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“The Seafarer’s Gift”  
Approx. 1,575 Words

## The Seafarer’s Gift

*The Dark Indigo Current*  
Poems by Thomas R. Smith  
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*The Dark Indigo Current*, Thomas R. Smith’s third full length collection of poems, is an extended meditation on loss. The poetry is swift and deliberate by turns, reflective, deep-running, and the style is Midwestern plain, intimate but laced with an agreeable tact. Readers of Smith’s previous collections, *Horse of Earth* (Holy Cow! Press, 1994) and *Keeping the Star* (New Rivers Press, 1988), will recognize the poet’s fascination with the colors and textures of nature and their manifestations in our own emotional processes and patterns of thought. But *Current* extends Smith’s range: the focus here is on human relationships, in particular the social and psychic condition of men in American culture. The scene is still rural and small-town, so readers who prefer urbanity — the crackle of cocktail party wit or the wry soft-shoe of the bow-tied *fin de siecle* crowd — will want to look elsewhere (not difficult, since big city life and its concerns dominate poetic subject matter these days). Because he

writes from a situation that is rapidly vanishing from American life and letters, Smith’s work feels peculiarly fresh, even as he embraces familiar themes.

“Familiar,” in this case, means “familial” as well. The death of the poet’s father overshadows these poems, although the book includes elegies for other family members and friends, so that the issue of loss deepens into issues of relationship, which continue — often intensified — after loss occurs.

Like Smith’s previous collections, *Current* consists of an opening verse followed by four groups of poems. (It’s heartening to read such poets, whose books are more than miscellanies.) “Seafarers” is the prefatory poem here, and in it Smith writes: “Shipwreck is our destiny. [...] It’s right to give our longing to the ocean— / and if someone speaks to us, that’s a gift.” The poem recalls “The Seafarer,” the Anglo-Saxon poem now about 1,000 years old, whose narrator speaks of exile and grief, frustrated longing. These are Smith’s themes, but there is an enormous difference in tone: the old poem’s speaker chafes in the chains of his suffering, but Smith implies that we need the lonely journey, if only because it leads us to appreciate the gift of even the frailest human communication. It’s worth noting that Smith asserts the journey’s universality by changing the old poem’s title from singular to plural, because similar subtleties in his poetic practice give *Current* a wonderfully complex texture, full of shifting reflections and shadings and hidden depths.

The book’s first section, “End of Summer,” establishes a psychic context for what follows by presenting an extended family whose elder generation is passing away. The mood is all ripeness and melancholy, a yielding to mystery. Smith describes the territory in a prose poem

(a form he has made powerfully his own from the very beginning of his career) whose title gives the section its name:

1.

September rain slants into the heavy alfalfa. Water pours from the square and brutish mouth of the spout and runs away into the boyish grass. Circles of rust at the bottom of the bucket are thoughts, growing inward, of a mind simplified by solitude, monotony of rain....

2.

Things done or not done for a long time lodge in odors, in old clothes furrowed with brooding, in black cooking-soot on the widower’s stove, in the small varnished cross nailed on a bedroom door, and in the dirty rose curtain on tarnished brass rings — all left as they were when the old man died.

3.

Near the end did he paint so as not to watch night shamle toward the barns? On the back of a cornfield scene with pheasants, we find a far older landscape of lacquered trees and rocks. Implacably symmetrical, halved precisely by the glass knife of a falls, the left side is green, the right side ochre, this picture turned toward the wall.

Other poets might drag this old man into therapy, but Smith — no. He prefers messy realities to abstract ideas. (Thoughts, after all, can rust out a perfectly useful bucket.) Who the old man is exactly, Smith doesn’t say. But this solitary amateur artist, holding off nightfall with cornfields and a secret taste for rigid symmetries, seems to represent the Smith family genius (in the ancient sense of that word: a tutelary spirit), and we find his spirit in the several other family portraits Smith offers in this section.

