

AN INTERVIEW WITH AUSTIN SMITH

Kirstin Hotelling Zona: Welcome, Austin, to the *Spoon River Poetry Review*. We're delighted to have you as our featured poet.

Austin Smith: I am as well.

KHZ: First of all, I am amazed that you do what you do at only 28 years old—*barely 28!*

AS: I'm actually 38! I've been lying.

KHZ: Hardly! (laughter). So, one of the characteristics I love about your poems—and this is a *felt* characteristic of the language in my mouth, in my ear—is the interplay between long, undulating sentences that often course over the spread of one or two pages, and short, declarative sentences or phrases. And what makes this characteristic of your poems especially distinct is the way it embodies what I feel is a core concern of your work: a fascination with the sensation of home as, at once, a source of salvation *and* self-annihilation.

AS: I'm glad you recognize this characteristic of my work because I think it gets at something essential for me. I don't really know how to separate my work right now from certain reading experiences I've had, experiences that felt like more than "reading experiences"—and one of the most important influences for me has been James Agee. To me, Agee is a sort of personal saint, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is my favorite book. I'm obsessed with Agee's obsession with dwelling on the particular. I feel that Agee—and Larry Levis, my favorite poet, and I—if I can put myself in that company—all dwell upon the particular as being *holy*, as being emblematic of the whole—while we also dwell upon the particular as a way to stop the inevitable. Agee's father died when he was nine. Levis suffered many personal tragedies, and I think the tragedy that I'm trying to stall off right now is the loss of our family farm, which has already happened. Two years ago, we lost the farm, and in my recent work I won't let go of the experience of having grown up there. I'll write pages and pages, but then I'll suddenly feel the sensation that it *is* truly gone, and I think that's the moment that you mention: all of a sudden, I'll write a brief, abrupt

phrase that seems to cut off the meditation. If I were to go back to the farm that I lived on for 23 years, I would be arrested for trespassing. I can't be there physically, so I have to be there poetically. But it's a dangerous place to dwell, and oftentimes I feel like I'm being sucked into a world that doesn't really exist.

KHZ: So, you are dramatizing again and again the trajectory of loss in your poems. I wonder if one of the things that saves your work, and maybe yourself, from tumbling into the abyss of loss, or from romanticizing loss, is the way in which your poems privilege simultaneously a oneness with whatever it is you're observing *and* the distance between yourself and what you observe. I suspect, too, that it's this aspect of your poetic that feeds the deep compassion in your writing?

AS: That's absolutely the best compliment that I could receive, to be told that my poems are compassionate. Agee's book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a spiritual text. He went down to Alabama, as he says, as a spy—living with people of such destitute poverty—coming from New York, working for a magazine called *Fortune*. Agee's guilt is the subject of that book—and rightfully so. I don't think Agee ever felt that he could really *get* those people. I grew up Catholic, so I have sympathy for the guilty artist. In other words, I don't think I could ever really express the beauty of my grandfather or my father or my mother or grandmother, the dairy farm in Illinois, the suffering that they went through to raise me, the sheer exhaustion of being dairy farmers, the huge sacrifice that it takes to live that kind of life in today's time, and the life that they gave me. I'm just too fraught with guilt not to be obsessed.

KHZ: Do you mean obsessed with the life on the farm? Obsessed with the particulars of that life, and of rendering them?

AS: Yes. I can't let myself go. I can't let myself be experimental. For me, to be experimental in my poetry would be somehow disrespectful. Others can be experimental if they wish, but I feel that I have to dwell upon the holiness of the particular—that this is the only access I have, ironically, to those lives.

KHZ: Why is this ironic?

AS: Because in my poems I'm constantly returning to another place. I'm actually a recorder, taking notes upon a previous feeling. As in: "I felt something as a boy but I don't feel it now but I am able to report upon it." The emotional power is in my childhood, but the writing is happening now. This is probably funny to admit, but I'm seeing a therapist now and he asked me to show him a poem. So I gave him a poem about my grandfather that is three pages long, no line breaks, no punctuation. And he said, "You know what you're doing here? You're overwhelming the reader. You refuse to give the reader a break. You won't even give them a stanza break. You won't give them a period, a comma, anything, because you were so overwhelmed as a child by this feeling for your grandfather that you will not allow the reader to be relieved of that emotion." My poems are often terribly difficult for people to read because I don't give them a chance to breathe. Agee uses colons more than anyone's ever used colons in English literature, and I use colons a lot as well because they allow you to just *keep going*.

KHZ: Another poet who uses a lot of colons is Louise Glück, and she's also a poet who writes from of a place of guilt, or more accurately, a place of grief or sadness. Your sensibilities are very different, but you both employ a similar syntactical strategy to survive and modulate the flow of emotion in your poems. This is interesting... But tell me more about Agee, his influence on you and your writing.

AS: Well, reading *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was both the greatest and the most debilitating experience of my life because Agee had done exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to write the Midwestern *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. And I still do. In fact, I'm tortured by this feeling that I have to write about the people of the Midwest the way Agee wrote about the people of Alabama.

KHZ: So you feel that your writing is both a burden and a calling from the shadow of your youth? This makes for a pungent tension—

AS: It is *the* creative tension of my work; the tension of knowing that you have something to say about something you find to be holy but that society has disregarded as unimportant—like with Levis's poem about Johnny Dominguez. Basically, Levis is saying, "Here I am, a poet. You may assume that I am smarter than Johnny Dominguez. But I'm not. Johnny Dominguez was Johnny Dominguez." The saddest thing