DALE SMITH
TAKING STOCK OF THE WRECKAGE

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The figure neither outward nor inward – rather a figure of migration moving across time, across place, refusing the simple convenience any split affords. So Smith. Stampede of force thinking itself through the small hours when time is tight and the passage narrow. These are the geo-rhetorical contours Smith's poetry has navigated for more than a decade. And for nearly a decade I have been with the work – living in the imagined lyrical space that rifles through the wreckage of past and present moments in order to navigate a future. Smith's work comes to us with urgency. It comes to us not as Benjamin's angel of history but the angel of Edmund Burke's *Reflections*: "that, like a destroying angel, smote the country, communicated to it the force and energy under which it suffered." For Smith this angel is a language embedded in the tissues of the body. As he remarks in *American Rambler*:

> it's not enough
> to imagine it
> only the whole body
> knows what took place.

Investigating the shape of love and the consequences of capital through the corpus of his work, it is the *whole* body Smith situates in that narrow passage ruthlessly governed by epistemological limits – the known and the unknown – the body projecting itself outward so that it might encounter the radical alterity within. We find this in his *Black Stone*, meditations around the birth of his second son: "There's a thin edge between the known and the unknown, and the self's that limit stretched between." Consciousness, bound to the body and suspicious of memory, negotiates these limits, moves between them, at home in the homelessness of not knowing:

> Forget what I'm
> supposed to do
> or be or know.
>
> [. . .]
>
> That ol' drag
> Mnemosyne—
> give it a rest
> already.
>
> Sometimes it's enough
> pulling goose grass
> from my shoelaces.

Black stone. It is among stones that Smith searches for the blackness of that *one*, an absent center, the void upon which all ground rests. The center is a stone. And it is this stone, fundamentally inexplicable, that exceeds the very instrument of investigation – language. Only the whole body is capable of knowing. And however ill-equipped one might be to encounter this stone, it must be approached. For Smith this approach is made by way of searching among those materials most near him – texts taken from stacks open or closed, the mythos embedded in everyday experience, the cycles of seasonal change and the rhythms of the domestic. Published independently of his other book-length works, *Black Stone* contains an introductory note that offers a point of entry into these other projects:

> I began *Black Stone* on the first day of the Christian observance of Lent. My second son, Waylon, was born during that period, and I wanted to explore the narrative of days around his birth. The poem ends on Easter, the end of Lent, the day Christ is said to have come back to life on earth. Christ is beautiful, but he casts an extraordinary shadow. I think of that shadow as a kind of stone, and I find it more useful and scary than the sweet piety of the crucified god. That shadow of Christ remains in the world, while the rest of *his* goodness was absorbed into the flesh of generations of Europe and America and elsewhere. So much blood has been spilled in the meaning of that goodness, but the shadow – that blackness – remains, hidden, undocumented, thankfully, by the Human Inspector General. And so the image of the stone, finally, compelled me to meet it.

It as an excess or remainder that eludes, a goodness beyond the purely rhetorical goodness absorbed into the flesh of civilization and spoken through conflict. The search for this stone – a messianic excess that has escaped the grasp of humanity and resulted in an interminable slaughter conducted in its name – has been Smith's project since the beginning. From his first short collections *Sillycon Valley* and *Texas Crude* through *Susquehanna* it is the search for this shadow that insists Smith take stock of the wreckage through the somatic rhythms of the poem.

If I can appeal to the language of another Burke – Kenneth – a figure Smith has read closely and absorbed into his carefully measured sense of the poem – the search for this shadow by way of poetic production invites Smith to develop strategies for living, allowing him to name a situation that cannot otherwise be named. Again, *American Rambler*:

> Slowly, I am pushed toward an edge between abundance and poverty, the known and the unknown, memory and imagination. And poetry gathers the historical fragments . . .

Moving outside the worn grooves of familiar discourse, Smith aspires to reside in the productive space between dialectical forces, rethinking the systems of logic that separate and give rise to the "conspiracy of mind" that would "detach itself from the consequences of the body."

