

A Poet's Voice

John Smith

Toronto-born John Smith's career includes degrees in mathematics, physics, philosophy and literature. He has published 7 collections of poetry that establish him as one of Canada's most accomplished philosophical poets. A retired professor of English from the University of Prince Edward Island, and the island's Poet Laureate, he lives in Charlottetown, PEI.

Author's Statement Much of what we call knowledge is metaphorical. What we say we know is the vehicle of a metaphor whose tenor remains, although brought into presence or even into being by the process of metaphor itself, a mystery, or at least a subject to be engaged. Poetry is important because of its specialized focus on the creation of metaphors and of comparable instruments, such as analogy, metonymy, synecdoche, simile, anthropomorphism, and hypothesis, which, like metaphor, explore one thing (the tenor) by treating it in terms particular to another (vehicle).

Why not

Why not choose what is simple: food, water, work,
a house, the girl or boy next door, a life?
Where did you latch on to the supposed need
to accelerate beyond the local value of gravity?

Or, veering from the straight and narrow, to feel
inertial mass? Was something implanted to that end
by the early neurotics, perverters of the clean slate?
Coming to consciousness later, as you do, you figure

all this has been laid on you by old masters
of the art of intensifying life. Without them
would anything be precious? Were it not for the gold

you haven't got, the bread you have might be tasteless.
Knowledge, too, compensates for want, stands for having,
Given that, all things fly towards being known.

There is One

There is one metaphor for everything. If it is money,
then poetry is redundant. If not – ah, if not, then
is it that single nonsense syllable sung by the indefatigable
oarsman setting his back against the tide of things,

groaning out the strokes of his trade, but hearing
in each groan a new thwack of the sea ring
like an unstoppable tonic chord reached at the last
expiring bar in the last sonata of a long career

as the boat turns to flotsam? Yes, it is that.
There is one metaphor that serves for everything in turn,
and it is like enough to all metaphors at once that it hardly differs from

the things themselves that hardly differ from the effort to achieve them.
Bend, address the moment – this is an old see-saw – drop
– get it right – heave, breathe, groan, hear, swing up, again, again.

Report on Planet Earth

The men have been cobbled together out of
second-hand lumber.

The women have been born under water.
The men are toolkits for prying open the outer world.
The women are searching for the eye of things.

The women curl themselves around an undeliverable truth.
The men work by the edges of their senses
along jungle spoors white as the gossamer of old wounds.
After sunset, women and men alike sink into the blessing

of anonymity. They grow smooth enough to vanish.
Then it is the way it was before their puzzlement,
the way it will be after:

something – impossible to say what – pours
relentlessly through something into something.
No compromise. No fuss. No footprints in the snow.

Why not

Why not be easy to get along with? In spite of inconveniences – how boring your ideas are, how boring mine – life under almost any duress is so much better than being dead, there's no comparison. Consciousness

valorizes itself, as the learned say, and from that springs by mimesis the self-congratulation of a full stomach, the self-reflexiveness of every work of art, the very identification, problematic as it is, of being with self. So why not?

Why not be accommodating – move over and let wombats have room, introduce to enjoyment as widespread an aroma of pinewoods as deep breathing allows, bequeath

to posterity a garden of life-enhancing epitaphs? The dreamless sleep from which the subject of these presents has briefly awakened is vaster than anything that can be embraced.

Why not therefore pee unrepentantly into infinity while you can?

Once Development Starts

Once development starts, it runs fast. We like the heady feel of it. To keep the rush going, it's not enough to adopt a policy to change for change's sake. We've proven that: the production lines mass-produce inanity.

There have to be need, a great idea, sense of direction, violence, and a conviction of who you are that comes from having to fight for your life against a committed adversary. It's rare in history for all these parameters to intersect.

Priests have proven as vested an interest as generals. We've had trouble lately from profiteers in soporifics as much as from loss of nerve. Ideas abound, but we're no longer sure

we've got a great one. A great threat, however, seems to be advancing: the biosphere's revulsion against us, our own hands tormented and transmuted into a lethal genetic field.

At the centre, though, if you can look on to it – we've been told often, in one way or another, and sporadically believe – there's a saving point, full of infinity.

Another Bamboo Poem

Hermit Scholars dedicated many books to the species wisdom of bamboo: how it celebrates itself and its surround by adaptive radiation across a continent; how it descends character by character grasswise down the page of the year, as it were jewel music cascading in the wind, feeling its way pool by pool from meaning into meaning: how it learns of the swallow to dip and rise, of the rock to precipitate its sap to silica, of the tempered blade to glisten unseen, of wine to fill its enclaves with moonlight, of itself simplicity, of man decorum,
a sure appropriation of its powers to each occasion and each need.

The Wind Is

The wind is in everything. Not just in the leaves. The rocks thrum, their strike-planes shiver; joints of the oaks wrench open. It's something as much in the style of the stalker as in things themselves

or the actual gusting of the wind. A moment like this can give identity to a whole culture. Any one of a vast number of metaphors is true enough to sustain life

for scores of generations. It finds its way, not just into the meaning of words, but into the music of speech: that it gets harder to breathe in any other way.

Then comes invasion, plague, or colonial expansion.

Waking and sleeping wheel together again, a new pressure-flake breaks free, and everything begins to resemble it.