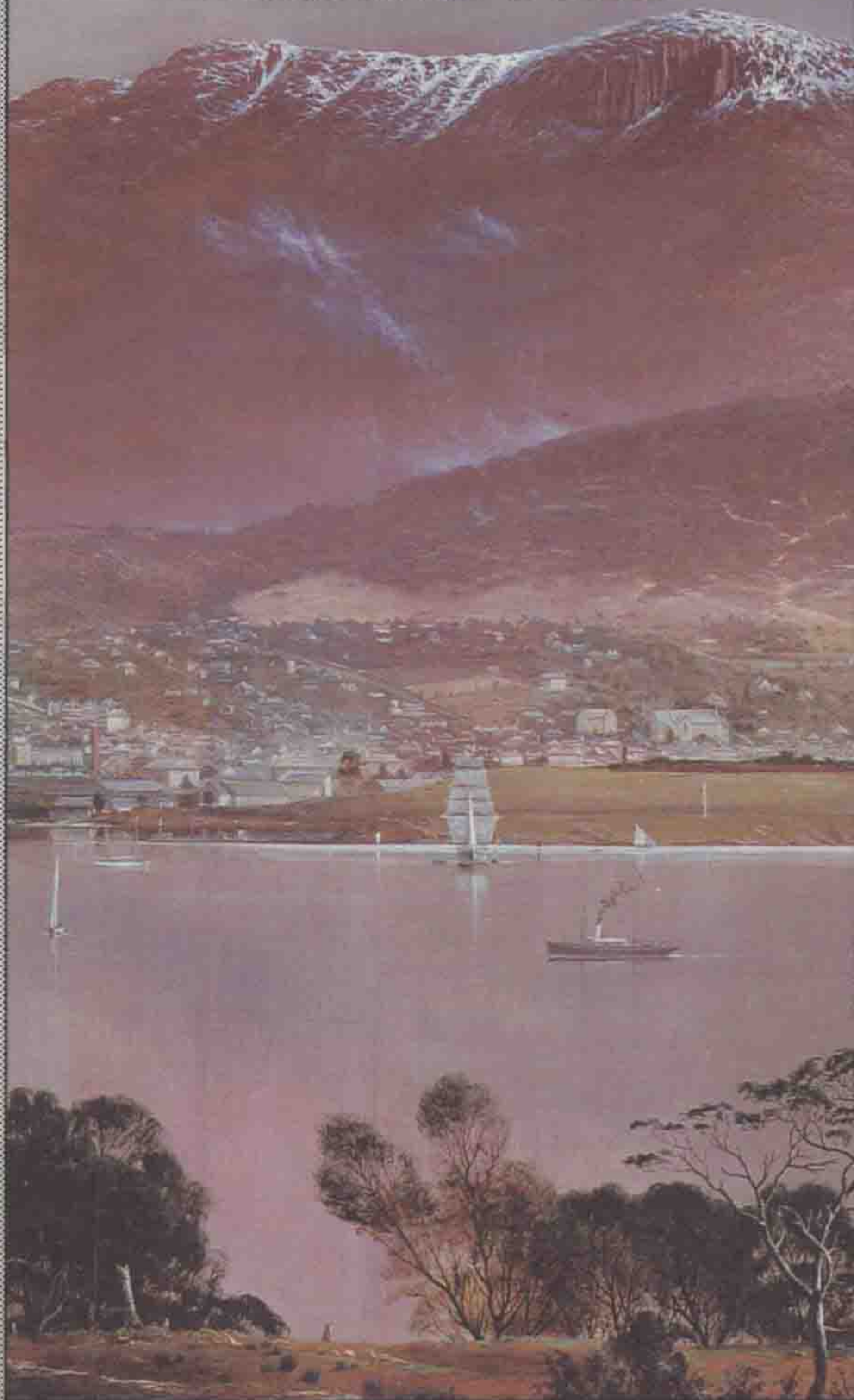


Vivian Smith

Selected Poems



A&R MODERN POETS

Vivian Smith

Selected Poems

Publication assisted by the
Literature Board of the Australia Council,
the Federal Government's arts funding
and advisory body.

ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

Unit 4, Eden Park, 31 Waterloo Road,
North Ryde, NSW, Australia 2113 and
16 Golden Square, London W1R 4BN,
United Kingdom

This book is copyright.
Apart from any fair dealing for the
purposes of private study, research,
criticism or review, as permitted
under the Copyright Act, no part may
be reproduced by any process without
written permission. Inquiries should
be addressed to the publishers.

First published in Australia
by Angus & Robertson Publishers in 1985

Copyright © Vivian Smith 1985

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-publication data.

Smith, Vivian, 1933–
Selected poems.

