

SAMPLER

*Small Scale  
Observations*

ALSO BY JAMES SUTHERLAND-SMITH

BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS

- Four Poetry and Audience Poets* P&A, Leeds 1971  
*A Poetry Quintet* Gollancz, London 1976  
*The Death of Orpheus* Words Etc., London 1976  
*Trapped Water* Earthgrip, London 1977  
*Death of a Vixen* Many Press, London 1978  
*A Singer from Sabiya* Many Press, London 1979  
*Naming of the Arrow* Salamander Imprint, London 1981  
*The Country of Rumour* Many Press, London 1985  
*At the Skin Resort* Arc Publications, Todmorden 1999  
*In the Country of Birds* Carcanet, Manchester 2003  
*Popeye in Belgrade* Carcanet, Manchester 2008  
*Mouth* Shearsman Books, Bristol, 2014  
*The River and the Black Cat* Shearsman Books, Bristol, 2018

TRANSLATIONS (*with Viera Sutherland-Smith except where stated*)

- Not Waiting for Miracles* Modrý Peter, Levoca 1993 (with Štefánia Allen and V S-S)  
*Slovensky balady* Pavian Records, Bratislava 1997 (with Zuzanna Homolová)  
*Swallowing a Hair. Poems by Ján Ondruš*, Studna, Bratislava 1998 (with Martin Solotruk)  
*An Album of Slovak Literature*, Bratislava 2000  
*100 Years of Slovak Literature*, Bratislava/Vilénica, Slovenia 2000  
*Cranberries in Ice: Selected Poems of Ivan Laučík* Modrý Peter, Canada 2001  
*The Melancholy Hunter: Selected Poems of Ján Buzassy* Modrý Peter, Canada 2001  
*Scent of the Unseen. Selected Poems of Mila Haugová* Arc Publications, Todmorden 2002  
*And That's the Truth: Selected Poems of Milan Rúfus* Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Mundelein, IL, 2005  
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*Tidal Events. Selected Poems of Mária Ferenčuhová*, Shearsman Books, Bristol, 2018  
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*Sarah born in Johor Bahru*  
*Dorcas born in Stroud*  
*Fiona born in Accra*  
*Rebecca born in Derby*

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## Whodunnit

“We are all guilty,” said Doctor Williams,  
head of the household, on the day he died.  
The Major slept noisily in an armchair.  
The lid of his glass eye was flicked back.  
He could have been a winking corpse.  
Open on his lap was an Agatha Christie,  
“Murder on the Orient Express.”  
Stanley, the ex-wrestler, exercised  
a yo-yo. It described greater and greater  
ellipses, the orbits of the planets.  
By the sundial Miss Elsie Sutcliffe  
dictated the first clue, “To my loyal subjects.”

In the blue room Lady Amanda had woken.  
She rehearsed the customary questions.  
“Am I clay or root? Am I stem or leaf,  
bud or flower? What did my dream mean;  
the church with the diamond-shaped west window,  
myself in mourning and my hands so wrinkled?”  
She noticed the seams at the room’s corners  
widening until a slow avalanche of earth  
slid rumbling slightly until it settled.  
She watched lichen and moss accumulate.  
A fern sprouted from her shoulder  
its tip curled like a baby’s fist.

1974

## A Haunting

Something is crawling up the side of the house.  
It has been all my life.  
Bony or scaly, it's not ivy or clematis,  
but a matter of belief.

Someone not entirely friendly is dancing on the roof  
though his rhythm can't be caught.  
Neither waltz nor jig nor galloping hoof  
that tapping could be fate.

Breath that's icy cold spirals up from the cellar  
and speaks with a serpent's hiss.  
The fire that enchanted like a storyteller  
dies away to wordlessness.

It's not the cat on the doorstep, the dog whining  
for me to let him in.  
It's not a bird or the wind in the chimney,  
but my sense of mortal sin.

For this is not how I thought love would call to me.  
It chills me like winter rain.  
Neither angelic nor human nor beastly  
it whispers to me in pain.

## Siberian Irises

All day there's been the tremulous  
impersonal rattle of a whitethroat's song  
as it delves for insects in the valleys  
and ridges of the apricot's bark.

A wasp with a red abdomen sneers  
over the winter garden's glass roof  
above which a ghost of gold and sky-blue  
shimmers behind gauzy net curtains.

And so our vision hesitates down  
to the irises whose indigo  
has a recollection of red  
and something of the dark between the stars.

In forty-eight hours they've altered  
from black dogmatic spearheads to the curve  
and countercurve of petals round a tongue,  
pistils feathered with stamens, mild milky white.

Tomorrow they'll have withered to twists  
of ancient carbon paper, all while the moon  
moves from incompleteness through perfect form  
to a Roman coin clipped on one side,

all while you change from apparition  
at an upstairs window through flesh and blood  
to shrivelling scorn as the whitethroat sings  
my fortune like dice clattering in a cup.

## Thaw

Our world today is melting.  
The red arcs of the creeper  
bend and shake with beaded light  
continually sliding  
to the point where a twig ends  
its own non-Euclidean form,  
so water drops on to mulch  
which stirs under the impact.

