and
gossiping nurses,
quietly cursing the self-absorbed girl
in bed twelve:

“There are people here
desperate to survive,
why bother keeping her alive?”
Voices between her ears
or outside?

Jay couldn't tell
but from the way they'd not respond
when she rang the bell
for help to go pee,
and they didn't answer
and she sat-up in bed
surrounded by the spinning floor
focused on lifting one
of the three versions of the IV bag
off the hook,
use the other hand
easy, easy
careful not to dislodge
the needle in her forearm
or wet her pants
if, indeed, she was wearing any
wait for the floor to slow down
before her feet touched down,
the nurses outside

unaware as she crept
steady short strides
clutching divider curtains
to the door,
entering the sobering illuminated
corridor blindly
before a male nurse saw her...
“Hold on, I’ll get you a stand for that,”

And with those words
Jay fell in love,
determined not to cry
in front of nurse-guy
or any other nurse
at the station, she wheeled
her IV by, unsympathetic
to her pathetic situation,
as her pupils dilated
adjusting to the light
toilet sign in sight she moved
toward it.

Back in the room
the blackness interrupted
by the black-blue of the sky
behind the window
with no shutters or blinds.
There were no stars,
just an expanse of life
in black-blue.

Through the hospital haze of
plastic trays and linoleum
to the celestial canvass

out the window, toward reverie...

*An xy Fairlane pulls up
in front of the Irish pub,
Oxford Street in Darlington.
Jay and Gray say goodbye at the lights
Jay climbs out, the V8 grumbles off
she's early.*

*Fairly tired from their talks
inspired by just having graduated
undergraduate degrees,
she walks in, orders a Guinness,
relieved to have a quiet moment
before her date arrives.*

*There's a fire in the pub
waitresses in black and white
bring out grub for the punters
who watch screens with football
or the races,
Jay can't tell from where she stands
and waits for her pint,
poured in thirds.
These sports-fanatics disturb her.*

*Jay forgoes the fire,
hands the green-clad barman a tenner
and finds a seat outside
on the street, watching people
walk by, as the sky darkens.
It's dusk and her date is late
and she contemplates leaving
if he's not here by the end of this pint.*

*The man's name is Jim,
she saw him play once at the Uni bar,
and though he wasn't a guitarist
and his voice wasn't the best
he played three instruments,
this impressed Jay,
she signed the mailing list
got an email the next day
so she replied,
then he replied
and the rest is history.*

*He said he'd be in Sydney
would she like to have a drink
she agreed, not thinking much of it.
Now here she sits
waiting... until,
there he is, that looks like him.*

*Jim walks straight up to Jay
Immediate recognition,
to her surprise.
He wears a blue hooded jumper
he's taller than she remembered
he looks her in the eye,
not really smiling
he seems shy, so she
instigates a cheek-kiss
says, "Hi",
"So, finally we meet." Jim offers.
"Have a seat." Jay says.*

*

*Some months later
Jim would present her with a cartoon
he drew of that first date.
In pen a beautiful woman sits
with a giant pint of Guinness
across from a dorky boy
gawking at her from behind
an umbrella decorated cocktail glass
Frangelico on ice,
there are sparks like zig-zags
drawn beneath the table
when their legs touch
and the note says
he loves her very much.*

*“Why don’t you come to Melbourne?”
Jim invites Jay,
realising they’ve only just met
gazing at her hopefully.
“Stay with me, I can cook,
I can give you a massage.
Did I mention I’m a trained therapist?”
Jay smiles at his seriousness
making him laugh becomes
a game to her,
he thinks he must seem lame to her.*

*The night falls, dark and cool
Jay and Jim take a walk
down Oxford street toward the Barracks,
they find a bench*

*sit together, quiet,
attraction brewing for Jay
unable to tell if it's mutual,
she asks Jim what he's thinking,
"I'll tell you, if you'll let me kiss you first."*

*Jay's mind burst into
silence, had she heard right?
Completely blank
for two minutes flat
she says nothing,
while Jim waited
anticipating the meaning of the silence...*

*Jay turns to him,
smiling, finally realising,
and he does it
his lips and her lips
and her hands and his hands
his arms and her waist
eyes close and open.*

*One Autumn on a train together
Jim and Jay went to see his grandmother
they stayed in the bungalow
in the bush, behind the timber kitchen
overgrown green Gosford
after dinner rain softly at the tin roof
they collected blankets,
went to bed, held each other.*

A month since their first date

*time for quiet contemplation
on the sudden serious nature
of their relationship.*

*But no sense was spoken,
just the rain singing to them
in the dark.*

*Jay could only see Jim's eyes
shining,
make out his shape
a shadow warmly touching
her face,
as they said it, at the same time
the words people say:*

"I love you"

"I'm in love with you"

*Who said it first?
Nobody knew, but suddenly
Jim had Jay in his arms
lifting her up
carrying her out the door
both half naked
in the rain
in the dark
spinning and kissing
droplets dripping down necks
hair soaking, full awake
freezing hot,
no lights on in the house
laughing turns to whispering
"Love."*

*Grandma didn't notice the fuss
breakfast next morning
normal and surreal, simultaneous
cornflakes, and cream for the coffee.
The early sun warming
through the window,
the bungalow looking knowingly
surrounded by dew.*

*On the train back to Sydney
the two quietly, sleepy,
Jay looks up at Jim
just as a tear, bold and slow
folds down his cheek.
She reaches for it,
catches it on her thumb
tastes it.
"What is it, darling?"
He lets her hold him in silence,
more tears fall.*

Jay sat at the bed's edge,
cradling the cold metal stand
and looked out
the ward window
she looked out 'til the black-blue
grew brighter.

*

Alex picked her up
with a barrage of questions
coherent and discharged
she didn't wonder why

she was taken back to Alex's
instead of being taken home,
the St Kilda apartment
Jim and Jay rented together,
she assumed it was best
no energy for contesting her friend.

Through the Flemington corridor
Jay was guided,
kelpie by her side,
by the window in the sun
she settled on the day-bed,
"I'll make some tea," Alex said.

And then there was music
something soothing
girly, folky,
and then there was the kettle
whistling pitchless
and steam rising
and peppermint leaves
escaping the strainer
and a blanket over her knees.

Jay considered joking about it –
what happened, or
Alex's taste in music –
but thought better of it,
she'd probably see though it,
Jay didn't want to blow it,
this kindness she was being shown.

Jay wondered if Alex was angry
she was too tired to know.

Jay didn't recall
how long she stayed there, at all.
An afternoon?
A week?

With Alex back at work
she needed perking-up
from the numbness,
suppressed horror
of an uncertain future,
so she started considering
her lack of any clothing
an excuse to go home
see Jim.

She put it off
with daytime soaps,
intermittently looking at the phone
with hope that he'd call.

If this was the end
of Jay and Jim...

With him she was a shadow,
no need for mental-health,
just the sobering fear
of not having done anything
by herself in years:
holiday plans
dependent on his band schedule,
and his family at Christmas time,
always at his dad's farm

or with his nutty mum,
in the nearby town.

Only when Jim was not around
would Jay pick up work
here or there,
nothing she really cared for,
and her writing talents
gone to shit,
used on the odd release
for the band's new album,
and a few bits of rhyme
for her part-time course.

Long cut-off
from male friends
Jim had pissed off
with endless scowling
snarling encounters of envy.

Despite being dark and unfriendly,
cursing her family
hating her mates,
deviating on tours
and luring her away from herself –
they never really fought,
oddly.

They'd taught themselves
their very own secret language.

Their love was an affliction,
a devout addiction
Jay wasn't prepared to live without.

3. Nowhere left to go

Still shaky through the garden
making her way upstairs,
“Harden up,”
Jay tells herself.
Although her name’s on the lease
she feel sneaky using her keys
walking in
listening for Jim
rattling ‘round the office,
Jay’s old suitcase packed
on the couch –
suggesting
this wouldn’t go well.

Perhaps she should have called,
had he worried about her at all?
Who is this man, anyway,
this other half to “Jay and Jim”?
He looked the same,
tall, unshaven,
but suddenly there was no anticipation:
what he’d say,
what he’d do.

Jay had never known him to be violent,
just occasional tantrums,
petulant child, wild for an hour
then harmless.

The flat,
still a mess,
though on the mantle,

super-glued attempts
to fix the things of hers
he smashed that night...
Perhaps this might go alright.

Jim looked up
from rustling through a box,
discs and press-kits.
He saw her,
stopped, sat.

“Are you here for your things?
There’s your case, take it,
send Alex for the rest.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“You disgust me.
I can’t look at you
and not see you with some other man.
Why tell me now?
After all these months?
It’s not revenge unless you rub it in my face.”

“That’s not what it was.
After all the girls,
the hookers in China,
the American, Jim, Jesus...
I felt like rubbish.
Why wasn’t I enough?
I was in bed for a week,
Sara brought me food,
George brought me vodka,
I thought you must hate me,

why else would you hurt me?
I had to get out,
feel independent,
I didn't even know if we were together anymore.
I don't know what else to tell you,
don't make me go."

By this stage Jim is fuming
consumed by green rage steaming.
He storms into the bedroom,
takes the thangka painting off the wall
begins to roll it,

"This is yours,
I hauled it all the way back for you.
Take it, get out."

"How can you been so cold,
it's still me,
it's still Jay.
You didn't even call to see if I was ok,
the hospital was horrible,
Jim, please..."

He stays silent
in his grey sweater,
brown waves disguising
stormy salt-water eyes,
long arms pull another old bag
down from the wardrobe.

"Ok, leave it.
I'll pack myself,
pretend I'm not even here."

Hurt and losing the battle,
she starts gathering shoes,
Jim steps back
pushing the hair from his face,
she's heaving an armload
heels and boots, unsorted
off the shelves in semi-darkness,
white drapes pulled
spiting the afternoon sun,
lifting and dumping them
into the bag,
she spins too fast for the second bunch,
inertia lunges her against the door
grabbing it so as not to fall
Jay remembers she's still feeling poorly,
her head spins.
Jim just watches,
barely flinches
until she keeps going,
bending down to pick up more.

His hands suddenly on her shoulders,

"I called Alex to see how you were."

She knew,
turning to face him
he sits her down on the bed
moves the bag of odd shoes
and sits by her,
elbows on knees
head in hands
he's shaking, he's crying.

“We can’t do this anymore.
I don’t want you to go but
this is tainted, now.
I don’t know what to do.
We both know it’s over.”

*

Stepping down gutters
over streets
away
‘til the flat was out of sight,
face cold from a
St Kilda breeze,
gaping mouth hysterical
back-drop Luna Park
proportionately shocked
at Jay,
tears streaming
for suddenly being alone.

Alone
a state that once
was relief,
now twisted acid up her throat.
Disbelieving it was over,
she could only consider
surviving the next hour.

Call Gray?
Ask him to come?
But stay where?
Not at the flat,
Jay was suddenly homeless, too.

Call Alex?

She was working.

Call Sara?

Maybe... But she and Jim –
friends can't take sides.

Jay found herself riding the 112
to Angel's bar,
Brunswick street, still weak
damn pharmaceutical cocktail,
she sat at the bar,
ordered dark ale after dark ale,
weeping barfly,
shook up,
under Angel's watchful eye
while he quietly did the books.

