



The  
Interview  
Rose

Elizabeth  
Smither

THE INTERVIEW ROSE

ELIZABETH SMITHER



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Interview  
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AUCKLAND  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS

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## *The frog*

Once I followed a frog down steps  
to the garden, to a pond. On each  
step he hopped, then paused to catch  
what I thought was his breath.

One hop, pause, one step.  
Down we went in the wet night.  
Light rain was washing his mottled skin.  
A large confident frog, a human.

Magic in our collaboration.  
Woman and frog, a distant pond  
reached by plodding and breathing  
and by companionableness.

## *The fish*

In the sea beside the restaurant  
a little tide is turning, like fine lace  
and in the shallows lies a fish.

At first it's gleaming white, unidentified  
a dead fish with its torso torn  
its fanned tail missing.

Two gulls like ushers in a church  
stand beside it, peck as if  
it's on a sand collection plate.

We dine – I eat fish and leave  
some on my plate. The eyes of the fish  
seem to regard us. The tide

comes up, whiter now and curling.  
The sand on which it rests releases it  
drags it back to deeper burial.

## *Two poems about cows*

### *Item on the Concert Programme*

A LISTENER PHONES IN TO DESCRIBE HIS EXPERIENCE WITH  
MOZART'S CLARINET CONCERTO IN A MAJOR, K. 622

At fourteen I climbed an apricot tree  
with a transistor radio  
and cows came close to listen.

Remember cows have large eyes and long lashes.  
In the *adagio* movement they lowered their eyes  
and in the *allegro* movement they raised them.

Seldom can a public concert provide  
such satisfaction. The cows as critics  
their beautiful eyes, their listening.

## *Cows swimming*

Towards a bank in flooded water  
that knows no wane nor reason  
a little herd of cows  
is swimming in a triangle.

I've seen line up a similar quotient  
of Canada geese, stilled in the sky  
until they settled on a leader

and calling from the bank – the geese  
must have a similar method –  
the girl to whom the cows belong

calling an indecipherable ancient call  
that might have belonged on battlements  
or arrow slits of chance

a piercing unstoppable breathless cry  
to which the cows respond  
by swimming harder and further.

## *The cat and the Wittgenstein quotes*

The cat is sitting on the table on two pages of Wittgenstein quotes copied by his mistress in her indecipherable handwriting as mysterious as Wittgenstein.

It is the feel of the paper, its warmth that slowly accrues on skin, and fur emphasises. *Never stay up on the barren heights of cleverness but come*

*down into the green valleys of silliness.*

An hour in the sun and then a leap leaving some words scrunched. *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.*

Such simplicity to a cat who will not leap onto a chair and then the carpet until something better offers: his mistress passing near his dishes, recipient of a stare.

*The limits of my language means the limits of my world.* This can be conveyed from mind to mind.

The cat's kibbles fall into a dish

and Wittgenstein is warm beneath his fur. One quote the cat agrees with, nothing more: *I don't know why we are here, but I am pretty sure it is not to enjoy ourselves.*

Pshaw! Has he not heard of transference: philosopher to philosophy to imbiber. *Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving yourself.* I do a service by sitting on his sheet.

## *100 brushes of a cat*

First the forehead (1–10)  
the skull presents itself, elevated

then (10–15) a longer and longer  
sweep down the spine to the tail.

Some words are spoken (15–20) *lovely*  
*beautiful* – he stretches out on his side

and presents the landscape of cat (20–30)  
brow to tail in strong strokes

massage-style, lightly touching  
the tail where fleas might hide

(30–35) the underbelly, gently  
a censoring look may appear

and remember to avoid the paws  
(I tried once and was deterred).

Now stretched out, an obelisk (35–45)  
a tomb figure, a loved cat

caught in his mistress's skirt or by her hand  
a secret love, kept from her lord (45–60)

a stroke like a wave, full and assured  
accompanied by more words, questions perhaps

until (60–80) he turns on his other side  
and then (80–100) sits like a sphinx

ready for the sun and moon  
to cross the sand. I stand

but not before I've kissed his forehead  
and he's approached and kissed my hand.

## *The moon that harms animals*

It's going to harm animals, this moon  
rising so full and huge at dusk  
over this little bald hill at the edge  
of a field of stubble. Stalks and  
black earth, already gleaned  
and dark as the darkest desire  
which will come over the animals tonight.

And here, in proof, is the ragdoll cat  
carried, draped over a child's arm or  
worn around the neck of another, sore  
and torn, hardly bearing to be held  
because of the savage bites she bears  
for venturing, unstoppable, through the cat door  
and yielding herself, in fealty, to the moon.

## *Houses on the hill*

I envy the houses on the hill  
and their bold seizure of sky  
and sun and stars and moon.

Most have shady trees for company  
a canopy, a hedge of fur.  
These hill houses have bare necks

and long windows whose light  
and timing is out of reach. We  
below switch on the prescribed lamps

but they are flooded, dawn to dark  
by bands of light like premonitions  
great swathes of war and peace.

## *The knowledge in grass*

The top sports field, now all games are ceased,  
grows longer grass. It is the week  
of unaccredited exams where students walk  
with books in front of their noses, in the stubble,  
talking to themselves. We, below them, can see  
their lips moving, their furrowed brows bending  
over dates and declensions, names of rivers,  
how the Etruscans lived and the Romans.

The romance they really desire is in the grass  
and there they would be lying, dreaming,  
if not for these blessed books they are holding.  
They'll come here again, after the exam papers  
are gathered up and held at arm's length  
by the invigilators, like waitresses carrying plates.

Forever after, if they leave or stay, the grass will be  
the base of any perfume, this late summer,  
the grass absorbing the sporting heels and toes,  
the knowledge slipping down their arms and elbows  
as they pace, blink in the sun, and learn and learn.