ISBN 0 207 15145 8.

I. Title.

A821'.3

Typeset in 9pt Trump Mediaeval
by Graphicraft Typesetters Ltd
Printed in Australia by
The Dominion Press–Hedges & Bell

PREFACE

This selection contains poems written between 1952 and 1983 and it is as rigorous as I have been able to make it without completely disowning the younger poet from whom my more recent work has developed. A few poems, from which I now feel a certain distance, have been included at the request or on the advice of friends. Apart from one or two details of punctuation and wording I have not tried to revise or rewrite.

Reading my poems through again to make this selection, I noticed how a group or cycle starting in one book is often completed in another — some of the lyrics in *An Island South*, for instance, continue impulses already explored in *The Other Meaning*, and the same applies to later collections. And I have become more conscious than ever of the centrality and polarity of the two places in which I have spent most of my life: Hobart and Sydney. They seem to represent the two extreme points between which my poems move.

Translation has been an important stimulus to me from the time when I first started to write poetry as an adolescent, and I have often been drawn to poets whose preoccupations and use of language are completely different from my own, but with whom I have felt some affinity. A selection of this work is included.

Vivian Smith
Sydney, 1984

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Poems reprinted from *The Other Meaning* were first published by Edwards and Shaw of Sydney for the Lyre-Bird Writers and the Commonwealth Literary Fund; "Lines for Rosamond McCulloch", "View from the Domain, Hobart" and "Summer Notes" first appeared in book form in David Malouf's anthology, *Gesture of a Hand*, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Acknowledgements for poems in this collection not previously published in book form are due to *Island Magazine*, *Poetry Australia* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

CONTENTS

From *The Other Meaning*

Bedlam Hills	3
Bird Sanctuary	4
Old Men Are Facts	5
Fishermen, Winter	6
Winter Foreshore	7
Aloes and Sea	8
Penguin	9
Fishermen, Drowned beyond the West Coast	10
Man with Greyhounds	11
This Time of Calm	12
In Summer Rain	13
Deserted Bandstand, Kingston Beach	14
Portuguese Laurel, Flowering	15
The Last Summer	16
Late Autumn Dove	17
Equinox	18
Praying Mantis	19
The Other Meaning	20
Alceste	21
The Shadow	22
Thylacine	23
These Wrens, This Wattle Tree	24
Myth	25

From *An Island South*

At an Exhibition of Historical Paintings, Hobart	29
Winter	31
Despite the Room	32
Reflections	33
Return of the Prodigal Son	34
For My Daughter	35
Absence	36
Summer Band Concert	37
Early Arrival: Sydney	38
Summer Sketches: Sydney	39
Return to Hobart	40
Philoctetes	41
Family Album	42

Quiet Evening	43
Deathbed Sketch	44
Bus Ride	47
Wrong Turning	49
One Season	50
An Effect of Light	51
Dialogue	52
There Is No Sleight of Hand	53
Beyond This Point	54
For a New Year	55
Late April: Hobart	56
Warmth in July: Hobart	57

From *Familiar Places*

View from the Domain, Hobart	61
Balmoral Summer '66	62
Summer Notes	63
Postcard from the Subtropics	64
A Room in Mosman	65
Lines for Rosamond McCulloch	66
A Few Words for Maxi	67
For Edith Holmes: Tasmanian Painter	68
For Nan Chauncy: 1900–1970	69
Coins and Bricks	70
Slope with Boulders	71
Back in Hobart	72
Twenty Years of Sydney	73
Il Convento, Batignano	74
The Traveller Returns	75
The Man Fern near the Bus Stop	76

From *Tide Country* with new poems

Onion in a Jar	79
My Morning Dip	80
The Edge of Winter	81
Still Life	82
The Restorers	83
Revisiting	84
The Tower	85
Late May: Sydney	86
Looking Back	87

Dung Beetles	88
Tasmania	89
Autumn Reading	90
Convolvulus	91
At the Parrot House, Taronga Park	92
From Korea	93
Chance Meeting	94
Sparrows: Mosman	95
Poetry Reading	96
In the Colonial Museum	97
<i>Translations and Variations</i>	
<i>Delie, Obiect de Plvs Havlte Vertu</i> (1544)	98
Variations on Garnier's <i>Perpetuum Mobile</i>	99
Summer Feeling	100
Crows in Winter	101
Under the Pine	102
House for Sale	103
<i>Poems after Paul Celan</i>	
Corona	104
Flower	105
In Praise of Distance	106
Menhir	107
With Changing Key	108
<i>Ich bin allein</i>	109
The Whitest Dove of All	110
Sleep Then	111
Sleep and Food	112
I Heard It Said	113

From
THE OTHER MEANING

BEDLAM HILLS

Corroded flat as hills allow,
stubbled with stones and brittle weeds,
only the thorn blooms here
and scatters its seeds.