PART TWO

1. Foray into the pond with the other fish

The Commonwealth Games shook-up
every aspect of Melbourne,
annoying Jay
with parades and delays –
the city's public transport calamity,
accommodation and tourism economy
sports mad
volunteers tag clad
uniforms and swarming spectators
what a spectacle.

But none so spectacular
as a series of strange events
not sporting,
but transporting, none the less.
Beginning with one tall, slender
high-jump contender from the UK,
and ending with Jim's small screen debut
with a dramatic performance Jay
wished never to have seen.

*

Happening to arrive
twenty minutes early,
St Kilda open house inspection,
David with his friend
moving to Melbourne,
In competition with Jay for this

location! location!
polished floorboards
gas heating
cooking marble bench,
first floor, beach access.

Sitting on the block
of cement letter boxes,
hot dry sun melting
Jay, grinding to a stop
in a mess of make-up,
just run from the tram,
rosy cheeked
past boutiques in heels
trying not fall
arriving like a stunned drag queen
only to discover, embarrassed,
she wasn't running late at all.

David was immaculate, gleaming
unaffected by the heat, leaning
cool and steaming all at once.

“I love those seventies style brown flairs you're wearing
please excuse my staring,”

The conversation advent
followed by teasing her Aussie accent,
as she attempted a reply
still breathless, she sat by him
squinting in the afternoon glare.
David passed her his pilot-style sunglasses
finally his eyes revealed,
she accepted the shades

with flirting grace,
despite knowing
how odd most sunglasses
looked on her face,

As David walked Jay out
after the inspection,
some semblance of decorum
returned to her.

“Can I give you my number?” He asked,
removing his glasses from her head.

*

His friend got the much-sought after
location! location!
pad in St Kilda,
David and Jay had already
dined together twice by the time
the lease was signed.

It was six months
after her separation from Jim,
Jay was in a funny way,
still, David came around almost every day.

Jay met David’s mother,
new lover under observation
during the tribulation
of watching David compete
on a bad foot.

The first and last time Jay
would hear the cheering sounds

at the famous
Melbourne Cricket Ground
where the track events took place.

David's mother, Donna, loved Jay,
surprising, according to David's expression
realising their bonding
at the high-jump competition –
Apparently Donna was never touched
by her son's female company, much.
Jay and Donna,
unbeknownst to each other
had more in common
than they'd ever discover.

Donna, a model in her day,
married a famous rock drummer
who was always away.
Two children, thirty years,
fears of not living better
and a whole lot of boredom later,
she left drummer-Dan
for the love of her life:
Donna had fallen for dying man,
And when he passed away,
and tired old Dan came to her door,
She opened it and let him back in
despite being unsure.

*

David's coach was disappointed,
they didn't win a medal that night.
So Donna and Jay were appointed

to keep the atmosphere light.

Back in St Kilda, they all sat and ate,
at a Fitzroy Street café serving late,
The night was warm
the company, trying to relax
to soften the impact
of David's loss on the track.

David held Jay's hand the whole night
her fingers curled tight around
palm and knuckles
firm and steady
wondering when he'd be ready
to let go.

The drinks and talks began to flow,
Jay began to feel detached
her compassion usually unmatched,
but this man was new,
Jay was
not knowing quite what to do,
not knowing what he was thinking,
she found herself sinking
into grim reverie
remembering harder times with Jim,
when he was ready to give in
and quit the music game.

With David, she wasn't sure what to say,
she didn't know if he was ok
to bear the brunt,
or if he was putting on
a false brave front.

Jay was glad for Donna,
she knew what to do.
They laughed at dirty jokes
through countless rounds
of rum and cokes
till the restaurateur dimmed the lights.

Donna and Jay exchanged emails
before taxis were hailed,
the two would remain friends
longer than David and Jay would,
in the end.

*

Jim found out about David
through their cliquy friendship crew.
Just as any good deranged
jealous ex-husband should do,
he Googled David's name.
Upon finding files of photos
evidence of his fame...
Jim spun into a funnel of self-hate
shelved disheveled and cold
man past his expiry date.

He called Jay after David had gone
and left the country to enquire, forlorn:
"Are you enjoying your fucking alpha male?"

Jay went round to their old apartment
ringing the bell to no avail
used her key and walked in,

pale and nervous,
to find Jim half dressed in sweats
hair a matted mess
silent and tense,
storming around the kitchen
attempting to wash dishes
temper keeping tempo with
battered cutlery crashing against the sink,
Jay against the doorframe,
unable to think of what to say.

He finally threw the towel in,
pushed past her rushed and
Landed in a knotted heap of
knitted eyebrow and fowl-face
on the bed.

She sat with him quietly
like she always used to,
hours passed, her patience lasting
waiting and waiting for him
to give her some words to work with.

Hours upon hours of nothing,
Just waiting and waiting
Apprehensive, fearful and tiring...
Jay would ask herself later:

*Why did I bother?
I wonder that now.
Because I loved him,
I wanted to show him
I was loyal to his feelings at least
No-one should stay self-loathing without*

*At least someone to see them through it
I knew what that felt like
I couldn't bear leaving him
To suffer from his own silly madness,
Not without indulging him:*

"You heard wrong, we were friends, he's gone now anyway" ...

*

The night of David's final,
after the dinner they ate
and the booze that they drank,
David went home with Jay,
she lit candles and they sank onto the bed
turned out he was in quite some pain,
removing his shoe and sock
revealing a swollen aching foot.

"You know, I think it's a stress fracture.
You really need an x-ray," She told him,
covering the swelling
with the palm of her hand,
sending love across her chest
down her arm to test
her healing powers.

"I'll wait till I get home,
have it checked out,
the Games' doctors just beat
the pain so you can compete".

Jay lifted her hand momentarily before
he reached for it

placed it back, imploring.

“Don’t let go,
it doesn’t hurt thanks to you.
Jay, what are we going to do?”
“Do about what?”
“I’m leaving in a week.”
“I know.”

If Jay took his point,
she hid it well,
preferring to concentrate
on the swell of his injury
than to contemplate the possibility
of a sad and serious farewell
or a relationship that dwells
somewhere in the Atlantic,
such unromantic distances
more potential for painful
instances of the heart.

No, that wouldn’t do
so Jay hardly saw David
the next few days.
Text message tantrums
the day he went away
they never said goodbye,
he made himself scarce,
made shy by her terse treatment
of the subject of “Us”

He ascertained it would be too pained
to say goodbye to her.
Hot-blooded and un-fussed

by oceanic fences
Not caring for the consequences,
Jay thought:

*So he is leaving, so what?
We should make the most our time, why not?*

She was annoyed, she felt justified:

*Who needs a man who was afraid of his own heart.
Who can't even say said goodbye before we part?*

*

It was two days after he was gone
Jay was back in Jim's apartment sitting
quietly waiting
for his dark cloud to erupt.

Almost a year has passed, now
but she lived the same scenario
so many times
she knows it all by heart.

Jim's cloud finally did erupt
out cascaded the shroud of insults:

“You think he doesn't have a hundred models to keep him busy in England? You're just another place to stay in another city in the world to him! He's practically famous, what are you?”

Jay sat still
like a berated child,
filled with shame

elbow in her lap,
fist over mouth,
left arm tucked around her belly.

She anticipated the next phase:

Anguished sentiment

“I hate knowing your business. I know, ok, I know I was never man enough for you, I know you should stay away from me, I cause nothing but trouble,”

She reached a hand out
touched his shoulder,
hunched and facing away from her.
she rubbed it gently,
he remembered who she is slowly,
then:

Self-pity

“I don’t deserve you, just go home, you don’t need to do this, ok, I’ll be fine by myself”.

Before she went home that night,
Jay visited the corner Seven-Eleven
bought a block of chocolate, Heaven,
a big pack of chips and Jim’s
personal holy grail,
childhood favourite ginger ale,

She walked back in the spitting rain
feeling that she was to blame,
left the treats in a plastic bag
hanging from their old doorknob,
rang the bell, compelled

by heart and head throbbing,
and left before he answered.

She used to do that sort of thing
all the time.

He'd make it back to the
lounge room window
second floor
tap on the window once
then tap on it some more,
sad-eyed, he's leave his big paw
of a hand there
and watch her
leave the building,
pace to the path.

Pads of his fingers still
against the glass.
Jay would look up
push a smile and continue on
all the while cold and alone
walking away from her old home.

* * * *

The next few months they spent
less and less time together,
Jay thought she understood why,
till one afternoon
Jim sat her down on their old sofa
facing her, pensive he started with
her least favourite opener:

“I have to tell you something and you won't like it,”

Her heart was already beating harder
bit by bit,
worried sickness started to hit;

Has he gotten some young girl pregnant this time?

Has he contracted some strange disease from a Chinese prostitute and is now dying? Am I dying?

Or worse,

Has he fallen in love with someone else?

“I haven’t seen you much
the past couple of months because...
I was shooting a film.
I’m the star in a new film,
it’s um,
kind of an art-house porno....
It’s probably going to
attract some media attention;
I thought you should know just in case...”

Jay cracked a bewildered smile

Mouth wide open, cheeks cold and
she started laughing
nervous then quiet-hysterical shaking.

Tears starting to well
yet another sudden swell
of complete ridiculousness.
It was hilarious, disturbing and Jay
could think of nothing to say.

She couldn’t think at all...
Nothing to say,

Nothing to think.

Not one thing
for ten
terrible minutes
of tumbling laughter.

And while she laughed
and while he looked concerned,
something important she would discern,
the one real thing to finally find
its way into her delirious mind:

Jay was damaged goods
Jay was a broken woman
or maybe just
a silly little girl,
or a confused twirl of the two.

She'd been through too much
for her sensibilities to stand up to
now they'd left her to fend
without them.

Jay thought back to her incident
painkillers and sleeping pills
the previous year had meant
she'd failed the universe
that night by surviving
couldn't kill the pain
and the sleep never even came,
painkiller play,
not such a threatening game.

And this was just another sign:

*I should have died that night,
I still had some dignity then,
I should have jumped through
That tiny window of opportunity
while it was open and the cool numbing
Night breeze was calling me.*

PART THREE

1. Introducing the new Jay

Jay felt she could stay
on the bus forever.

Her mother, once
told the story of arriving in Australia
thirty years ago:
British Airways flight
Jay's older brother, Manny,
perched, window-seat.

(Jay was just a
long-term lose-plan,
formless, birthless.)

As the plane dipped sideways
Manny, age nine, observed
the landscape below,
vast contrast from the deep greens
of the European land
he was used to seeing;
surrounded by grand
business class passengers, he blurted:
“Look mum!
All the trees in this country are burnt!”

On this bus
in the smoky bushfire haze
Jay is lucky to see the occasional
patch of greenish grass
or blue filtered sky.

Everything, shades of grey
and brown, lumps like dinosaurs
sleeping, bumpy skinned
the windy hills en-rout
to Melbourne from Sydney.

She's high up in the aircon shaded
earphones full of blues
the female voice sings, jaded:
“art imitates life, and life imitates TV”.

The young girl,
bleached blonde, beside her
reads Mills and Boon
busty melodramatic siren cover,
her equally blonde friend over
the aisle, wears hot pink,
flips through a glossy Cosmopolitan.

Jay is still, looking at the sky,
The bus just passed the sign to Gundagai.