For Smith the body is always already present in a metaphysics of knowing that without *this* flesh (eyeball roving across page; ear attuned to conversation) the traces of consciousness and desire encoded in the texts left behind by other bodies cannot be reconstituted or searched among. Meaning for Smith inhabits interstitial spaces, the spaces of relation between bodies and those things in the world produced by bodies. These are rhetorical spaces that only a body can know. These are also the very spaces which allow the power of rhetoric to exist and act on the world – the locations of slippage within which the messianic blackness he seeks resides.

Take the following. In the last section of his *Susquehanna* – a book-length poem that attempts to think the failure of Coleridge's utopian Pantisocracy – Smith targets what is perhaps the most characteristically Hegelian of all Hegel's propositions: "The Spirit is a Bone." Žižek makes much of this radically paradoxical proposition in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, offering a Lacanian reading of the proposition which views this "idealist wager" as one that would take bone and transform it from the "lack of the signifier into the signifier of the lack." The thing before us – invested with meaning – stands in for what is not there, calling attention to the presence of what can never be present, but which is also precisely that thing which allows things to be present to us – what for Smith is that hidden and persistently elusive black shadow, the stone. Not despite but *precisely through* this conflation of the pure negativity of spirit and the unforgiving rigidity of bone, Smith works through this radical contradiction in the space *between* spirit and bone – the space of rhetoric.

Moving in the late 1990s from the Bay Area to Austin with his partner, poet Hoa Nguyen, Smith extricated himself from the discipline of poetics. In doing so he also removed himself from those debates surrounding innovation and the new. As his interest in Kenneth Burke suggests, Smith threw himself into the study of rhetoric, an all but forgotten discipline and one not presently in vogue among contemporary poets. A former student of Tom Clark given in part to the work of Ed Dorn, Smith's move into the study of rhetoric has – intentionally or by chance – allowed him to follow the contours of Dorn's intellectual development. In a talk given March 4, 2008 at the University of Colorado symposium on Dorn, Smith writes:

> By turning to the Enlightenment during the 1970s and '80s . . . Dorn moved beyond the internal formal debates of experimental poetics to do something more politically effective. He renewed public modes of argumentation in satiric poetry in order to orient a public mind to the value of language within a democratic context . . . . The poem, treated as an agonistic field of exchange, provides a rhetorical space in which the demands of both author and audience meet. Ideas and insights to specific cultural situations motivate his writing more than their formal possibilities.

A committed and careful reader of Dorn for more than a decade, Smith could easily have been speaking to his own poetic practice. Sans Dorn's scathing satirical assault on audiences, Smith's work similarly solicits encounter and is more concerned with thinking through the possibilities of entering into productive dialog with an audience than with formal innovation. Just as Olson and Creeley believed form follows content, Smith suggests that innovation follows address. If we rigorously address the situation – the specific conditions of our historical moment – there is no need to pander after the new. Across time landscapes and languages change, and with these the deep structures of poetic production too change. The point is rather to find a meaningful way of thinking the present moment with rigor, through the historical fragments of the past, before these fragments have been rendered completely illegible and the only readable texts left are those of our own loss and suffering. As Smith warns in *Susquehanna* with the prophetic force of Burke's destroying angel:

> A time will come
>
> when those waters carry
>
> away the surplus of the country
>
> and appetites reveal aping agencies
>
> a bitterness in the wind
>
> in the shadow of what you are ashamed of

This, the shadow of what we are ashamed, and the messianic shadow Smith aspires to locate in *Black Stone* may in fact be one in the same – an excess which has not yet disclosed itself to us but one we urgently need in this neoliberal moment of mortgage crisis, corporate scandal, political corruption, protracted war. Smith – rethinking the rhetorical bombast of a prophetic tradition that includes William Blake, Jonathan Edwards and Jeremiah Wright – announces in his *Susquehanna* a time to come when the real might disclose itself in the shadow he seeks – here where the shadow is a stone, the spirit a bone – a time when we might think through all the filth, blood and grit that would produce a Columbine, a Katrina, a Cormac McCarthy novel.