

*The Purpose of the Gift*

**Also by Michael Smith:**

**Poetry**

*With the Woodnymphs*

*Times and Locations*

*Familiar Anecdotes*

*Stopping to Take Notes*

*Selected Poems*

*Lost Genealogies & Other Poems*

*Meditations on Metaphors*

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*Irish Poetry: The Thirties Generation*

**Michael Smith**

**The Purpose of the Gift**

*Selected Poems*

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## *Dedications*

### I

It was a note to be heard never yet heard,  
A black tulip on the blue air – the unknowing  
He lived among could give it no word.  
And there – where flies in summer darken the air.

When the time came, I imagine the sun  
set beyond the high grey wall,  
Beyond the innumerable railway lines and the Royal Canal,  
And the birds at the foot of the bed were startled into song.

### II

The orderlies deal with our chaos there,  
Where the wick burns to encroaching dark.

Flesh shrivels there, contracts, concentrates  
To a final explosion of fluid,  
The decrepit matter of the skull seeping away.

Before the end old men will not stay abed,  
But try again and again to climb a non-existent stairway,  
Failing again and again.

### III

The butcher carried the cow's skinned head  
By a bright grey hook in its eye:  
Blood trickled on the pavement.

The red-faced butcher felt  
Only the awkward weight  
That pulled on the bright grey hook.

And there was the sun, too,  
A hot afternoon sun; and children passing  
Said to their mothers

'Mama, Mama, look at the moo cow.'  
But their mothers dragged them by  
The cow's skinned head and its hooked eye.

#### IV

Somewhere in Clare beyond fields and laneways  
Two herons lifted into the grey air.  
I climbed a promontory Norman keep.  
Eyes swam over seas of grey rock.

The dog at the head of the stair  
Trembled and whined in a grey fear.

The orchard was deadly sick with a grey fungus  
And the bark of the hazel was silver grey.

The hair, skin, eyes, teeth of the old woman  
Who polished my shoes for the dance, were grey.

Here in October dawn breaks in sheets of grey glass.

#### V

Long Lane, one of Dublin's back-streets,  
Just such a street as Mangan struggled down,  
The winter darkness and the pitchy damp.

Then, like some figure out of mythology –  
A sphinx – the silhouette of this club-footed man  
Against the glaring yellow of the lamplight.

As the branch tip tapping on the window glass  
In the snow-stormed night becomes the lost object,  
To return always when a sense of loss occurs,

So fear comes now with twisting twisted legs,  
Hobbling down Long Lane a winter's night,  
Climbing steps, then knocking at a door, and passing in.

#### IV

Through the window I saw  
the first fall of snow  
falling  
falling  
delicately  
as only snow can fall

from long thin grey clouds like distant trains  
travelling across the sky above the pine tops.

Silence.

And then *A stairway! A stairway!*  
At the end of a corridor to nowhere  
*A stairway!*

While the first snowflakes disappeared  
into the black square of the chest hospital  
*A stairway! A stairway!*

#### VII

The desolate rhythm of dying recurs,  
The rhythm of outgoing tides, corrosion of stone,

Fall of petal and soft rain on empty squares,  
The fading memory of song, say, in an old man's head  
That never stops in a moment of time,  
A rainbow vertigo spinning beyond the nurse's cool hand,

Subsidence of wind and branches against a settling sky,  
And stars fading at dawn, or fall of snow:

Something ordered, yet desperate and violent –  
A rose, say, or an old man's humiliation.

### VIII

Dead days, like a vegetable world all burnt up:  
Blossom and weed, rose and pimpernel, gone to the flame's mouth.

And there is no point in asking, no one can tell you why,  
There is no reason for dying, it just happens that way.

In a cobbled lane of stinking pig and lesser celandine  
A vagrant crone fumbles and stumbles among her pieces.

With querulous voice she hails to every passer-by she sees,  
Pointing to the green church dome among the hawthorn trees.

To every passer-by who will not mind her  
*The moon is a greener cheese, she says, only kinder.*

### IX

Through no imperial portals, but rusty bars on broken hinges,  
To this kingdom of black earth like dampened dust

Where my green knight evades the black-shawled witch's eye,  
The dragon's teeth and the sly pervasive worm.

Bells beyond the kingdom toll the significant hour  
And the streets are silent, the squares empty.

In his gaslit room of the golden birds  
Roosting quiet as the small rain of summer,

The old man receives the boy's green gift,  
And the green knight hears his golden song in wonder.

X

There is something  
white and still  
in the black river  
below the cathedral –

And no one can see it  
but the still  
man across  
the parapet.

Streets have fallen taking  
pieces of the sky with them;  
Summers have passed taking  
many who walked through them.

It has rained,  
it has snowed,  
and even the sun shone  
occasionally.

But the gaze of the still  
man across the parapet  
Is fixed on something white  
and still in the black river.