*

After running out of money,
and running out of year,
Jay sublet her South Melbourne studio
to an eighteen year old boy
and his BMX bike,
he couldn't get a break,
memory of what it was like
trying to be free
a rental-referenceless teen,
itching for emancipation

desperation for group-house terraces
pleading with property-managers,
their ugly suits and ugly offices.

Jay trusted he'd look after her place
her cherished shoeboxesque space.

*

Headed on opposite tracks –
the eighteen year old boy and Jay –
she went back to stay
with her aging parents for a
Sydney summer,
North Western suburbs,
sun-burnt window shopping
at the Parramatta Mall
painful break from
all the reading
philosophies on death
and the lives we're leading
between Days of Our Lives
Young and The Restless,
Oprah schedule,
helping dad with the
set-top box manual
chopping veggies with mum by five,
and subtly drinking to survive,
every last bottle of red
before moving onto the gin
after they all went to bed...

The reality hum-drum
that the older a person gets

the more themselves they become,
begging her dad
not to hobble too far on his
mystery broken leg
(The mystery being:
he didn't know how he broke it).

*

It's summer after all,
Jay still counts herself
as a student of sorts,
never one for sports,
or business reports, instead
research at the University by day,
spirits, music and play
or stir-fry, beer and a book by night.
So the holiday in light
of the warm season
was by far enough reason
for a habitual escape
from her daily mundane
to the family domain.

*

8pm on the Hume on January 12th,
Slinky sun went down on the earth,
slipping between crevasses
parting tree towers
deliberating the heat
of the soil for hours.
Now the sun's found
the bushfire haze and

turned pink and bold.
Jay stares out at it without squinting.
It looks straight back, unflinching.

*

It's been a while since
she's been touched by a person.
Twelve days to be exact.
Twelve days since she woke beside
a god-send
her ex-husband's childhood friend,
Sam, a sensitive soul
a very smart man,
in her ex-husband's childhood
country town, wearing just
a borrowed red silk dressing gown
in a single bed,
the two perpetrators
tangled together,
her neck stiff, his...

His lift home to Brisbane
rolling into the drive.
she heard the crunching gravel
beneath car tyre
deciding not to bring it to his attention,
enjoying the ascension
the warmth, the light
the genuine chest that her ear
suctioned to all night
the admiring eyes, sincere concern
for the state of her health:

Was she happy?

Was she at least coping?

What was she hoping for
this new year they'd just welcomed in
at the local pub
before a midnight walk
through surrounding bush-land scrub?

Was she still getting out?
And how did she feel about
spending summer with the folks?

Jay was enjoying being more human
less alien, enraged,
damaged and disengaged.
She loved his innocent black
rectangle eyebrows,
his long stubbly chin,
his black curly mop
his body tall and taut...

Why couldn't I have met him first?
She thought.

She knew this wouldn't last,
not longer than two days.
he wouldn't
considering their past, and anyway,
he's going to practice acupuncture overseas.
Jay needed reminding again
between clumsy meetings
with clumsy men,
that love could be a gem, of course

there's more to life than romance,
after all, but then
Jay is a closet romantic,
lost in the pocket lining
of a pragmatic jacket
like loose change
destined never to be spent,
she knows it, but wont often
admit it aloud.

*

What she will say is
she's a hopeful academic,
it's poetry she loves,
preoccupied with humanity,
or lack there-of.
She would do a doctorate
on bloody quantum physics,
but for one limitation –
some lifetime soon
she'll be more amenable
to mathematical equation.

We all have a weakness,
the fatal flaw, the funny bone,
Jay's lies in her past life
as a muso's failing wife.

Although it wasn't in her plan,
a weekend with Sam
was a gift from above
incidentally spiting
her former love,

something of an experiential
offering to the gods
of falling out of love and moving on.

*

The bumpy bus, Melbourne-bound
knocks the passengers around.
Jay can feel her bum
against the bus seat numbing,
her foot against the rack.

She feels regret at not flying back.

8.27pm on the Hume
The blush sun now so low to the hills,
tree skeletons are black and still
against a flushed sky.
The globe is huge this close to the ground,
every bend the bus swings round
Jay expects her
fellow passengers to bother
to clamber over each other
to abandon their seats
to catch sight of the vast
view out the window.

But everyone's docile and sallow,
half the ragged blue drapes
drawn by backpackers immune to
setting suns and bushfire landscapes.

*

Jay is going straight to Sara's
when she arrives in Melbourne.
Sara's probably pottering around now,
basting the chicken
putting the ginger wine on ice.

Sara had a break up, too
a bricky she was photographing,
though she seemed less bereft
than when Jay fare-welled Jim and left.

Yes, technically, it was she who left,
Jay, the one who won't admit
to ever having been hitched,
young and convinced
she could be enough to
help the musician become a man
lost in a love-maze
without an escape plan.

Some love wars leave burnt-down relics,
salvation is against the laws of quantum physics.

Jay's going home to Melbourne
pick up her studies where she left off
postgraduate poetry in her
South Melbourne loft.

She's going home to the city
she learned to love deeply
for the man of her dreams
who had a deep love of girls in their teens.
She's going home to a group of friends,
some of whom are friends of Jim's,

they've all maintained disjointed friendships,
until now:

After her new year's blunder

Jay and Jim

will have no more to do with each other.

*

Jay is half asleep

music in her ears

when her pocket starts to buzz.

In her fuzzy state

she flips it open

“Hello?”

“Did you think I wouldn't find out?

Did you think I couldn't fucking tell

I know you both well enough

to see what was going on.

You're no different than all the other

sluts I meet on tour.

Did you think you could hide it?

I'm the fucking expert, Jay

I know all about cheap lays.

I don't ever want to hear from you

not one word, nothing

ever again.”

“Jim, seriously—“

“Shut up, I don't want to hear it

you've fucked it up now.

Delete my number,

stay the fuck away from my friends.

We have no friendship.”

And that's how it ends.

2. Laugh, eat, dream

Sara made a roast:

Delicious chicken seasoned
steaming to the carcass
potatoes, pumpkin, lime and
gravy made from scratch simmering
stirring in the pan, just in time.

The bus was delayed,
broken down
in the dry dust
50ks from any town
in the hot sun the people waited
the aircon satiated the older travelers
the mystery busted carburetor
unraveled and revived in two hours.

Two hours on top of the scheduled twelve
and Jay was in no mood
for trams at 11pm knowing
dinner was waiting,
wine was too.

An hour before midnight
she poured herself out
of the cab in Fitzroy,
pulling her heavy bags
as far as the street,
Sara bustles out in bare feet
to meet her with hugs and kisses
and strong arms to help
they carry her things up the stairs,

pushed them through the door
and abandoned them
for the kitchen calling.

*One of my favourite places in the world
Sara's kitchen bench
Where I serve us wine in massive glasses
As the chicken is dismantled.*

Stereo's playing reggae
and the cab/merlot
and cooking smell
and steam ironing Jay's disgruntle
she's almost straight up
human again,
particularly with Sara supporting
her New Years' Sam scandal,
agreeing that Jim was out of line
telephone assault for a minor crime.

"I'm going to photograph you after a few more glasses, hope you don't mind!" Sara's smiling
cheekily.

"Fine by me, apologies if your lens breaks."

Jay secretly looks forward to the challenge
maintaining tipsy talking
posing but not posing.

"Don't be ridiculous. Besides, I'm going for a grungy look."

They're moving placemats
and candles to the table,
Sara tells that Jim's plans,
tour the band to Europe,

are falling through.

Jay is out of the loop,
she'll never be in the loop again.
Life continued in Melbourne
through the dramas
of The Days of Our Lives
at her parents'
and the tarmac
and dives of the Hills district
of Sydney bubbling in the sun.

She is disappointed at the news:
if Jim loses the tour
he'll be staying.
Jay is doubting the city is big enough
for the two of them
afraid of breaking this
insurance of distance between them,
afraid of seeing him at
some Smith Street cafe
from out of a tram window,
on any grey Melbourne arvo,
feeling missing of any kind
any old vulnerability
would undo her.

*I'm afraid he's not through yet
I'm afraid he wants to hurt me,
Take revenge, take something else away...
I want him gone,
suddenly and completely gone.*

“Shall we move to the couch? I'll grab the camera.”

Sara's up and shuffling toward the stairs.

Jay picks up both wine glasses
in one hand
the bottle in the other
goes to the couch,
pouring more wine,
and snuggling into a pouch
of cushions, sipping, looking
out the open balcony doors
the city lights are a starlit sky
celestial path to the golden hewed
St Peters steeple
beyond nearby rooftops and staircases.
There's a draft,
but Jay hasn't the heart
to shut out the Melbourne
or ever depart it again.
Instead, she cuddles
a cushion for warmth.

Sara's back,
Removing the lens cap
as she sits beside,
leaning on the arm
She squints through the camera,
presses something,
and addresses Jay again.

"So, glad to be back?" She asks,
Lining up a nonchalant shot.
Jay is self conscious at first,
she's not been photographed a lot.

“Yes indeed. Nice casual conversation starter”

Sara laughs at Jay
reaching for her wine
to keep the nerves at bay.

“It was a legitimate question!
You’re going back to uni, it’s exciting,”
Sara clicks again,
enticing Jay to relax and chat.

“I’m going back to uni. Yes. I miss it.
I miss things with half-rhymes
and varied pentameter.
But I wouldn’t describe it as exciting, exactly.
Exciting is planning a potentially international exhibition of your photography.”
Jay is softening now.

Softening and glowing
a little warmer
despite the wind chimes outside
ringing harder.

“I need you to help me write an artist’s statement.
I don’t know what I want to state.
Or I do kind of know, I’m just not sure exactly how.”

She’s clicking liberally now,
pointing the cannon
at Jay’s hand grasping,
spanned fingers ‘round
the bowl of the glass
painted nails and the merlot harmonizing,
foot on the coffee table rim,
and a drunken grin.

“I’ll run you through some writing exercises that might help capture what you really mean to say.”

“Speaking of writing and exercise...”

*

As the conversation grew silly,
Jay forgot about the clicking
almost completely,
occasionally making an effort to fleetingly
look down the barrel
strike an exaggerated pose
rosy and bolded
until she’s scolded for starting to yawn,
taken downstairs where
the sofa is already pulled out
and adorned with pillows and sheets,
Sara leaves her to sleep.

It was rare for Jay to sleep
deep and dreamless,
no seamless darkness
through the night hours.

*

Nighttime was devoured
by the creative beast
at the very least Jay dreamed
in colour vision,
three dimensions, vivid
choppy seas of emerald

dark wood pirate ships at night.
Her poetry was nocturnal,
fighting the will for peace
no quiet for the wicked
just thoughts in words with curls
and rhymes in time
with her circadian rhythm.

When it wasn't poetry
writing itself,
or reciting itself from something Jay read,
it was how best
to teach her writing class
the best way to show,
not tell,
how to inspire them
to express themselves well.

Always preferring to be alone in bed
on a good night, Jay would sleep
heavy as lead
black darkness and silence
helped subdue the violence
of the creative monster in her head.

3. The things you take with you

The key was in the mailbox
so the kid wouldn't have to face her
after leaving the studio in deep squalor,
his Albino-like blonde hair
static clinging to everything
from the fold-out couch
to the dishes by the kitchen sink,
drinking glasses a mess
vaguely rinsed at best,
without a hope
eighteen year old boys don't use soap.