This tutelary spirit is embodied most powerfully, though, in the poet’s father and in the poet himself. “In Hospital,” where we first meet the father, presents the man’s worsening illness over eight years, from 1986 to 1994, in three sharply-drawn, heartbreaking scenes. The poem also illustrates how inherited patterns of thought and feeling can prevent the Seafarer’s gift from being delivered.

The book’s second section consists of an extraordinary sequence of poems entitled “In the Hour of His Death.” Considering our own losses, we know how much it must have cost to wrestle these clarities into words. From “the tubes and monitors, the night / nurse, the slowing breath, the Mysterium” through the death-bed prayer and the burial (“I can’t shake the sense of having // abandoned you, handed you over to death”) and the many “first days without” that follow, Smith observes, wonders, sorrows, broods. “What we / could have been to each other is used up,” he writes. He confesses a desire to dream about his father, but when the dream arrives, as recorded in the breathtaking “Dream of the Glass of Wine,” it is equivocal, hurtful, thwarted.

And yet fresh dimensions of reality do open up, as the sequence’s last three poems show. Such dimensions open around us, Smith writes, “as if to tell / us we’re neither abandoned nor alone, / the one thing we most need to know.” An admirable honesty shines through that “as if,” which gently insists on doubt in the midst of profound desire.

In “Riding Into Memory,” the book’s third section, the poems embrace anguish and nostalgia, anger and regret, at the same time bearing “affectionate witness” on behalf of both the lost father and the lost son. “He was the future // I steered toward willingly” Smith admits in “Admiring My Father.” But the legacy’s a vexed one. The man seems to have lived only

partially, and on the evidence of “Ages of My Father’s Working Life,” at least, his considerable energies were siphoned off into the smallness of small town life. Smith shows himself rebelling, with a sometimes narrow single-mindedness, in order to avoid the same descent. “I closed / my door for nearly twenty years,” Smith writes, “to stand on the side of a brittle / bookish privacy.” Smith has no interest in using these memories to blame either his father, himself, his family, or his situation. He prefers to convey, with as much clarity as possible, the vision of his family “straining in the harness of love.”

At the end of his ride into memory, in the luminous prose poem called “Snow Sticking to the Hood,” Smith achieves a not entirely satisfying accommodation with the power of the absent father. Driving in a snowstorm, the poet imagines that his father has taken over the wheel and that he himself has become a child again: “I’ll just stay small, where the wind and snow part for him. And we’ll arrive safely wherever it is we’re going,” he writes. The impulse to *defer* is subtly disturbing, and Smith makes us realize that the desire to “arrive safely” can be psychically dangerous. After all, the son *must* take the father’s place or he’ll never arrive at his own destination.

The poems in *Current*’s fourth section, “The Lost Music,” deal with restoring the self that was wandering in grief, caught up in the harrowing processes of memory and self-examination. Relief comes in the form of renewed access to nature, the abundance of married love, and the practice of poetry. The implication is clear: this destination — for whatever reasons of character and circumstance — was never accessible to the deceased father, and claiming it for himself was the aim of the son’s rebellion. “All things that live follow the paths of desire,” Smith writes.

Maple seeds make a “community of desire” when they lay scattered in the maple tree’s shade. By attending to this desire, “the incompleteness that shadows / all your efforts may pause and for / a moment lose itself.”

As an artist, Smith attends to desire by making poems. In “The Reply,” he imagines his poems as loaves of bread, each “clearly marked with / the name of some hungry person to whom / it [will] be delivered without fail.” And in “The Road to Kenora,” Smith hints that his practice is part of an ancient spiritual tradition — one that relieves grief by giving it form and a place in the world.

*The Dark Indigo Current* ends with “Housewarming,” a poignant vision in which the poet’s family is restored to him, “none dead, none missing, none angry.” Robert Bly included this one in *The Best American Poetry 1999* anthology, and on its own the poem is worth the price of Smith’s collection. But in the larger context of his book, “Housewarming” becomes an even more affecting statement of faith in the power of imagination and desire — a gift fellow seafarers will be grateful to receive.