

***The Thing I Came For* – Susan Bradley Smith, launched by Ross Gillett**

A handy starting point in trying to characterize *The Thing I Came For*, is (on the back cover) Robyn Rowland's snapshot of the territory covered by this vivid, rich and richly disturbing collection of prose poems: "London in the 80s pulsates: good sex and bad; lostness and embracing life; freedom and constraint; drugs and suicide. And back in Australia, motherhood's loving helplessness."

The poems are presented as letters, sometimes addressed to others and sometimes to the letter writer's self, and they are grouped into sections, the two biggest of which are The Girlhood Letters and The Womanhood Letters, and all told they hit the reader as vividly imagined memoir, but as memoir with the impact of intensely present experience. This is partly because of the quality of the writing – strikingly original phrases and images, such as these from the early parts of the book: 'the rain is really radium', 'she was a good, clean, chromium kind of friend', 'the hot, uranium happiness of things' (I love this small thread of hot, shiny, dangerous metals imagery) OR 'the pickaxe panic of the AIDS epidemic'. Get the alliterative binding together of a phrase like that!). So, the imagery, the phrase making...

But it's also because of the voice:

It wasn't really a champagne event, though it did feel like a wedding, what with all the family there farewelling me and marvelling at my misguided departure outfit (white cowboy boots; Bronte-blue eye shadow) and my anxiety to get my sorry soul out of Sydney and her cruel canopy of sunshine...

This is just a small sample, but the created voice of this book is so sharply self-knowing, so unself-pitying but so shrewdly self-accusing, so grimly and despairingly humorous at times, that its tone and intensity become very compelling. This voice is saved from anything approaching self-pity or melodrama by the sheer originality of its vision, of what reaches us as memoir, as memory, yes, but also as a web of strikingly imagined and reimagined experiences.

So if these poems/letters constitute a complex narrative, they do much more than tell a story – their imaginative force take us deep into the disaster, the sorrow, the regret, the failure, the helplessness (thanks RR!). It's in this context that the Epigraph to the book needs attention – it provides the title to the collection, after all!

Quote Rich, American poet, 1929-2012, from 'Diving into the Wreck':

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun

The wreck itself, not the story of the wreck. And note that the sun at the end of this epigraph is not redemptive or salvific. Susan Bradley Smith has given us a big signal at the very start of the book: don't expect rescue, don't expect any easy way out of the distress and dysfunction that the writing presents so fiercely. Now in a sense fiercely great writing like this is always redemptive, always saves us in some mysterious way, but it doesn't mean it has to promise or predict redemption or rescue.

This book is almost literally framed by pain, in fact. The opening and closing poems are addressed to the letter-writer's daughter, who is being dropped off by her mother at a psychiatric hospital in what sounds like a truly desperate attempt to save her. Here's a bit of the first poem:

I sneak a sideways glance at you, time-jump, see you smiling into rockpools, sliding onto swings, making playdough love-hearts, eating them. The malice of life, its flooding baths, its greedy ovens, its lost daughters.

And in the final poem in the book, the mother remembers finding an unsent letter from her daughter so terrible in its revelations that she, the mother, feels as if she has died, never to rise again. Nevertheless, in the very last sentence, she confesses to living for the fantasy of resurrection – not a prophesy of resurrection, not even the dream of resurrection, but the fantasy. Hope doesn't get much more slender than that.

I am reminded of a poem by one of Adrienne Rich's slightly older contemporaries, another member of the great generation of post-WW2 American poets, Randall Jarrell. The poem is called 90 North, and it's closing lines are:

I see at last that all the knowledge

I wrung from the darkness—that the darkness flung me—
Is worthless as ignorance: nothing comes from nothing,
The darkness from the darkness. Pain comes from the darkness
And we call it wisdom. It is pain.

One of the great things about *The Thing I Came For*, in fact the centrally great thing about it, is that while its laceratingly brave writing constitutes an often terrible truth, it doesn't resort to wisdom.

The Thing I Came For is hereby launched!

Ross Gillett

(Port Fairy, Sep13, 2026)

Ross Gillett is a poetry editor for Puncher & Wattmann and Liquid Amber Press and also works as a freelance editor and poetry mentor. Ross's poems have won awards including the Newcastle Poetry Prize, the FAW John Shaw Neilson Award (twice) and the Woorilla Prize, and have just in the last year been listed amongst the finalists for the Peter Porter, Blake, Newcastle, Fish and Bridport prizes. Ross's most recent book *Swimmer in the Dust*, was released by Puncher and Wattmann in 2022, and his new and selected poems, *Drift*, is scheduled for release by the same publisher late this year.