Jay spent four hours
cleaning a six by nine studio,
four hours inclined
by the rubbish still not taken out
and bouts of empty beer bottles
on the dusty dark-wood floors.

She pulled her things out of
locked cupboards
boxes of useless candles, cloths,
cheap market art-works and statuettes,
trinkets she adorned the place with...
she'd adorned every place she'd lived with.

* * * *

Jay once surprised Jim
while he was on tour in Brisbane...
his old band about to kick him out,

every night on the phone
he'd quietly moan
he missed her, he missed her
he felt horrible and alone.

Jay booked a flight,
called his guitarist to rally support,
checked into a decent hotel in The Valley,
and pulled them out:
wrought iron candle sticks
for the candles and cloths
from her handbag
set up around the room
to show she adored him
in spite of the "no live flames"
signage on the door the same
and security deposits:
"You will pay the fine for auto-called fire department visits".

The cab took Jay to the bar venue
late afternoon sound-check continued
on before the gig.

She stood on the path outside,
called his mobile
brimming with pride,
ring, ring...

"Hello, Sweet..."
He sounds tired,
the drums are sound checking inside.
"Hi, where are you? It's noisy."
"Just in sound check, can you hear me?"
He yells.

“Not really, can you step outside?”

“Yep... hang on... Ok, I’m out the back”

His voice is normal.

“Out the back?”

He was meant to come out to the street

“Yeah, how are you?” He asks

“Um... I’m good, maybe you should go for a little walk...”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, just go for a walk ‘round to the front.”

“Sweet... are you...”

Jay hears footsteps hastening to a jog,
he appears from around the corner
nearly tripping on a parking barrier log
stunned and innocent,
he starts tearing up
cupping his chin, nose and mouth
in his hands
stopping as he lands
to look at her waiting there.

He runs at her,
picks her up in a bear-hug
kisses all over her ear, neck, forehead
“Sweet, Sweet, Sweetie...”
He mumbles teary,
he sets her down, sniffs,
overwhelmed and calming
he holds her face in his palms
a couple of droplets streaking his cheeks,
Jay touches her small nose to his big one,

“You’re here... you came here!”

All fears allayed

he peers at her face
not letting go, his arms
wrapped round her waist as
he guides her inside.

The bassist in the support band
is an old friend of Jay's
He's surprised and happy to see her
seeing him play
in Brivegas town...

In spite of Jim's frown
on Jay's attention dividing
for a moment of psychic chiding
from her male friend
and boyfriend colliding
Jim scowls at him,
protective and suspicious
As Jay kisses him hello
and they have a quick catch up
knowing she'll patch up
Jim's jealousy tonight.

Soon the other boys realise she's there
sharing in cheers and drinks
"Oh! What a lovely surprise!"
Jake, the guitarist, winks.

The others aren't as warm as usual
but Jay knows better
than to involve oneself
in band politics
or writing set-list picks
or even lost drum sticks.

She hugs each of them

disarming the troops
who astutely know she's on Jim's side
charming them lightly
in hopes of a calm night,
they patiently wait for the support
to finish sound check,
Jim holding Jay close,
the boys on the other side
of the band-room divide
and a self-contained storm
percolating on the horizon.

* * * *

Once her things were back on the bookshelf,
the dining table,
bedside chair,
life was back in order, stable.

Jay sits at her desk in the quiet,
worn out from cleaning and arranging
looks out at the tin roof wonderland sight,
and wonders how she'll bother
feeding herself tonight.

As dusk fades to black shadows
and dark purple sky,
she notices a tapered structure
on a rooftop juncture
staring at it as though it might be a person -
looking down into her window
lit by candles
watching her sit

and wait for nothing-
Instead of just another ornate Victorian chimney.

But it is just another ornate Victorian chimney.

Nobody watches over Jay
with her impending birthday looming,
grooming her finger nails
on her own at the desk
empty and untouched tonight
a young woman alone,
like most women:
grandmothers, mothers,
even more alone
than before they've been
stretched, creased or scarred.
Making missionary love to life
that leaves more gaps
more empty crevasses
than they started with as fresh
bulbous babies,
unidentifiable from males,
like romantic portraits
where the rich, preserved women remain
round and full and soft as newborns
and the whores and
subservient trodden-on
are skinny, hollowed and gaunt
more space than body
more space a man can't fill.

4. Awkward encounter

After a Sunday afternoon
of homemade cupcakes and goon
with Sara at Angel's bar
on Brunswick street
Jay stands there at the tram stop
corner of Johnston
after passing a curly haired boy
with a flirtatious ploy.

"Excuse me?!"
They're calling to her.
Eyebrows raised,
her gaze follows the voice
to the trendy bar
with tables out
two guys sitting on the nearest end.

"Did you happen to hear what I said to my friend,
just before you walked past?"
"No," Asks Jay, "What did you say?"
"I said you were very pretty."
"Oh."
"I just thought you heard because
when you walked past you looked
at me."
"Maybe," Says Jay,
"I looked at you because I thought you were pretty."

She always had the right words
there just up her sleeve
for her to grieve when the moment passed

or down her collar
an honest two cents
in the illusory dollar...

“Oh,” He’s pleased.

She won’t walk toward him
she’s too coy
with the pretty curly haired boy.
He comes to her, instead
“I just um... find you really attractive, I mean, you’re beautiful.
I’m just going to play poker, was wondering if you wanted to come...”

She bursts into laughter,
about to succumb to his offer
distracted by his chosen vernacular.
He’s shaking his head
starts laughing with her.
“I’m so sorry...I think that’s the worst pick up line I’ve ever accidentally said...”

They’re really cracking up now,
laughing openly, two strangers
shared dirty sense of humour.
Passers-by don’t notice
the clouds roll slowly in
dust meets the outdoor cafes
for a Fitzroy laksa.
“I’m sorry! I just wanted to talk to you...”
When Jay calms down a bit
she offers him her number
and he offers her to come sit.

He’s probably much too young
for Jay to want to budge

but then, who is she to judge.

“I actually, um, have a girlfriend – sort of...” He says.

Jay laughs harder,

she can't help herself.

“How long have you been together?”

“Only two months, it's getting to that point where

I don't find her attractive anymore... Is that horrible?”

she wipes away a giggle-tear

“No, it happens, dear.”

She thinks he's silly,

she considers telling him

she doesn't want a boyfriend,

so it would be alright

just to hang out for tonight.

Instead she asks his name

“Daniel,”

And tell him hers is Jay,

though she wouldn't stay

she feels she wasn't wrong to chat

as they sat a few minutes more

before she shakes his hand,

it's thick and strong

but he uses it too lightly,

like a frightened doe,

she lets him go

and walks back

through Brunswick street bustle

bound for tram tracks.

5. Bon Scott Valentine on public transportation

The day everyone comes in twos
it's February, we're all hot here
wanton southern hemisphere,
half-dressed
skin-bearing
beer-sharing and late sunsets.

Couples might use this day
that coincides with sticky sides
and wishing to be free,
free of clothing
free of partnership
wishing to have few too many
watch the cricket at the pub
just enough sexy booze
feeling too rough to choose
just carry another
restless stranger home
undress them for bad bored relations,
hope to forget it all tomorrow
in delayed train stations
after the alarm goes off
fourth time
roll into more annoying clothes,
coffee stained
drag our hangovers to work
with shame.

*

On this Valentines day,

Jay's Valentine was a tram driver
king of the light-rail
long graying hair
pulled back in a pony tail
he belonged on a Harley,
not a gnarly Yarra tram,
kindred spirit
"Next stop, ma'am."

Jay came across him every month or so,
since she moved to Melbourne
before her love life was in dispute,
and he was always driving her,
on the 96 route.

He was always looking,
sweetly admiring, friendly,
something between a father
and an impossible lover,
never another lecherous old man,
just looking as the tram moved on
wondering maybe
if his bohemian charms
still won over young women like Jay
though never would he prey,
scolding himself for wondering
wondering if she remembered him
from last month
and all the other months...

And she did,
(Unknown to Jim, since
the last thing Jay needed
was another envy seed planted

over an amusing light-hearted
older-man fantasy)

Though she's nearly half his age
clever and pretty enough
for a rock star to notice
her diamond in the rough
find her in a crowd,
pick her up at the bar
over loud music and shots of vodka
and marry her –
still she noticed Mr. Harley,
buying her ticket, humming Roxanne,
picked up literally
by the older hippy
tram driver man...

*

Jay ran for her tram
after belly-dancing and drinking
red wine on Gertrude
thinking "Sublime!"
for the first time, she made it!

Climbed on so pleased,
ten meters later to find,
they were stuck behind
a broken down tram in front.

The packed 112
opened its doors with a grunt
out streamed a tired mob in twos,
almost every second grumpy lover

rose in hand
no grand embraces
only moods affray
aggravated looks leading the way
to the closest cross street.

They all stepped onto the replacement bus
disengaged and clumsy stumbling,
musty, as it took off round the corner
smelling of stale cigarettes and disorder.

Luck rolled the dice
back at Gertrude street
or fate or whoever –
the alternate tram change
number 96 casino stop,
And there he was:
Jay's Harley tram man at the top.

11.48pm, not much time left
for a sordid public transport
Valentines romance, bereft .
Jay fantasized the whole 6 stops:
Could she write her number
on a receipt in her bag
slip it into the driver's compartment?
Would his wife mind?
Would the public transport department?
How about just a note with no name?
Could she pretend she needed directions?
or claim not know her way,
he'd slide open the window
she'd stick her neck through
to kiss his prickly cheek.

Could she knock? He'd let her in,
she'd sit on his lap with a grin
he'd show her how the tram is maneuvered...

11.56pm Jay's stop,
Jay's loose top hangs off her shoulder
he'll see the tattoo
there'll be no question it's her,
he's already turned his head,
though nothing's been said
he knows
she's been staring
not caring if she's caught out.
She can see his legs,
he must be wearing shorts and
dress shoes with socks
old hippy schoolboy
like Bon Scott
he knows today's Valentines day
and Jay won't let him down
the tram doors are opening,
she looks straight at him through the window
it's all happening now
the red wine's made her confident now,
now's the time
say it! Say it now!:

"Thanks."

Jay smiles and mumbles
about to stumble down the step.
He understands,
smiles back,
says a single-syllabic word
she doesn't really hear

only friendly cheer in audio-range
she's satisfied with the late exchange.

Jay runs all the way home
excited like a kid
scuffing her worn boots
'til it's just her sock-heel and the tarmac.

