

SAMPLER

*The River and
the Black Cat*

ALSO BY JAMES SUTHERLAND-SMITH

BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS

Four Poetry and Audience Poets P&A, Leeds 1971
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

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Not Waiting for Miracles Modrý Peter, Nevoca 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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James Sutherland-Smith

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(*this address not for correspondence*)

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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 beloved 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 stop watch 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.

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One Small Idea

You can choose or not.

The river is memory riffing
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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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