## XI

Too soon put up for the wind that blew it down,  
Hope became despair,  
And despair was the sea on which my ship had sailed.

The rain became the city, the city became the rain,  
And the unnested fledgling that ancient playful dog.

Barbara, Barbara, my canal-bank pinkeen girl,  
Your curls are in the water with the barge,

And I am sailing down a purple Nile  
Across the mill's aluminium-silver dome

From where the knacker's leans against the sky  
And a solitary lilac weeps in its concrete yard.

## XII

Here is the abattoir where, in the old days, were heard  
The ultimate cries of table beasts.

Here is the home for unfortunate women  
Who launder a twelve hour day and are never cleansed.

Here is the Union, picturesque on a sunny Sunday;  
In fact, stables of appalling decrepitude.

Here are the slums where life swings back and forth  
With a thud like a heavy pendulum.

Here is, partly, love's ecology: occasional blue skies  
And, more often, thunderous falls of black stars.

### XIII

There is one, never seen, behind that window  
Where the light burns on through every night;

Another, whose sole appearance in a generation  
Was a naked dance with obscene gestures.

There is a third, whose tired white face  
Forever droops from a backyard window

Like some old flower that will not wilt  
Administered by an ancient spinster:

Mad but quiet people, gone, like Elijah, up,  
Body and soul, into their own home-made heavens.

### XIV

It was, the neighbours say, a considerable time ago,  
But nobody knows the date or exactly what took place.

It was late summer, say, just for the neighbours' sake.  
Imagine the afternoon, the flies maddened with heat,

The flies thick in the air, exploring every place,  
And the afternoon there in a deadly prurient heat.

Even the old man's pigs lay prostrate in the square  
Though grunting occasionally at a black fist of flies.

It was late summer, say, near the seasonal change —  
But nobody knows the date or exactly what took place.

XV

The linnet on the orchard tree was green  
So the day became an emerald, the branched moon a pearl.

Menacing gargoyles laughed below the turrets  
But poet and etcher were too tired to hear.

And the world was tired of their excessive love,  
Unsympathetic now to all their fumbling gestures.

The stars were inedible, the clouds could not be caught,  
The beloved married another and moved away,

Arcadian lovers, dropt from the silver lining of their dreams,  
Their legs danced in a last impatience with the world's height.

XVI

Ghost, come and speak to me beyond the hawk's-beard,  
The scum-surrounded yellow water lily;

Tread gently the warm crushed brick of home,  
And, upon the thistled hill of childhood,

Speak to the assembled sunlit dust,  
The heavenly host in all its summer heat.

Afterwards, in needless demonstration,  
Walk the canal water's hot and putrid surface.

I, like a dog's black skull in submarine sleep,  
Await your oracles from beyond the rubbish heap.

## *Beneath the Table*

*for Kay*

Beneath the table  
the naked boards,  
Three feet of air  
above the black-earth  
kingdom of the singing worms,

And the familiar trapdoor  
unbolts to the post-midnight,  
The single shaft of sunlight  
through the curtains,  
And the boom of the clock  
with the tiny pendulum.

Once more the gnomonic face  
with huge fish-like eyes  
Glares through the opaque darkness.  
Its breath is heavy upon the air  
like a living thing,  
fouling the fevered night.

A moth flutters  
against the window and is still.

Quietly memory wheels to the past  
like a bird of prey.

## *Cold Glints*

Cold air glints  
like frost against the stars,

and the moon's casual  
indifferent face  
simply there  
in the broken sky,  
bird-high above  
the small terraced houses  
where people dream  
in the hard night  
of their own private suns:

red things beating still  
beneath the packed snow.

## *Report*

*(as in a police report)*

Here the walls breathe to the imagination's warm reception.

Shadows are everywhere, real and unreal.

Questions form in the darkness and remain there.

Glistening machines throb in antique skeletons.

A tree is an incongruity where bricks are growth.

The canal stagnates on others' putrefaction.

The convent bell is synchronic with the horse's last neigh.

Over the vendor's shoulder the hungry cry.

Poems for souls lost between hand and mouth.

## *The Time Was Truly Right*

The time was truly right for the recall of stories.

The flesh withering to its own painful tune,  
Memory tightened its chords  
For its last intense melodies;

Love was crying out beyond the slow sad death:  
The collapse of things like the sift of sand.

## *Lost Street*

*for Gerard Smyth*

Always the old houses were falling into dust;  
and the weeds grew high as the houses fell,  
and gaps in their broken walls led to strange places.

Piles of red dust burned in the sunlight.  
The slow, blue pigeons, the purple weeds.  
A girl's soft laugh rounded the broken wall:  
golden shards, old china, among the nettles.

Black, that city soil was black when you plucked  
grass sods to drown the drumming on the tin roof  
of the rain that always fell at the close of evening  
as you listened quietly to the tense growth of sounds.

It was almost enough to have stayed there forever,  
or at least till winter came and all was frozen.