6. Space invaders

By a stony dragon
under the Chinese Arches
Jay waits for Alex, Friday night
Chinatown dinner and a gig.
Alex locks her bike
to a street sign on Swanston,
the two friends hug, walk up
the steaming side-street
bar-bound as Alex says
“I asked Pete to join us,”
“Sound-guy Pete? High school?”
Jay asks.
“Yep, I hope you don’t mind”
“No, I’ve meaning to see him
since he moved here.
Will he find us alright?”
“Should do, he said he’d bring
a friend or two.”
Jay wonders what a friend or two
implies, dubious that her
quiet Friday night might be hijacked
slightly annoyed, she says
“Like a girlfriend, or two friends?”
“I don’t know babe, does it matter?”
“I don’t want to spend my Friday night
in the company of strangers,
you know I hate – “
“-people? Yes.
It’s just one or two friends, Jay.”
“Right. “

Down a steaming ally
they climb the steps to Manchuria
push the heavy door, bar bound
Alex orders a cocktail
rose petals and egg-whites
Jay asks for a stout,
no sooner are they seated
in a booth with gentle reggae
than a group of five bustle in
obnoxious to the calm
Alex looks up
“It’s Pete! Hi Pete!”
The group invade Jay’s table
she shifts into the corner
as the chaos of drink orders
unfolds, each young person
with a different European accent
Pete holds the introductions
clumsily forgetting names
“This is Jean-Luc, from France,
this is Betty, from ah...”
“Germany”
“Right, and her friend...”
Alex smiles engaging
Jay grinds her teeth
peeling the label from her bottle
of beer.
Betty is hungry, and vegetarian
Jean-Luc is all ready to drink
are they eating here
or going to a restaurant?
What does everybody think?

Jay's head starts throbbing
dying to move away
she's forced to stay unless
she moves the two girls
and Pete's other friend
or dives over them and rolls
but there are wooden chair legs
to consider, glancing up
from her beer bottle,
Alex is grinning widely
while Jay resists the urge to throttle
the nearest backpacker.

"So how do you all know Pete?"

Alex asks

"We are all on the couch-stay
website, we're staying with him,
actually we just met today."

Jay groans louder than she means to

Alex is enthusiastic for details.

A plan is brewing

Jay finally opens her mouth

asks to get through

to go to the loo,

they all let her out,

Jay grabs her bag,

swigs the last of her stout

as they all file back in

she walks the long way

'round the bar by the ladies'

and through the exit,

she leaves.

A safe distance away
the tram home moves down Bourke
too many people charging
around town tonight,
Jay shoves earphones in
staring down at her text message
how would she explain:
“Alex, couldn’t stand it, sorry.
I’m fine, gone home, have fun.”

PART FOUR

1. Birthday reminiscing

“Alright” Says Gray,
“Churchill, Mussolini, and Hitler,
who was the vegetarian,
the theatre fan,
and the alcoholic man?”

Packed into Alex’s van
for a pointless drive away,
Jay and her friends
celebrate her birthday.

The sun is setting
the trees are dense,
they’re 50ks from Lake’s Entrance.
In the passenger seat
Alex looks confused
While Jay, boozed up in the back
gives the question a crack:
“Hitler’s the vego,
Churchill, the alco,
And Muso must be the other thing you said.”

Gray nods his head,
“Very well done, birthday girl,
now give this one a whirl...”

Soon the trivia runs low
So, Gray gives some touchier subjects a go:
“This time last year,
you’d have been expecting that reject

of a husband to call.
I'm glad he's gone,
I don't miss him at all."

Gray is testing Jay,
he waits for her to take the bait,
instead, she does concede:
"I know, I let him bleed me dry.
I've no more tears to cry for Jim."
"But don't you miss him?"
Alex probes deeper.
"No, I'm in love with a tram-driver."

The laughter pours out like a sea
blocked in by tense gates,
and though Jay joins in
the merriment grates her,
her closest mates
left un-abreast of the tempest
in her mind,
would she never be the kind
to fall in love with a man
for longer than an hour,
worry her sweetness had soured
worry she'd become a coward.

* * * *

Jay's been reading
too much Bukowski
he always makes her drink
too much
to think straight.
But there's this great running theme,
his women tend to

sing to him, dreamily
(he doesn't enjoy it mostly).

Jay sang to boyfriends
before she met Jim
only on enamored request
and only softly
for a minute or two at best.

One trip up the Great Ocean Road
with a red kombi
and a blondie
feminine feline
boy she wasted some weeks
aligned with
tape deck broken
since 1989
words of boredom unspoken,
so she'd sing beneath her breath
almost all the way
from Anglesea to South Australia
save him having to balk
at her attempts to talk about
anything other than fruitarianism
socialism, communism,
whinging, whining,
not complying with
the ignorant majority,
crying for his abundant superiority ...

So, Jay would sing
instead of getting a head-full
of the tired hippy king's
blonde curly

ideas about the world.

“What’s that? It’s beautiful”

He’d meow behind his pretty
golden curtain

through thick pink lips,

“Sing a little louder.”

As they’d set up the kombi

in a dark expanse of

beach and highway

ocean blowing cold and crisp

at Jay in her ugg boots

parked illegally down the beach

avoiding camping fees

and any inspired company

aside from each other,

only stars for witnesses

to Jay’s shudders at half the things

meow-man said,

and a bottle of red

she’d hardly let him near.

Times like that

she’d pretend she was alone

every chance she had.

Alone is

honest and proud

closer to the calm surrounds

further from

the hounds of farcical romance

in fisherman’s pants.

*

Between Jim and Jay

it was he

who sang to her.

Second night together

his band played a Sydney gig

he said

“I don’t even do this for my mother,

your name’s on the door,”

as they left their first date

not yet lovers

unwillingly in separate cabs.

She arrived alone

(braveness galore)

she’d been to The Excelsior

so many times before

enter furthest door from the stage

determined not to engage

at first

just quench her thirst

and watch from up the back.

This time somehow

the open-plan

dark dance floor and bar

curled into a tunnel

as she entered

flushed by a beam of light

redirected from the rig

and Jim had her in sight

straight away, mid-gig.

Wrist stamped

she moved into the light

without panning the scene

toward the man on stage
singing to her
for the first time.
Not knowing
this would start a
revolution growing.

It wasn't his voice
nor the style of
frenetic funk loud,
semi-nude girls bopping
or the size of the crowd –
none of it was quite
rock enough
to appeal to Jay's
rough taste in music.

Still, she was walking on
wooden-floorboard clouds in the stars
through angels
denim clad and excess make-up,
heart thumping nervous
and shaken-up
to see this curious
tall, big nose
eyes deep set and dark,
long fingers arched
attaching man to mic
trying to croon on a stage
and fall in love with her
all too soon and simultaneous
for eighty dancing witnesses.

End the set of

songs on Buddhist nuns
and prostitutes beget
anti-love ballads
and incoherent
drug-dribble lyrical salads,
he stepped off
The Excelsior stage
navigated away from raging
drunken loving punters
coming towards Jay.
“You came.”
“I wouldn’t have missed it.”
begin the second kiss.

* * * *

10.46pm the van pulls in
camping ground abound with
early-twenties backpackers,
hire-campers and beer cans rolling
in the dark.
Gray drives
through the open gate
Alex insists they check
the office is closed.
Jay, keen to keep
her fluids up, suggests they park
nearest the neighboring pub –
a bowls club, that Gray doesn’t doubt
will have the townships cheapest stout.

10.50pm, indeed the office
shut for the night
the three friends tumble out

to the backpackers' delight
Gray feels it would be rude
not to call upon the brood
of rowdy young travelers.
Alex follows close behind
while Jay's impatience brews.
In seventy minutes flat
Jay's birthday starts,
twenty-eight years,
she harps on the number
encumbered by her slow,
social friends.

"Come on, punks,
let's go,
I'm not getting any younger!"

10.59pm Jay, Gray
and Alex step over
the parking barriers
across the gravel in the dark,
floodlight in the wrong direction
nobody trips
and they arrive at their destination
illuminated ultra-violet
ding-ding-ding of slot machines
greyhound races on TV screens
and the kitchen's long closed.

Jay and Gray order pints
Toohey's Old on tap
while Alex tries a passion-mixer
vodka with a screw-top cap.

Jay is shouted birthday dinner:
packs of chips,
salt and vinegar,
and by the gaming room
they lounge in couches
avoiding eye-contact
with local punters.

They'll drive to Sydney, next day
drop Gray off,
continue on their way
to Newcastle's arts festival
where Jay is due to read poetry
and Alex will feed
on fish and chips at the beach.

2. A history of anxiety

They'd converted the oval
into a tent city
for the artisans of the festivity.
Jay woke in the back
of Alex's van, packed
full of pages of poems
and ages of dread,
Jay remembers she should have read
to the audience yesterday
before her mind went astray.

The drive up was fast,
and when at last they arrived
with time on their hands
they went to the pub
to drink the bland local beer.
At the table,
suddenly Jay seemed unstable
"Can you hear me?"
Alex touched her friend's face
and in place of a reply
Jay simply sighed.

"Sweetie, you're million miles away,
you seem unsteady.
Maybe we should get back to the van
and get you ready for the reading?"
Jay, preoccupied by the feeling
suddenly reeling,
remembering her breathing said:
"What do you mean,

let's just finish our beer.”

She was quiet, but clear.

Alex was not easily deterred,

“This isn't the first time this week

I've noticed the colour

drain from your cheeks.

Before you were a little vague,

now you look plagued by something more.

Poor thing,

let me ring the organizer

we'll cancel today,

what do you reckon?

What do you say?”

When she felt her self

starting to sway

on the chair,

caring that she might pass out,

doubting she could really stand

without Alex holding her hand,

Jay accepted, Alex called.

Back at the van, Jay stalled,

“Actually, I should be fine,

let's call them back”

And proceeded to have

a full-blown panic attack.

Alex, frantic, shook her buddy,

Jay was eyes-glazed,

and mind-muddy,

the van a blurry haze,

Alex's words of concern,

unheard and dazed.

It wasn't like she hadn't read before
she'd taught poetry classes,
she knew the score.
Was this stage-fright,
or a greater plight,
she wondered as she gasped for breath.

Now, a new day had bloomed
blue sky and endless possibilities
Jay clear and waking
in a singlet and black g-string
arse cheeks and shoulders everywhere
no longer with a care
in the world,
she uncurls to find Alex asleep
in the morning light,
the warmth of the day
through van-door, ajar all night.

*

The night that follows
Alex reminds Jay they're leaving tomorrow
encouraging her mate
to read before it's too late.

To the closing night they arrive
and Jay feels stronger
as though she can survive the shakes
long enough to share a page of verse
for her own sake
before she'd start to feel worse
about bringing Alex all this way

for nothing.

The hall is wide
a makeshift bar along one side
is their first destination
conversation is quiet
as a man on the stage reads
a riot of words and sounds
compounded into poetry
the man's face is pink
what was he thinking
wearing wool under the lights
on such a mild night?

Something strikes Jay as they sit,
listening to the other poet,
she doesn't care if she blows it
she feels she could read better
than the poet in the sweater.
She'd be more relaxed, at least
contrasting his apparent exasperation,
she looked forward to the elation
of sharing her work
since publishing is sparse
sometimes readings are a perk.

Jay thought back
to yesterday's panic attack,
she'd assumed it was performance related
now that worry abated
she had to ponder the cause
of the nausea that broke her.

* * * *

Years ago,
one of Jim's tours in China
led astray
as always, a singer's ego
too embellished to forgo
temptations of the flesh,
determined to prove despite their love
he wasn't meshed in with Jay
romance was here today
gone the next
feeling he'd done his best
to appease her
now was time to tease her
with the jealousy that burned
his own mind so easily
every time Jay's
feminine ways came in to play,
it wasn't so much the men on the street
who'd turn to meet her eyes
but having to disguise his distrust
of Jay's past with men and lust
hating every crude image
of every man she introduced him to
imagining them in bed
assuming there was more
than friendship,
history left unsaid in front of him,
poor Jim.

