

## Ian C. Smith. *Lost Language of the Heart* (Ginninderra, 2010)

Smith was born in 1941 in the United Kingdom and now lives in the Gippsland Lakes region of Victoria. He is a self-educated, working-class poet who has spent time in prison and lived a tough life. Smith's experiences as a migrant, working man and former inmate are often reflected in his work. Smith was the recipient of an Australia Council grant in 1992 and has won numerous awards for his writing. He is the author of three previous collections of poetry: *Memory Like Hunger*, *These Fugitive Days* and *This Is Serious*. Smith also writes fiction, and has published over forty short stories in journals including *Wet Ink*, *LiNQ*, *Meanjin* and *Island*. The acknowledgements for *Lost Language of the Heart* reveal that the poems in the collection have previously been published in thirty-eight different journals, anthologies and newspapers based in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, including *Eureka Street*, *Heat*, *Westerly* and *Transnational Literature*. Clearly Smith is a well-established and widely-published poet. However, Smith's latest collection does not contain any biographical information, perhaps signalling a desire for readers to focus on the poems rather than the poet.

*Lost Language of the Heart* contains 58 poems, the majority of which are less than 30 lines long. Smith favours short free verse lyrics and uses a variety of different structures, ranging from eschewing stanzas altogether to the use of stanzas ranging in length from four to ten lines. Smith's range is displayed by the inclusion of two sonnets (especially the excellent 'Howl,' which references Wordsworth, Coleridge and Ginsburg), three prose poems, and the opening sequence, 'Grief,' which is comprised of seven nineteen-line poems. 'Unforgettable' is the longest poem in the collection at 70 lines, while 'Sidestepping' is the shortest at ten lines. The brevity of the majority of the poems is probably due to the fact that most of the poems were first published in journals, which do not usually publish long poems. Most of the poems in *Lost Language of the Heart* utilize the third person voice, with the speaker of the poem referring to the subject as 'he.' However, since the subject matter of the poems seems personal and close to the facts of Smith's own life, it is tempting to conclude that Smith is writing about himself in the third person in an attempt to create some distance between himself as poet and himself as subject. The technique is not always totally satisfying, however, and often one senses that the poems would have more immediacy and power if Smith used the first person voice. For example in 'Belief,' Smith writes, 'He imagines/ himself buried alive, air thinning slowly/ lying flat on his back in a coffin' (7-9); using the first person voice would certainly make these lines more powerful. Moreover, using the first person voice would make many of the poems more universal, since the second person 'he' obviously limits the poems to a single gender.

Many of the themes Smith explores in *Lost Language of the Heart* are evident in his titles, such as 'Grief,' 'Woe,' 'Broken Hearts,' 'Migration,' 'Place,' 'Survival,' 'Second-rate lives,' and 'Remember me, my love?' Other recurring themes include loss, memory, regret, failed relationships, loneliness, parenting and aging. While such a catalogue of themes may suggest that the collection is dark and bleak, Smith provides many moments of light and writes in a direct and honest tone that certainly does not create a gloomy atmosphere. Smith's style is direct, simple and understated.

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He has a knack for creating similes and metaphors that are vivid and concrete. In 'Grief,' 'The cold dawn smells like weary sex' ((7) 19), while in 'Unforgettable' the reader learns that 'feverish love has shuddered to an end' (56). Smith may be preoccupied with the past, but he is anything but sentimental. Moreover, he is not afraid to explore the seedier realms of contemporary life, and in 'Abuse' writes about a city that 'glistens like lubricated leather' (4). At times, Smith's experiments with language are not entirely successful, resulting in unconvincing similes, such as 'dolphins had raced the boat/ like a mob of aquatic kangaroos' ('Gulled' 16-17), and lines that seem forced or unimaginative: 'Pain lingers long, stabbing us' ('From a lost 18<sup>th</sup> century diary' 9) and 'Poets would also wax max about us' ('Hybrid' 8). Thankfully, such miscues are rare and Smith is almost always in control of his craft, wielding his tools with subtlety and precision.

Unlike other contemporary Australian poets, such as John Kinsella or Peter Minter, Smith does not dazzle or baffle the reader with his use of language. The educated reader will have no cause to reach for the dictionary or to enlist the aid of Google in order to uncover the meaning behind obscure references. Although Smith does not force his readers to work hard in order to enter his work, his poems are by no means unworthy of close engagement. On the contrary, Smith's work rewards repeat readings and careful examination will reveal subtle allusions and connections that might be missed on the first reading. Smith writes the kind of poetry that does not seek to exclude any reader and provides satisfaction to a wide audience. *Lost Language of the Heart* is a mature, rich and varied collection by a poet who is at ease and adept with his craft, even if he is not at ease with his past.

**Nathanael O'Reilly**