

*Elizabeth
Smither*



Night Horse

Elizabeth Smither's world is the people she knows, the places she visits, the animals she encounters. As they appear in her work they take on mysterious, sometimes surreal, qualities. Her imaginative world is charming and enchanted, peculiar, whimsical, and often very funny. – C. K. STEAD

The freshness of Elizabeth's vision, her altogether metaphorical way of looking at the world, constantly surprises. Then there is the course her poems take, rising into something which hits, or is very like, the sublime. Her work is replete with a humanity that draws the reader in, moves us and stays with us . . . – DIANA BRIDGE

In Elizabeth Smither's eighteenth collection of poetry her words are as vital as ever. The poems take the everyday – mothers and daughters, cats and horses, books and bowls, slippers and shirts – and transform them into something fresh: sometimes surreal, sometimes funny, often enchanted. And throughout, the work is infected with the personality of the author: a quirky, whimsical observer of the mundane world around her, which she shows to be full of surprises.

Elizabeth Smither has written five novels, five collections of short stories and seventeen poetry collections, the most recent of which was *The Blue Coat* (2013). She has twice won the major award for New Zealand poetry and was the 2001–2003 Te Mata Poet Laureate. In 2016 she won the Sarah Broom Poetry Prize, New Zealand's most valuable poetry award, judged by Paul Muldoon, and those poems are included in *Night Horse*.

My mother's house

Once, near nightfall, I drove past my mother's house.
She was inside it, moving about some task.
I saw her move from room to room.

I could have stopped. Shortly she would draw the blinds
but a knock on the door might alarm her
who had her routine for night.

It was all those unseen moments we do not see
the best of a friend, the best of a mother
competent and gracious in her solitude

as if she was concentrating as she had as a child
on something she was reading or pondering
a thought that occupied a minute of a day

and brought her pleasure at her own competence
to take a minute, to exist inside it
as still as the minute was to itself

neither neutral nor particular but she made it
who would soon walk into the last room
of her life and go to sleep in it.

Miss Bowerman and the hot water bottles

'Tiny maids are strongest,' the housekeeper said
when my mother was interviewed for Government House.
'She looks too small to lift a mouse'

but for screwing on Royal hot water bottles she was queen.
The thought of a flooded bed was too much
for any major-domo to bear. 'Fetch Miss Bowerman

and let her apply her wrists, child-sized,
to the bladder of near-boiling water
to warm the sheets, the vice-regal feet

or rest against the spine that stood
bored and rigid in a receiving line
and listened all night to boring speeches.'

Next morning she was called again
to undo the work of her marvellous wrists.
'Miss Bowerman, can you let out the water?'

Swimming with our fathers *for Beth*

You used to swim with your father and
I used to swim with mine. The same
beach but perhaps never at the same time

though that's a possibility. We'd never met
when aged ten or thereabouts, we swam
in our ruched swimsuits, our flat chests

with our handsome fathers. Mine
going further out than I dared –
or maybe he was protecting me from the sea –

swam breaststroke in. I saw his legs
snap and open like scissors, his head
regarding me and my dog paddle.

And you, my long-time friend, saw your
father too, floating on his back, but
turning his eyes, time and again, towards you.

Day breaks in dressing gowns

In your double bed, raised on a little platform
your two figures in dressing gowns, backs against
the headboard, are sipping cups of tea.

Two dear dressing gowns, one blue, one white
their sashes tied, though out of sight.
Perhaps your toes are stretching beneath the covers

toes you would recognise if they were stolen away
one toe overlapping on the left foot (high heels)
the other (male) pristine and soft.

No need for dressing gowns in the summer air
one made of towelling, one of poplin
but how they dress you, how I applaud

standing in the doorway, robed in
a spare I found behind my door.
I know you so well, I think,

and the dressing gowns seem to concur.
I hope never to hold them in my arms
empty forms and dangling sleeves over which I weep.

Wedding car

For your wedding we hired a 1926 Nash
in deep forest green, straight sides
like corsets pressed in and then some more

(the curved cars on the road looked askance
as if Rasputin had appeared among them
severe and poisonous and prim).

A white ribbon ran from the chauffeur's window
to the flying naked lady. The wheel spokes gleamed
and measured each revolution like time

and though, today, someone else will ride in it
you are both still there, on the back seat
with its sense of discipline, its stuffing

of horsehair, not foam, your bouquet reflecting
the subdued light from the narrow back window
as if it has thrown and caught itself.

Eyebrows, toenails *in memory of Jeny Curnow (1931–2013)*

Eyebrows, toenails, the either ends of Jeny
today will be attended to by the beautician.

Toenails first, I imagine. Jeny on a footstool
looking perhaps at a print on the wall, a curtain

moving in the air. The little moon shapes fall
and are swept up. Now the dye

for the beautifully arched, slightly quizzical eyebrows
that Jeny always wears. Not a questioning

Why are we here, why have eyebrows at all?
but a shared amusement: a moon

on either side. Even in maintenance
there is a perfection of sorts. Jeny

rises and walks. Her sandalled toes
when summer comes show extra flesh

her eyebrows gleam (the dye takes
weeks to fade) on her bright face.

Slippers *for Viva*

At the last your feet swelled and their shape
changed to a caricature of a foot. How
strangely arched, it seemed, the foot
you lifted from your only fit, the slipper.

All you could wear: slippers befitting a Mandarin
in maroon velvet with embroidered uppers
the widest size for your stiff high arch
to slide into, without a chance of straightening.

Racks and racks of shoes you possessed
boots and stilettos, sandals light as air
buckles, straps, suede, satin. Surely they
could have assembled into one hybrid pair

fit for your poor stiff foot that seemed
like a dinosaur trying to enter a building
the ceiling too low for the neck, the tail knocking
over the walls, the head like your pointing big toe?

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