'Your friend the drifter'

*Collected Poems*, Ken Smith (648pp, £14.99, Bloodaxe)

I've written elsewhere (*The North* #34, 2004) of how important Ken Smith's original *Fox Running* book was to me. Along with the West London sections of Gavin Selerie's *Azimuth* (published a few years later) it showed me how one could write about London without being T.S. Eliot or sentimentally confessional. Smith's Fox is a restless, shifting (and shifty) character relentlessly pursuing himself around the tube map and suburbs, fuelled by the anger many of us felt at the time: at Thatcher & co.'s assault on society and the arts.

*Fox Running*, revised and expanded*,* was gathered up with poetry from earlier books and pamphlets in Smith's *The Poet Reclining. Selected Poems 1962-1980,* andSmith followed through with further missives from and about London in 'The London Poems' in *Terra*, his 1986 volume. *Terra* showed Bloodaxe and Smith at the peak of their powers: the book looked funky with full page photographic title pages and intros and outros ('the adverts') and Smith captured as a kind of artist-cum-gangster figure in various combinations of shades/trilby/beret, boots and ex-army jacket. Smith was in the middle of a residency at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, and Bloodaxe were riding a wave of publicity on the back of that and their book of poems by a young Irina Ratushinskaya.

In the flesh, Smith was somewhat different. When I met him at a reading with Keith Jafrate in Newcastle-under-Lyme he seemed older than his press photos suggested, somewhat tired and worn out with it all. There had been a flurry of publications in the wake of *The Poet Reclining*: *A Book of Chinese Whispers,* a collected prose poems; *Abel Baker Charlie* Delta; and the conceptually -underpinned *Burned Books*, which claimed to be the surviving fragments of a dictator's library set alight after his downfall. It was too much too soon, as 1987's *Wormwood* evidenced. Here, we got East European versions of Fox, either writing home from Serbia; as Yakob, who has 'no home but the roads, / smokey longings for the distance'; or locked up doing time, writing from his cell about 'the remembered city':

Camberwell Clerkenwell Muswell a haze,

glassy steel etched on tile was the city,

its traffic clear over to Canning Town

where I don't want to go as it happens

by wheel or by water. Wind blows there

through the towers, the spraycan sneers

*this is white man's land* and the shadow

on scrapyards is soon rain, it's forever

the mean meridian of Greenwich, coming in

off the flyover to Rathbone and Silvertown:

all the lost boys hunched on their knives –

the Posse, the Firm, the Little Silver Snipers

Apart from the reference to the inmates as lost boys (which occurs throughout the sequence 'As It Happens'), and the gangs in the last line, this seems like an outtake from *Fox Running* or, at worst, self-pastiche. For me, Smith's work would never again capture the immediacy and energy of his early 1980s work. At the time, over the next decade or so, as Smith's next few books, with the exception of parts of 1990's *The Heart, the Border*, all seemed the same, and somewhat lightweight in comparison to what had gone before.

Now, thirty and more years on, and 15 years after Smith's death, we have a massive *Collected Poems* to look at, rather than individual books or the two selected poems (*The Poet Reclining* and *Shed*). And what a book it is! There are more early poems to delight in, and it is clear that themes of history, London (and other cities) and East Europe appear and reappear throughout all his work. Smith was an ardent socialist, and committed to articulating social and cultural concern in his work, to documenting and highlighting the machinations of power, politics and economics, without stooping to writing polemic or rant. Words and language are the stuff which Smith used to comment and critique, to fuel and build his poems with:

Words like rain in the applemint. In my trade

I'm a journeyman living the life of waste nothing,

odds picked in skips, scraps my dead father kept.

all the words I can steal so look out for yourself,

my sisters, my brothers. I'm Thief, Joker, Twister,

(from 'Departure's Speech')

Away from all the 1980s hype and publicity, without having to live up to anyone else's expectations, or his own, Smith's work can finally be seen for what it is: an impressive, accumulative set of poetry, that attempts and often succeeds in speaking about, to and for the dispossessed, the poor, the homeless, the downtrodden and the ignored; all of us. In early 21st century Britain, we need this poetry more than ever, to inform and incite us:

*Por favor*

bring me the head of an American President

on the green platter of a dollar bill

(from 'Poverty's Prayer')

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