He knew, he knew
the vile things men would do,
he'd done them all himself
readily with stealth,

and he'd do it all again
with gusto and energy
take his housemate's friend's virginity
as a favour to her,
ignore the groupie's lies
that she's of age
stepping off the stage
to take her to his room
too soon for second chances.

His romance with Jay was unique,
special, a real ripper.
The first time he'd related to a woman
who wasn't a stripper.

The hooker left after getting her tip
in the Shanghai hotel suit
and Jim, now alone, thought about his sweet
Jay back home
on the other end of the telephone.
He considered a feint
convince her of his restraint
it'd set her up to trust him
no more questions or strife
he could live his double life
feed his ego and warm his heart
artfully keep his marital harmony.

The sex-worker wasn't his first
this tour bursting with offers
he felt no guilt for paying
no concerns about her staying.
The accountant he met from the US
with the annoying accent

was the truest disloyalty
she was a royal pain in the neck
not worth the cheque he paid at the bar
unsure why was he was
even taking it so far.

Add to that
he was feeling ill
a flu he feared would kill him
he was hardly in the mood
preferring to brood
than to play shows,
all thirteen in a row.

The band was having rows
as usual, which allowed Jim
too much time alone.
He finally cracked one night
called Jay on the mobile phone.

*

Jay was home when she got the call
Sara was there
to catch her fall.
Jim, sobbing at the end of the line
admitting to her a third of his crime.
Jay was silent
listening to the violent outpour
not wanting to hear anymore
she leant back
against the doorframe
held the receiver
away from her.

Her vision went blurry
then black,
this would be Jay's
first panic attack.

* * * *

At the festival club
a tall man smiles shyly
warmly from across the space
as Jay steps off the stage
into Alex's embrace,
then leaves her friend to grace
the bar with her drink card.

"Ah, Jay. Hi,
it's me, Tim."
"Tim, hello!
I wasn't sure if you'd go to this."
"Well I'm glad I didn't miss
you altogether.
Are you feeling better?
I took your friend's call."
"Why? Do I still look appalling?"
"No not at all."

Tim says, embarrassed,
"But you do look different than I expected."
Tim smiled again, warmly.

Never formally introduced
the two were sometimes published
in issues of the same magazines,

both keen Scrabble fiends,
Jay played online with Tim
and she would almost always win.
The country boy
and city girl
linked by a world of words,
catching glimpses of
the other's life,
Jay had heard about Tim's wife
and the children he'd inherited;
Tim heard about
Jay's adventures and lovers,
the way her poetry hovers
between the two.

Both unglued by university,
and in the face of real-world adversity
Tim found Jay's blog comments
the cause of some lament.
Assuming her to be
prone to volatility,
she'd openly disagree
with other readers,
incapable of feeding egos.
Much to Tim's relief
in person Jay was sweet,
seemingly unplagued by grief,
and though she could
push his buttons, she wouldn't.

"It's just not my thing,"
Jay tells Tim
her disinclination
for spoken word performance.

“But it’s the only chance
most poets get
to get their work out.”
“It’s a chance to spout
word-games in dress-ups,
I don’t see what poetry
has to do with it.”

Sensing his cyber-sparing
partner getting shitty,
Tim resists the urge
for a witty rebuttal,
instead he settles
for gentle taunting:
“So, you are just as argumentative
in person.”

Jay silently curses herself,
“Give me a break
I just had a mental breakdown.”
“I’m finding it hard
to tell how serious you sound
when you mention that,
I guess I don’t know you
well enough to read you.”
Jay jokingly snorts a sarcastic retort:
“And here I thought you were psychic!
Look, really, I’m fine now,
I’m upwardly mobile,
I’m properly dressed,”
“I can see that,
and wearing red, no less.
You must have your fight back.”
“Which explains my random

verbal attacks!”

The two smile,
arriving at their destination,
a midnight courtyard reading.
Tim leads Jay to a free spot
on two entry steps.
They sit with the people
and candles laden.
The poet’s voice bounces
from every stone surface,
Tim’s leg and Jay’s arm touching
the who hour
like a still limb-dance,
every slight movement,
lead by one, followed by the other.

3. The shrinking of the head

Finally home, once more
Jay dumps her bag at the door
after submitting again
to the allure
of local beers, compensating fears
the night before
washing through her
vacant body.

No shoddy vision today
no hang-over belly
no jelly-legs,
Jay realises with glee
just an overarching desire to pee.

After the flush
while washing her hands
Jay looks up at her face
in the water-flecked mirror.
To her horror, along her right cheek
a pale rash with white spotted peeks
is raising slow but sure,
how on Earth did this occur?

Just as she gains perspective
focuses on her newly sensitive skin
her thoughts are interrupted
by a BEEP!
coming from her bag.

Jay jumps at the sound
a message on her phone,

suddenly an ill feeling in her sternum,
she goes to read it, groaning.

It's Tim from the reading
saying:

“Feel free to tell me
what you're wearing”
Jay smiles, surprised
remembers their disguised flirting
discussion on aura-coloured clothing.

Looking down again
Jay notices she's shaking
her hand barely taking hold
of the mobile phone,
she considers sitting for a while
but as though she'd
ODeD on coffee
Jay cannot break free,
this nervous ball of energy
that's made a home inside her belly.

She grabs her keys out of the door
walks outside once more,
her strides quicken
she leaves the gate
and starts to run,
in the late afternoon sun.
She runs down to the bay
and along the track
her lack of fitness
is no match for her drive
to revive the calm inside.

She runs all the way to St Kilda
but when she stops
the nerves start up,
so she runs, indefinitely, alone
wondering how
she'll get back home.

*

The office was, in fact,
the front room of
a North Melbourne terrace,
on Alex's recommendation
Jay relented after some thinking
saw the doctor who referred her
to a shrink
and ordered a gastroscopy.

The wooden blinds cast shadows
over Shrinky's face
like a 7.30 Report interviewee
on a biker gang special.
Jay sat opposite in the arm chair
intentionally avoiding the couch
knowing what probably went on there,
patients disparaged by
displays of tears and dog-eared
life stories, each more boring
than the last,
and Shrinky, probably, passing
the tissues and asking
probing questions into their pasts, like
"Tell me about your mother,
did you have many friends at school,

and how did that make you feel?"

The bookshelves behind him
packed neatly full of
Freud and Nietzsche
framed a peachy picture
of Jay's future: gloomy at best.

Jay imagines Alex in this room
on the couch, doubtless,
being groomed by Shrinky
for some better reality.

"So, I have some questions,
I ask everyone at first sessions.
Is it ok if we go through those?"
Jay wonders why he's asking,
"Yeah, sure."

"Your occupation?"

"I tutor, and I write. Poetry."

"Ah..."

"Ah?"

"So you're very intelligent, and creative."

"Yes, I'm a hazard to myself and everyone around me."

"And you use humour to break tension.

Ok. So I want you to imagine
you're walking down the street
you see a stamped envelope on the ground.

What do you do?"

Shrinky has a clipboard
no doubt recording his interpretations
of the answers she gives.

"Is it postmarked? Has it been opened?"

Jay asks.

Shrinky looks bewildered.

“Um, I don’t know. Why?”

“Well if it’s postmarked and opened,
maybe the recipient discarded it for a reason.
It’s had its journey, I wouldn’t interfere.
If not, it hasn’t had a chance
to reach its destination,
I’d put it in a mailbox.”

Shrinky is writing madly,
Jay must have said something schizophrenic.
She imagines him reaching
for an alarm beneath the coffee table,
enabling local authorities to deem her unstable
do the paperwork in minutes
and before the session’s up
some men in white would come
and take her to be committed.

“Now, Jay, you described
your symptoms as being quite physical,
which is common in patients
suffering anxiety.
Any other physical problems I should know of?”
“I don’t know,
I get a sore stomach,
throw up sometimes.”
“But not intentionally?”

Jay suppresses a groan,
trying to take him seriously

“No, I like food. Truly.”

4. Juggling

Autumn brings
red wine cravings
in Melbourne laneway bars
sitting in the window
looking out
fresh light rain and
heavy conversation.

Alex sips red
such a rare indulgence
for her to shed
her usual healthy aura,
inspired to let loose
by tails of trauma
twisted family follies.

The two drink down
the Luchador Shiraz
one glass
then the next
and Jay listens to tales
of a father's unpunished abuse
no jail or noose to reverse
the adversity Alex suppressed,
unrest for so many years
of fears and depression,
now memories surfacing
bringing light to the brim.

The pursuit of drunkenness
keeps their minds steady
absorbing shivers of anger

like their perplexed livers.

His voice in her head

“You’re so hard on me

keep that bi-polar in check

you’re twisting the truth”.

Ruthless.

Rain tapers off

droplets rest against

window panes.

Alex pushes a tear

sliding off her cheek,

now seeking distraction.

Sighs

and asks

“How’s single life, anyway?

Any men on the horizon?”

“One of my students is in love with me

he walks me to the station after class.”

“I’m sure all of your students

and colleagues are in love with you.”

“Yes, and everybody in this bar, too.”

“You’re probably right.”

“So is he cute? Are you behaving yourself?”

“Very. And a better writer than me.

I’m doing my best. You can get fired for that.”

The mahogany surrounds

warm a little

as the conversation wanes

a little.

*

Home-time walking
damp city streets
tram-stop bound to meet the
last service of the night
thoughts of her friend's tears,
Deep Purple in her ears
playing just for Jay
like uplifting credits
for a somber
night on the sauce.

She's alone in her preference for
Deep Purple
over Led Zeppelin
why so underrated?
Muscle car rock
despite herself
brightening her dark night.

Bought the album
age 18, her favourite
Sydney bus-interchange
second-hand shop
admiring store manager
indie, anti-pop
telling her
"Machine Head,
one of the best rock albums ever."
introductions and smiles
Jay would go back
often, for a while
to her sanctuary from

concrete Sydney crazies
wanting her conversation
while waiting at the bus station.

But what was his name?
Perhaps this
wino idea
to hunt him down now,
say “thanks for the music”
is ingenious,
Mr. Friendly Professional
from life past
prepare to be Googled at last.

The music stops
iPod battery in the red
and concern for Alex
re-enter Jay’s head.

*

The night went on
in full wakefulness
watching shadows of lanky
trees sway in the wind
security light on
then off again.

Brief dreams came after
hours of staring at the wall,
of shouting at her friend’s dad,
pulling a knife,
pushing a door shut,
carrying nine-year old Alex

down shopping center
emergency stairwells
like an endangered mother.

*

That first night
Jay saw Jim play:
since, years have passed.
clouds have lifted at last
floods come and gone
and dust settled
a bunch of seasons
packed away for reasons
unavoidable as time,
like a childhood trinket
once so attached.

This morning
she was being pushed along
on a hospital bed
to the University
by Alex, like on a bus,
for a \$10.80 fare
which was all the money she had
after missing her train stop
and wound up
nowhere.

They gossiped there about
some soap character – Rebecca
like she was a housemate or
a friend of a friend,
while weaving round

bends in tall-forest windy roads
then through a shopping centre

buzzzz!

when the alarm went off.
She hardly heard it,
earplugs stuffed in
since 3am
when the kid next door
unsettled the calm
started setting off the smoke alarm.

Only her freezing face
and the sound of her breath
to wake her,
make her
abandon the dream for
this misty grey 7am.