The hills are blank and pale now
beneath the clear and static air.
The landscape is as empty
as a blindman's stare.

Mad Clare, the story tells,
gathered her sticks and pieces here.
Her mind wore on the open rock.
But we forget Clare,

walk over and over the hills of strewn
and fractured rock where the berry
suckles the given stone
and the light breaks clearly.

These are the cold, the worn hills
with madness in their monotone
and emptiness where no life moves
beneath a stone.

BIRD SANCTUARY

I came down to the tideless bay
from hills sketched in rain
to light that flickers the pencil reed
to where these swans remain

and sail with slim and supple necks
over the water's rippled weed,
with necks and shadows seeking
in the cautious lengthened shade:

not knowing I would find
these water birds moving
in an area of meaning,
wings folded from flight —

or that swans on water glance
and settle into meaning
as thoughts and poems
on the edge of silence.

And there, now here these seven swans,
this water-world's remembered skies
hold silence, weed and living shade
within my centre of surprise.

OLD MEN ARE FACTS

The Ship's Graveyard, Risdon

When I was a boy I heard the sea upstairs in a shell.
I wanted to climb the spiral of sound
and make my life in its white storm:
its great storms were a part of me —
O part of me I have not found.

I spun the globe beneath my hand
and every port was a hive of love:
the fever hid along her mouth:
but I was young with a storm in my head
and over the north lay my cold south.

There is a life in facts: old men are facts:
I am a fact we all live through.
My face is old like the back of a shell
and I say less than I can tell.

Old men are facts as cabins are that bend the grass,
as funnels are like empty trees.
And yes these ships were washed up here
by fallen seas
to die along the withering shore;
I am an old man in a narrow hut;
these ships are part of me like memories;
and yes these portholes stare out my lame years
and in the dark and closing night
I turn life over in my hand.

Even if I could tell you of that land,
that subtle country of my heart,
I would only say in the windy shade:
old men are part of what they make and what is made.

FISHERMEN, WINTER

In the bay across the broken threshold sand
beyond the turning of the bird-walked beach,
deserted as a room — though birds and jetsam and
flotsam are always there — each belonging to each:

all morning they have sat there silent and alone
in a dinghy rocking on the sea like a gull,
while the mad beach birds for hours flown
and knocked by the light that cuts like a stone

walk on the wheeling water, tread the broken glass of
the air . . .

And light congeals on faces, a wing or a hand . . .
In the tides of shadows the slow nets drag
where the bells of the sea ring into the land.

From the land: the dinghy rocking gently as a gull,
they work and drag their nets as patient as the sea,
who gather what it offers: fish, crab and shell;
letting slip the shadows, the light of wings, the sea.

WINTER FORESHORE

The drilling wind, the whittling air
these cruel tortured days
could eat the feeling in the mind
to the thought beneath despair:
we are our elegies of praise;

our going through is all.
These objects caught in light,
discarded anchor, sodden bird,
the wind-rhyming shell
reveal the heart is desolate.

Worm-wood hull and ruined shore,
the sharp thrust of splintered wood
scratch the mind with shapes of pain;
severed now, this one bird's claw
rejects the traitor tide.

Under the ravaging brittle wind
anchor, stone and driftwood lie:
dragged in a net of sentiment
they'll clutter up the mind —
till they become an elegy

or riveted to praise
endure the traffic of the heart.
Our winter shore is leashed to a tide
that covers all. But we must build:
build from the havoc of our days.

ALOES AND SEA

The aloes stand along the shore
and stitch the driftwood of the sea
to a nest of air and broken shells —
a honeycomb of air and bubbles.

The paddock shifts into the sea,
the lip of earth hangs on the air:
the aloe blades flash in the sun
but the stringy roots cry, "Where

is the stone to bind us fast,
to grip and hold us firm
against the wind, the tearing sea,
the night and subtle storm

that gnaws the earth along its nerve
and only leaves its caves of air?"
The aloes stand along the shore
and stitch the driftwood to the tides

and grope for the fallen binding stone
and cry, "Why is this storm, why harm?"
But sea and wind along the shore
seem to moan, "Reclaim, reclaim."

PENGUIN
near Fluted Cape

You strut above the littered shore
with scissors for a voice,
that cut against the stubborn wind
like ice against ice;
and nest within the north sunlight
and build within your season's tide,
and reconcile the sea and land —

you walk with fragile pride
between the edge of the jetsam sea
and the changing ledge of rock and tree
where you defy the storm and calm,
whose storm and calm move with each other
and knit like bones within your shape
the ice of the scoured south
and the north-black of the cape.