

“Mugs”, “Rehabilitation”, and “Stitched Up”

Ian C Smith

icsmithpoet@gmail.com

Copyright© 2021 Ian C Smith. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged, in accordance with our Creative Commons Licence.

Abstract. Smith’s poetry asks questions of crime and punishment from the victims’ and perpetrators’ perspectives. In “Mugs” an easy victim reflects on the burglar of his house. In “Rehabilitation” a former prisoner returns to his prison, converted into gentrified townhouses. In “Stitched” Up the boredom, inanity, banality, and a soft pain of prison life is exposed.

Key words: Australian poetry; crime; punishment; victims; perpetrators.

“Mugs”

A strange impression persists; I leaf through a contemporary Book of the Dead, sightless funerary masks, some with closed eyes, others, bloodied faces, corpses photographed in a morgue, some girls who look young enough to attend primary school. Shameful stuff. The sergeant interrupts several times to prompt me about race, mentioning a line-up.

What if I turn a page, meet him face-to-face once more? I do. There he is. Longer hair, younger, needing a shave, shorter than I guessed after his shadow filled my bedroom doorway, this photo two years old. What has he done since then? Burgs, obviously, you fool. How do I waste my life? Let me count the ways. But this is no love poem in evening classes. Disoriented, I find him in another album slouched, looking decrepit, as if he slept under a railway viaduct. We can't keep meeting like this. I attract the attention of the constable with pink cheeks, his uniform freshly laundered, mop my sweating face with a hanky.

Heavy keys sway like a weapon below the bustling sergeant's huge belly. One of those fat men light on his feet. My burglar was light-footed, skinny. My burglar? When he saw me and my book he vanished quicker than youth. The sergeant says most of them aren't real smart, yet a fingerprint blotted out one offender's face. I wonder whose finger blocked the lens then fixed the ruined shot in the album? The intruder who stealthily forced a window, surprising us both, finding me re-reading Ray Carver on my bed, is good-looking in a hunted way.

I agreed to the line-up but waver. What did you think would happen next? I don't, always. Think. Vindictiveness flags. He armed himself with a screwdriver. That was for the window. He could have simply opened the back door, walked in. How stupid. You've been stupid, your own youth no golden age, common sense a phrase that irked. If you did normal things instead of forever catching up on precious lost reading time he would have heard you, slipped away unseen, leaving you to your alternative worlds. Knee-jerk reaction, again, should never have come here, shall veto the line-up, say I am uncertain, confused. Now that's the truth.

“Rehabilitation”

Anger off my heel for now, a murderous taste, metallic, blood in my mouth, drizzle in the yard beyond this high window, an air-slit in pitted stone the colour of bruises housing rage, terror, disgrace; sloughed up, a bucket, mat, graffiti, muscles still trembling, flesh lacerated, survival is my sole aim. If my heart shrivels I shall become a chalked outline.

The boy prone on concrete, blood pooling around his head spreading ever wider filling cracks, alarmed me. Captain Armstrong, 'Snake', for his venomous glare, controlled this regime; straight backed, boxing gloves displayed in his office a sign of muscular Christianity, the firm instruction of young minds led astray.

The historic C19th prison, gutted of tears, fear, yet wreathed in desolation, was sold to developers. Before its makeover as townhouses it opened to the public. When I still searched for love, my then second wife, young sons, and I, joined tourists stickybeaking at forsaken souls' lives. Our guide, Jim Armstrong, flabby retired guard, hair, humour, thin, entertained us, a practised spiel, anecdotes about colourful inmates, reminding us to visit the souvenir shop when leaving.

Reaching the Young Offenders Group area I struggle, remembered sour taste in my mouth, disoriented, itching to break out from our polite, voyeuristic seminar, step into shadow, find a vestigial echo of the vanished tool shed where I witnessed in dread a pitchfork at a terrified boy's throat.

Leaving, I needed to talk, explain, but bore it, bottled up as usual. I didn't tip Jim, this actor, wanted to expose obscenity, but held that to myself, too, our boys, my salvaged life. I bought a T-shirt instead, wore it, days softening into years, until, pocked with holes, it eventually fell away into my foul ragbag of reminiscence.

“Stitched Up”

No happy hearths for us. In the slowness of days while the lights of cities go on and off we work the dormitories for cigarettes, currency of the convicted, minor industries thriving in this chapel of corruption, regulations our enemy.

Dickie, who has already boxed in the tents, skin, features, gravelly pronunciation harbouring a vestige of his downtrodden people's true Australian tongue, contrasts with me, my skin pale, pimply, much taller, less brave, both adrift in the undertow of a treacherous tide, surviving.

Alert to venomous prejudice of outsiders, incomers, the disabled, the different, flotsam washed up on these isolated shores, my speech, London's foggy guttural erased, sets up the entertainment, a ringmaster's spiel to those whose lives have been fistfuls of pain, redemption a haven too far.

If we feign placidity supervision is soft between grub and lights out at nine. After each boy hands over tobacco I thread a needle, cotton white for dramatic effect – how we came by these humble items for legerdemain beyond me now – before transporting Dickie into his spirit world by muttering great bulldust as he calls it when we are alone together, that odd friendship of cast out boys.

Svengali sentenced, I hush them quiet as night, the only thing missing, a mopoke's ancient call, hand the needle to Dickie who flutters his black eyelashes, rhythmically whispering the names of racehorses backwards as practised, before opening his mouth wide, bad boys bored no longer, jostling to spot any hanky-panky.

He pierces his plump cheek, a silvery glint emerging through the outside of his expressionless face eliciting disgusted oaths, some demanding he stop, as he pulls the entire shaft trailing cotton through, blood the climax, bright against white, a droplet left on his cheek as I snap my fingers to break the spell, bring him back, to survival, cigarettes.

Ian C. Smith was born in the UK and, after migrating to Australia, eventually settled in the Gippsland Lakes district of south-east Victoria. Smith overcame a period of criminal activity and subsequent imprisonment to see the value of word power, to educate himself and to write poetry and short stories. He wrote about these experiences in an article in *Overland* in 1997. His poetry has appeared in *Cordite*, *Divan*, *Social Alternatives*, *New England Review*, *Other Voices* (Canada), *the perfect diary* and *Poetry New Zealand* (www.austlit.edu.au).