Jay had gone back to tutoring,
first-year university poetry.
while the green is changed for
red and orange
South Melbourne suburban trees
in fits of passion,
while Western suburbs
sat in cold and lumpy
containers and industry.

Jay braves incoming city
train station gritty traffic
elbowing against the people-grain
juggling important laptop

with hot take-away coffee
through the gates
legs like jelly
holding in nausea waves
and anguished belly
from the night before
and the weeks before that.

7.59 Sydenham line
Western rough-guts suburbia
forty monotonous minutes
pining for more sleep,
eavesdropping on
somebody else's work-whining
then ten minutes walking in pain
amongst fog and rain,
discarded fit packs
and a run over kitten.

This is a testament
to Jay's dedication as a tutor,
and only six students
show up
despite her efforts.

Stevie Smith's Not Waving But Drowning
prescribed week four of first year
saving the dears from the
dense maze of Paradise Lost
to a modern free-verse phase.

Stepping outside again
the dull grey sky
is turned blue.

Her students glide ahead
to their smokes and gossip and lives
as she waves goodbye.

Jay's student, Michael,
dallies further up the path
waiting for her smile to meet him,
sneakers and bag slung over
one broad shoulder
his brown hair long, hiding
nervous dark green eyes
looking for the ok
as Jay smiles, approaching,
"Michael. How's the first essay going?"
"I don't know, I'm not too great with essays.
I don't know how you do it, academic papers,
theses..."
"Your creative work is great,
I'm sure you'll do fine.
What's your topic?"

At the station,
Michael leaves her, regretfully
"See you next week,"
Jay continues up the ramp
to the train
BEEP!
Her phone again. Jay jumps
pumps her feet against the concrete
harder, to get home faster
the illness in her stomach lasting longer.

On the train
the old woman

across from Jay
Footscray bound for market shopping.
She's saying Catholic prayers
Italian beneath her breath
Gold wedding rings
gleaming diamonds to boot,
and 80s Adidas tracksuit
ironed, mint condition
hair short, and rinsed
conservative black
and thinning.

Jay wonders if she's praying
for more hair to clip,
a new tracksuit,
her public worship
reminding Jay of a Hare Krishna's
chanting quiet
Hare, Hare, Hare Krishna
Hare, Hare.

BEEP!
The phone again
another of Jay's sometimes-men?
Jay grabs the phone from her pocket
to check it out
what could the fuss
of two messages in a row be about?

It isn't Tim
asking what she's wearing,
but Gray, texting to say
"Weren't we meant to be sharing
in a jug this afternoon?"

I missed my flight
so don't come too soon.
See you tonight,
hope that's alright."

Gray! Of course!
Jay had forgotten
another symptom of feeling rotten
aside from most of her meals
defying gravity,
she was starting to lose
her short-term memory.

"Fuck! Damn it."
She scolded herself as she replied:
"Alright, see you in a bit."

5. Seeing the trouble with yourself in others

The email arrived with
coffee number three,
Jay, too tired for locating a café
piling instant granules
diluting, pouring the cream
dressing gown and slippers
Gray still asleep on the couch.

“Hi Jay,
Came across some of your work
in the journal you said I should submit to.
I loved it. Especially this one:
*I wish I were at some bar in hell
where the whiskey burns
but I'm drunk and I'm dead
and the heat is a charring change
from this place
in the darkest part of the blue
ocean before the dawn
three-sixty degrees of blackish horizon
clutching a shard of floating ice
corners not cutting frozen flesh fast enough
ice not melting fast enough
no ship passing fast enough.
To slip and drown to the centre of the universe
fires to subdue the forfeit
make the numb skin feel again,
demon bartender company
(who could cure this soul better?)
and timelessness.
Bright white timelessness.
...I could really relate to it.*

Michael.

PS. Can I show you a draft of my essay?"

He said he loved it,

Jay worried a little

that poem spoke to him

of all her poems,

he loved that one.

Part Five

1. Coming back to bite you

The girl across the table
looks indignant and sixteen,
full cheeks, puffy lips pursed
she is able to deflect the curse
of the world's biggest nose
by rehearsing her poses
(she has model-dreams
like all young girls these days, it seems).
she only pretends to eat
the prawn's shelled meat,
arranging her gangly
fleshless limbs, like spiders do,
and maintains at least
two points of contact with him
at all times, to boast
or perhaps just to use him
as a scratching post.
Being out in company
excites her, ignites her
need for all eyes on her.
Her hair, kept long, dead straight,
she keeps his fantasies elated:

Finally, a legal version
of Jim's ideal pure teenage virgin,
is his for the taking
so he's put her on hold
with a gold engagement ring.

In line with the story
by Miss Gertrude Stein,

Jay would stay there
despite not being gay there,
simply resolve not to look
at the dramatic displays
of affection and sinking hooks
across the dining table.

Poor Jay,
the hollow-heart savant
in the crowded seafood restaurant
for Sara's birthday tea
was reason enough to be there
and behave there.

Jay shouted Sara's birthday meal,
wishing to make it worth the ordeal
of the abundant mockery
assaulting her periphery.

Between the polite chatter
of music-business matters
and ordering the flathead,
or the salmon, perhaps, instead,
Jay fought a battle
with irritated thoughts, unsettled
recalling Jim's past declarations
of his monkesque station
in his life, to be alone
on his harem throne,
while Jay, smarts and beauty abound,
was bound to have found
a better man than Jim
who'd treat her well,
and once they fell in love

without disaster,
they'd reminisce on Jim with laughter,
oh, how his poisoned mind,
dysfunctional, cold and unkind
would isolate him, under duress,
detached from any happiness.

As if by some sick joke
a trick in fate
with mirrors and smoke,
it was Jay alone and unfeeling
and Jim whose new love life
had left *Jay* reeling.

*

The following day
our ever-philosophical Jay
sits alone in an ally-way café
same as every morning
for the past three years.
Peering out the open windows
out at the wintery people passing
out beyond the curling smoke in sight
from the men out front with ciggies alight.

Jay is tossing up,
whether to hold the hot cup
and stare outside all morning,
or mark some essays on Browning
or drowning her tears in a page
homework for her new psychologist-sage,
or write some poetry instead
on how she hasn't been to bed with a lover

in longer than she can remember.

Jay is down today
she feels she needs a holiday,
a rainy winter's sea change
to re-arrange the blues,
allay the dark clouds and confusion
for a while.

It's been nine months percolating
an anxiety baby in her grating mind,
followed by nights of staring down
the packets of painkillers she keeps around.

Normally hidden,
they live behind the 80s stereo speaker,
the electricity and water meters,
beneath the red paper lamp
locked away behind the filing clamp.

Now a box is close at hand
upon the mahogany night stand,
not to devour whole in an hour of need,
but to indulge the greed for sleep
on nights she stays awake to weep.
Just one pill and a glass of wine
enough to slow her racing mind
for long enough to dream
of a warmer night unseen.

Soon this morning will be midday
time to leave the café
for Jay dislikes the bland daylight
preferring times of shadowy dawn

brightness through the shade of morn
or evenings on the porch
coffee in hand and time to scorch.

This wouldn't do
this mood
it dawned on Jay
she would love to get away
so she takes out her phone,
on the other end Gray answers
"What is it?"
"I'm thinking of coming up for a visit."

2. The will to die

Sydney night in Surry Hills
the rain is fine down
cools the hundred steps
between the Hopetoun
and Cricketers' Arms'
warm boozy charm
and mahogany bar
charred in punters
slow simmered jokes and tales,
the two pubs never fail
to make Jay feel at home
in the city that's not her own.

Jay walks with Gray,
best mates since high school days
they are ten beers down each
since hitting the ground
beneath their feet,
shivering and cackling
at nothing so cracking,
inching down the misty
11pm street urban hub
towards the humming pub.

Out of the rain
slicked black streets
narrow lined with trees
and cars galore
washed in the downpour,
cabs splashing puddle water
as they pass,
at last Jay and Gray are in

and sitting at the bar,
not far from the door
or the chip-machine lure,
or the bartender wiping dry
the bench and sighing,
and Gray is trying to focus
as Jay explains
her new shrink's hocus-pocus,
and soon they realise
they've both defied
the will to die
some time in their young lives.

With the corner of the bar-mat
Gray fiddles
“So you're saying that
the shrink is helping?”
“Not sure,”
Jay keeps her doubts at bay,
“He's shelving
my childhood, my life,
and the strife with Jim
isn't as important to him.”
“But it's important to you?
How many years have passed? Two?”
“Three, actually.
And no, perhaps Jim's history,
but then why do I feel
so peeled apart?”
“It's 'cause of your art.”
Gray's diagnosis is frank.
“Thanks for bringing it up,
the shrink describes it as the cup
from which I drink.”

“That’s odd, I always think
of you as drinking from a pint glass.”

“You’re an arse.”

Open fling the doors
and in from a fresh downpour
come a couple of smokers
smelling pungent.

“Shrinky describes me as a sponge.”

Gray hums in agreement,

“You porously suck up
the world’s filament.”

As the talks proceed
and the drinks imbibed
this narrator concedes
to zoom out wide
to the scene of two old friends
long hair, leather jackets
and motorbike boots
out, drinking stout
and talking about something
bigger than mortgages and work
like the loud jerks across the bar,
Gray is for politics
and Jay is a poet
the world at their fingertips
and they both know it,
the girls in the bar
eye-off Gray from afar,
the men seek out Jay
whenever Gray goes for a leak,
and this is just an average night
in an average week,
midnight just before

the last drinks light abhors them all,
they should be elated, yet
both Gray and Jay owe a debt
hailing to the gods of trying to die
and failing.
Why?

*

Jay sits at the kitchen counter
watching her mother
chop fresh herbs for dinner.
“This was a very nice surprise,
I’ve hardly heard from you.”
Mother says.
“Are you still hungry,
I can make you something,
we have some chips
in the cupboard, I think.”

“I’m fine, ma.
Spoken to Manny, lately?”
“Yes, the baby’s doing well,
they’ll come for a visit soon.
And what about you?
You seem down, darling.
And what happened with that gastroscopy?”
“Oh, nothing much,
minor ulceration they said.”
“You’re under too much stress,
you know, sometimes I feel young people
don’t get to be young anymore.
You work too hard, you know.”

Jay doesn't say
the ulcers are from the day
she took too many pills
and took a spill,
saving her worried mother
the overwhelming bother,
another hater of Jim,
if she knew, she'd just blame him.

*

The grim truth, these three years on
that drive to not survive
was within her,
there's a New York Times article
says poets peak early
write alone,
says poets are mentally ill,
alcoholic, drug addicted,
die young,
and Jay believes it,
these days.
Never subject to harm or abuse
like Alex,
never fallen ill for long periods
like Gray,
Jay, ashamed, had no excuse,
all the panic and crying
like a baby
tired of trying
for some normalcy.

3. Nausea

Home too soon,
Melbourne, too still
and somber,
Jay feels three days away
did not suffice
suffocated once more
she notices, undressing,
climbing into bed
that ball of nervous
electricity hasn't left
her solar-plexus since
Newcastle, months ago.

She reaches the TV
with her foot from under
the white thinning doona,
a soap opera washes her
with tiredness.

During an ad break,
she looks around
mounds of dusty books
on the dusty floor,
studio door needs paint
dainty dried flowers from years past
everlasting in her vases,
candles melted down to nothing
for years now,
dirty wine glasses
red stained and finger-printed
no hiding this crime scene.