Now your hair is much thicker.  
You've washed, dried and twisted it  
into a braid whose gold sparks  
with light when you comb it out  
and my gaze is held there by  
electro-magnetic force.

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## Weeding

Once more I grub up ground elder from the soil  
corpse-white rhizomes fashioning networks as I labour,  
one fibre stretching itself the entire  
interior groove in a concrete tile  
I'd split and used in the grass's border.

I trowel and sift inch by inch until I dislodge  
a walnut shell filled with clay and the larvae  
of ants glittering with rage like tiny bronze nails.  
They run all over my hand, pinprick and blotch  
my skin with formic acid molecules.

Zero tolerance for our garden's terrorists.  
You see the walnut shell and claim I've destroyed  
a universe. You're far too kind to all things green.  
for you ground elder is as worthy as a rose.  
You can't bear to pull up the useless and the plain.

So let green flourish. Thirty years ago I had a bedroom  
in shades of green. One evening, the rest  
of the shared house being busy, I invited  
a Russian pupil there whose English I had to test  
for a Master's course. She hesitated.

On entering she said the colours reminded her  
of interrogation in the Lubyanka.  
We laboured inch by inch through her text above  
a noisy dinner party, changing round 'a' and 'the'.  
Afterwards we thought better of making love.

## A Cellar Room on to a Garden

*i.m. Teodor Babin (1930–1995)*

It faces west so the light is always soothing,  
a room like childhood, but not my own  
with items from a village near the Polish border  
and a flat near the railway track to Hungary;  
this year's red wine fermenting in a demi-john,  
a bubble rising in the glass valve every second,  
a yellow pumpkin, football-sized, and pumpkin seeds,  
which taste like spearmint, a dripping tap.

Two woodcuts – an ash tree in late autumn  
and a road to the little town of Somewhere  
with its church, council hall and granary –  
orange heads of flowers, which will be cooked  
into an ointment for every human ill,  
seven bottles of blackcurrant syrup,  
a legendary divan from the kitchen of the flat  
near the railway track, a doll with a skirt  
made by my daughter, a box of glass balls  
for a Christmas tree, a creamer, sunglasses,  
a jar of apricot preserves, a dripping tap.

A wind-up clock with a face in imitation  
mother-of-pearl and brass hands stuck at ten-to-four,  
a philodendron in a pot on a crystal cake stand  
trailing over a nineteen fifties radio,  
make Opera, finished in walnut veneer –  
I look at the dial of frequencies: Sackville, Praha,  
Schwarzenberg, Tel Aviv, Nice, Stalingrad,  
Hilversum, Moorside Edge, Athlone – a dripping tap.

The window is shaded by dark red flowers,  
the garden a lawn, two conifers, vegetables  
which feed us and fruit trees; peach, apricot,

cherry, plum and an underground store for potatoes,  
finally the fence, outside which my father-in-law  
once sat and said to me – I will translate –  
“During the war we had to learn German at school,  
after the war Russian. I will not learn English,”  
and he stared across the fields and houses to the west  
as if he thought he’d see clouds of dust again  
from armoured vehicles and soldiers marching.

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## Old Bolshevik Poet with Nuthatch

Yesterday the apricots showed pinkish points  
from gnarled minute dragon claws.  
Today I struggle to recall  
the peculiar rosy haze they cast  
across the garden and the past.

The pear still has buds sticky to the touch.  
The apple trees extend glints of green  
towards a qualitative change and shape.  
White apricot blossom under the sun  
explodes and revolution has begun.

Are you with us or against us? I ask  
a busy comrade with blue-grey wings  
and light mustard-coloured breast scuttling  
downwards to probe the bark of an apple tree.  
He pauses and looks askance at me.

A loud call, a flutter to a second tree.  
He strops his beak before a trilling scold.  
Are you with us or against us? I ask.  
A hard official stare is his reply  
through the Zorro mask around his eyes.

I have retired and let history move on,  
my freckles replaced by liver spots,  
my joints aching as the clouds come down.  
A cold flurry hints that winter could return  
from an east where farms and villages burn.



## Apricot Brandy

The only gold we had was from the barrel  
in the off-licence managed by a Pole.

Cheaper than sherry, it poured slower than oil.  
Customers had to bring their own bottle

otherwise the Pole frowned and said “No dice.”  
I’d bring a decanter of cut glass.

Over a fortnight we’d see the colour sink  
to emptiness, leaving only a chink

the afterglow of the sun when it has slipped  
over the horizon. Our tumblers tipped

for the last drop. “Lang may your lum reek!”  
we’d murmur and we wouldn’t ever speak

of what had wounded us, our father’s absence.  
I’d never tasted a flavour so intense.

Since then other apricots, marhulovica,  
baratskovica or kajsijovaca,

have neither drop nor scent nor colour of my past  
even when drunk slowly and made to last.

I can sip and savour them all from the roof  
of my mouth to my throat. At fifty percent proof

they numb my tongue, make nonsense of my speech  
and the bittersweetness I still try to reach.