The River and the Black Cat
Also by James Sutherland-Smith

Books and Pamphlets

A Poetry Quintet  Gollancz, London 1976
The Death of Orpheus  Words Etc., London 1976
Trapped Water  Earthgrip, London 1977
Death of a Vixen  Many Press, London 1978
A Singer from Sabiya  Many Press, London 1979
Naming of the Arrow  Salamander Imprint, London 1981
The Country of Rumour  Many Press, London 1985
At the Skin Resort  Arc Publications, Todmorden 1999
In the Country of Birds  Carcanet, Manchester 2003
Popeye in Belgrade  Carcanet, Manchester 2008
Mouth  Shearsman Books, Bristol, 2014

Translations  (with Viera Sutherland-Smith except where stated)

Not Waiting for Miracles  Modrý Peter, Devoca 1993 (with Štefánia Allen and V S-S)
Slovensky balady  Pavian Records, Bratislava 1995 (with Zuzanna Homolová)
Swallowing a Hair. Poems by Ján Ondruš, Studna, Bratislava 1998 (with Martin Solotruk)
An Album of Slovak Writers, Bratislava 2000
100 Years of Slovak Literature, Bratislava / Vilenica, Slovenia 2000
Cranberries in Ice: Selected Poems of Ivan Laučík  Modrý Peter, Canada 2001
The Melancholy Hunter: Selected Poems of Ján Buzassy  Modrý Peter, Canada 2001
Scent of the Unseen. Selected Poems of Mila Haugová  Arc Publications, Todmorden 2002
And That’s the Truth: Selected Poems of Milan Rúfus  Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Mundelein, IL. 2005
Dinner with Fish and Mirrors: Selected Poems of Ivana Milankov  Arc Publications, Todmorden, 2013
Selected Poems of Miodrag Pavlovic, Salt Publications, Cromer, 2014
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SAMPLER
Twenty Years After

It’s the most baroque of times,  
It’s the least classical of weathers.  
Nobody’s been promoted;  
some have gone to remote housing estates  
to open cardio-vascular fitness centres.  
All of us are to lose a belovéd friend  
in three subsequent volumes.  
In fact it’s twenty-six years after  
and I walk to my office beside the river.  
It’s rained and the waters foam with much mud.  
I look at the colours and implements on the hillside.  
The gardens are empty; a quince tree has been felled.  
A plumpness pads past with a stopwatch in her hand.  
I want to be challenged by the cardinal’s guard.  
Opportunity is burly although somewhere  
you aren’t conducting an intrigue  
for the honour of the Queen of France.  
Nor will I be your hapless accomplice.
Adam and Eve

Fashion is all we have to lose
while the glassware melts into bad habits.
Of course the clouds will accept no blame.
They simply sift through the textures
of what we’ll never do to pleasure
inhibitions who always remark
“Luckily, we were just about to.”
The black cat has hidden the Bible
because you declared you’d had enough
of metaphysics and bit into an example
of an apple I’d left uneaten.
Neither of us wish to read a digest
of complete restraint beside the roaring river.
So there you have it and my recovered sense of self.
One Small Idea

You can choose or not.
The river is memory riffling
its bed of stone and mud.
Or there’s the sky that egg-shell blue
which is neither memory nor forgetfulness.
There’s a hedgehog ambling across the lawn,
grey and brown with lilac haunches under its tail,
blood, appetite, prickles hardening into spikes
when it’s terrified. It can scream.
The black cat is wary.
Undoubtedly there’s history between them.
Desire, which recalls the future,
erects morose green shoots.
The Garden of Eden

All meaning is ahead of us.
What we’ve forgotten
the turbulent river whirls away
in its swollen ochre flood.
We’ve got the language,
we’ve got the language,
we’ve got the language,
but it’s got no more memory
than a flexing muscle.
The black cat always recalls
that I trapped and took her to the vet.
Otherwise we must identify
a colour for this spring,
something between pink and violet,
a petal’s tip showing
from a perennial
we didn’t plant and can’t name.
Art and Nature

The trees are as yet showing only minute points of colour, pink buds, yellow catkins, no leaf. so the ice hockey stadium isn’t hidden by the trees. Its walls were painted long ago in a green thought in a green shade unknown anywhere in nature, likewise the stripe separating the walkway from the cycle track by the river, itself an olive green, after the meltwater has gone. A truck tyre is visible and a supermarket trolley pitched there by the three musketeers. The black cat glides by on roller blades. A biplane trails a banner in the sky, “Do what comes unnaturally.”
Propriety

All at once more considered, more leisurely, more constructed, over time less inspired, less impetuous, less improvised, the garden comes alive at appointed places, brown, violet, pink velvet buds, nature imitating the unnatural, staked, pruned, espaliered, a language on its best behaviour, voices practising a nuance, hands splaying their fingers to make a point, smiles not residing in the eyes, laughter deliberately musical, a heart breaking with perfect manners, unlike the river unruly with melting ice while slightly elsewhere between little avenues of rose twigs the black cat trots with the first song of spring in her jaws.
Dialectics

That drawing of Louie’s, duck or rabbit?
It depends on your palate.
Both can be hung in the cellar
with porous walls through which
the river seeps in a wet year.
“Why introduce a subterranean metaphor?”
Louie or Fred before him might ask.
I could hang them in the open,
but then flies, the birds of the air
or the black cat would get at them.
Best to put the two lack of realities
where a slow putrefaction makes them
as tender as a romantic dinner for a threesome.
The bones and gristle could be an argument for.
The Varieties of Philosophy

The derelicts crowd together on a bench with cigarettes and a little of what you don’t fancy at all in a brown plastic bottle. They could be versions of the black cat possessing a calm as if they’d been cured of something they can’t remember and certainly the river withholds what it might have been sidling by, mumbling its secrets. Up river by the stone cross erected in memory of Saint Opilec two police wait beside a corpse hidden under a blue blanket. The policeman smokes, the policewoman flips her pony tail from under her cap. On the bank opposite to the stone cross a girl in red pants passes carrying her baby on her back papoose style. Her dog runs down the bank and crouches to shit in that delicate way dogs have when they must do something sanitary.
Après Nous, le Déluge

Our theme is restraint,  
the moon bound and gagged  
a tarnished silver,  
the river contained  
by levees skirting  
the edge of the town  
where water meadows  
glint with light in spring,  
the river oozing  
into our cellar,  
a skin of moisture  
peeling from the walls,  
glitter on the floor  
too shallow for pumps  
through which the black cat  
tiptoes flicking paws  
in irritation.  
Your manner to me  
is restrained. You turn  
your head away from  
my kiss, your worst fears  
brown stains on the walls.
Communiqué

A headless thrush brought in for breakfast, the black cat more than usually companionable, unseen, unheard the river conveys greetings from the Holy Roman Empire to the court of France despite the raucous manners of jay and magpie, the calloused hands of the executioner grasping an axe, a would-be lover having to comprehend that No means No while the garden begins to flourish before its due time, the apricot breaking out into white and pink and you and I embrace naked heedless of the open window.