*

Jay shivers,
pulls the other blanket over
cold face numb and headache
thumping slowly.
The neighbour plays Puccini
as the sun is setting,
the soap opera over
hours ago,
had she fallen asleep?
She wasn't sure.
Just then, a beep,
reaching for her phone
on the floor, plugged in,
message from Tim,
he'd be in Melbourne tomorrow,
would she meet him
at the Rainbow in Fitzroy?

Jay wonders if Tim
secretly desires her,
unhappy within his marriage
perhaps?
She tiredly agrees
to see some blues with him,
wondering how she'll
ever leave her bed again.

Intermittent dreams of
needing to leave a place
grace the long night,
waking her over and over
with an overwhelming feeling

she did something very wrong
her life is over
but what was it?
God what was so bad
lines from her poem
the one Michael liked
Michael, looking up at her
his head downward tilted
her student admiring her
and the lines from the poem
the bar in hell
the shards of ice
the student with a crush
did she want him, too?
Could this be the end
of everything?
What has she done?
What has she done?

She hasn't done anything, yet
A loop of obsessed fear
haunting every hypnagogic
hour Jay scours her body
for a deeper sleep.

After the sun is risen,
her body, lead exhaustion
overheating, head buried alive
beneath the covers
a dream of trying to wake up
there in bed, asleep
she tries to feel her limbs
one by one
moving, for a moment,

reaching for something
her phone, her pillow,
easy, easy lifting a hand
seeing just past her nose
is that the screen?
until the realisation
she hasn't moved at all,
her eyes plastered shut
this is still dreaming,
and it goes on for
what seems like days.

Sunlight crawls up the walls
Jay wakes suddenly
in the afternoon
with a start,
the neighbour bangs a broom
on the floor,
Jay's heart bangs hard
in her throat.

4. The big crash

The apartment block quiet
to her left,
the Puccini broom neighbour
collector of Egyptian artifacts
obsessive-compulsive
middle-aged man.

To the right
the owner's son stays
during the university term.

Both never have company,
she assumes they are virgins
wonders if they've met.

The ginger cat guards Jay's door
with his fatness
he appears too heavy to move
'til he's scared, then
like a cartoon he vanishes.

Jay sees ginger from the window
before she opens the door,
the cat is, indeed, on the matt.

Ready to meet Tim,
Jay is gentle stepping over ginger
he looks sideways, suspicious
as she leaves for the tram
and rightly so.

As the tracks between
Jay and the tram grow shorter
doubt sets in.

As she steps aboard

at the ticket machine
change in hand
– images of walking into the pub
alone –
paying for a two hour ticket
–walking through swinging doors
the threshold off the street
alone–
zeroing in on a seat
facing forward near the doors
the tram seems to be
moving very fast
much too fast, surely
–standing inside the pub
at the door searching for Tim
alone–
past the casino already
Jay is heating up
her eyes burn as tears swell
and fall down her cheeks
breathing is suddenly
difficult, what's happening?
–Is Tim alone? or there with friends?
god don't let him be with friends
not more strangers, please not that –
Jay fumbles for her phone
dials Alex
Hello? the answer
no sound comes out of Jay
Jay? Alex's voice, confused
her arms go numb
the phone falls to the floor
a passenger across the aisle picks it up
the tram comes to a stop

Jay is up
You ok, mate? the passenger
hands her the phone
Jay scurries off the tram
Collins street
she can't breathe
she can't hold her handbag
she puts it down
squatting by the tram-stop shelter
passengers look pitying
Drugs. somebody says
her breath returns
little by little.
Jay stands up, crosses the tracks
catches the first tram home
the attack turned to shame
tears still fall, mortified.

5. When what kept you going goes

Message thirteen: poetry lecturer
asking what happened last week.

Message twelve: Gray
he'd had a call from Alex
he's worried, should he come down?

Message eleven: Mum
she'd had a call from Alex
call immediately, please.

Message ten: Alex
she's been trying now for days

Message nine: university admin
the students are waiting
it's been half an hour.

Message eight: university admin
it's been fifteen minutes
the students are waiting.

Message seven: Alex
what's going on?

Message six: Tim
is everything alright?

Drop him a line.

Message five: Alex
Jay, please pick up
come on.

Message four: Alex
Jay, I'm worried
call me, okay.

Message three: Alex
what just happened?
heard your voice
but you didn't say anything
it cut out.

Message Two: Tim

I've been stood up?

Message One: Alex

Jay?

*

The buzzer sounds

the studio still

Jay wraps the sash

around her gown

opens the door and ginger jumps

from his matt.

Alex at the gate

phone in hand,

Jay buzzes her in.

“Thank god,”

Alex embraces her

tight limbed friend

“What happened to you?

You're tiny, suddenly

shit, have you been eating?”

Jay's knees give way

Alex catches her weight.

“Sorry... I'm sorry.”

“Sweetheart!”

*

The two girls lie there

on the bed, not talking

surrounded by a sea

cushions and used tissues

Alex's eyes shut
her breathing even,
Jay gazes at the ceiling
thinking: how white,
even the paint beneath
the peeling corners are
so... white.

Alex flutters awake
“How ‘bout a walk
by Albert Park lake?”

Jay's arm tucked in
Alex's elbow, slowly they stroll,
sun gives way to evening
folds of the lake
like a sheet of grey satin
tossed over a mattress.

Jay averts her eyes
at every jogger, searching
for some reasonable sight
distractions from accusatory glances.

The greatest guilt, right there
twixt rib and forearm,
comfort from the abused
post-traumatic stress, Alex had
problems with a cause
still, unbound hands for reaching
this indulgent sadness Jay
now despised herself for.

After the tram break-down

the electric mass
in her solar-plexus
emanated outwards and for heaven
killing what energy lived
through the sickness.
Now just nausea remained
the nausea of the ulcers
ground into stomach-lining
by the pills of the past
reminder of another failure.

It's failure's nausea.
It's Sartre's nausea.
It's anxiety's hangover,
 Unyielding.

6. Punishing the guilty

The sky darkens in the afternoon
it's been three days since
Alex walked Jay 'round the lake.
She thought she'd go back alone,
she made it as far as a bench
by the street, she sits there.

Her mother is on her mind,
she loves her so much
she pictures her with dark circles
beneath her eyes,
walking through the house in Sydney
making tea, or letting a friend
make the tea.

Would Alex and Gray visit?

She hopes so.

She hates herself more
with every picture of pain
she might inflict, by ending her own,
there seems to be no alternative
she must ride this out
the impermanence of everything
she must ride this out.

The clouds break and the wind
picks her up,
a dead shaking leaf on the path
walking home in soaking slippers,
no-one else about.

*

On day four,
the downpour like
a thousand fists drumming
upon the metal roof
and window panes pelted
with late winter rains
bouts of chesty thunder
intermittent noise barrier between
Jay's studio and the neighbours'.

When the rains come down
she allows quiet weeping
to howl beneath the covers
naked clutching burning belly,
having just read an account
911 call to a scene
a man comes out the front door
holding his face in his hands
they couldn't understand him
he reveals his face half blown-off
missing some jaw and tongue
he'd pulled the rifle away, last moment
that's why part of his face was gone
and not his head.

When the rain subsides
starved of fresh air, her face
emerges crimson in the light
of the room, she rehearses breathing
she hasn't cried like this before,
she's read more morbid things than that
it's the desire to break away
from her head, she relates to –
it disturbs her 'til the nausea

turns to vomit, she's out of bed
she's on the bathroom floor,
she's still boiling hot
even on the cool tiles.

What kind of fuck-up
wants freedom from their head?
What kind of fuck-up
only gets out of bed to throw-up?

*

The strangeness of no appetite
though the neighbour's dinner
smells pleasant enough,
no hunger instinct
day five it occurs
she hasn't eaten in quite some time,
she is the opposite of full
she has no desire to fill her
belly, no feeling for nourishment
at all.

She is thinking of the whiteness
of bathroom tiles, as the bath fills
tepid water rising
the tablets, beneath the basin
also white, for sleeping,
she takes four together
downed with wine from the bottle
steps into the bath
beneath the window
closes her eyes
white dots coil in blackness

this is falling asleep
this is sinking into the bath water
this is sinking further and further.

*

The neighbour switches off
the kitchen exhaust
in time to hear a sudden
suffocated cry
sounded almost like
“Help”.

He waits a few moments
then a few more,
shy by nature he wonders
should he check?

He goes over, knocks
no sound, no answer,
he knocks again,
he goes back inside.

It doesn't seem right
he goes back again,
he knocks, he knocks
he looks in through the crack in the curtain.
Emergency are dialed
the door is busted open
Jay is lifted out of the bath
limbs dangling lifeless.

All the neighbours gather
in the garden by the gate

hands over mouths

frowning creases.

7. Waking up

“She waking again,”
a man croaks.
A dream of a darkened house
she’s inside, silent hiding
stranger with a lawnmower
gaining on her, past the blinds.
Machines beep and hum
she falls back to sleep.

*

“She’s waking again,”
“Jay?” – a woman’s voice
her lips purse, whisper “ooh”
someone else says not to talk
says it’s alright.
She drifts away.

*

“Doctor, look,”
something plastic is removed
from her dry lips, it’s a young man,
“Hi there, I’m going to ask you two questions
don’t push yourself, one word answer will do:
What day is it?”
Why can’t he ask someone else?
“When’s your birthday?”
“It’s... it’s...” too hard.

*

She's on a train above an ocean
of Persian turquoise,
the darkest greens, white waves
bending like the corona ahead
the warmest celestial embrace
above the mammoth deep
she is euphoric,
she is in love.

*

Eyes open to a dark ward,
does she always wake at night?
She must be nocturnal,
an owl or a possum,
this is hospital, she knows,
must have been an accident,
she checks herself
toes wriggle, fingers flex
so far so good,
bravely, she stretches
her whole body, sore, intact...

What else? She knows
her nocturnal animals,
but she's not a child,
think of something adult,
sex. Sex, but with whom?
Sex preceded by dinner?
Wine? Should she call
a nurse? Perhaps?
There's probably a button
somewhere, but it's dark.

She'd like to go back
to the Persian turquoise dream
She closes her eyes,
she seems fine,
the voice was right
she'd be alright.

*

The psychologist sat
in an armchair by the bed,
quite an old woman
with a checklist:
memories a normal person
should have.

“Your name?”

“Jay.”

“You have two friends
who visited you through the week,
their names?”

She remembers nothing from the week
she was asleep,
for how long,
she can't be sure.

“Alex, Gray.”

“And what did you talk about
with Alex and Gray?”

She doesn't know

“I don't know,
nothing”

“Do you remember talking to them?”

“No.”

“Do you recall the Doctor
telling you what happened
last week?”

“He asked me my birthday.”

“You don’t remember anything else?”

“No.”

“Do you remember what happened
before you came here?”

“I went for a walk.”

“Where did you go?”

“Albert Park Lake.”

“Alone?”

“With Alex.”

“That’s the last thing you recall doing?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember how you’ve been feeling
the past month or so?”

“Afraid, tired.”

“Jay, do you know why you’re here?”

She doesn’t know

she can hazard a guess, but

she has made a decision.

“I don’t want to know.”

THE END