

Classic Poetry Series

Elizabeth Smart
- poems -

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Elizabeth Smart(27 December 1913 - 4 March 1986)

Elizabeth Smart was a Canadian poet and novelist. Her book, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, detailed her romance with the poet George Barker. She is the subject of the 1991 biography, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart a Life*, by Rosemary Sullivan, and a film, *Elizabeth Smart: On the Side of the Angels*, produced by Maya Gallus.

Early Years

Smart was born to a prominent family in Ottawa, Ontario; her father, Russell Smart, was a self-made lawyer, and the family had a summer house on Kingsmere Lake located next door to the future Prime Minister of Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie King. She began writing at an early age, publishing her first poem at the age of ten and compiling a collection of poetry at 15. She attended Hatfield Hall, a private school in Cobourg, Ontario, and at the age of 18 went abroad to study music at King's College London.

In 1937 she gained employment as the secretary to Margaret (Mrs. Alfred) Watt, head of the Associated Country Women of the World. Smart travelled extensively throughout the world accompanying Watt to various conferences. It was during this time that she happened across a book of poetry by George Barker, immediately falling in love not only with the poetry, but with the man himself.

After her travels with Mrs. Watt, Smart returned to Ottawa where she spent six months writing society notes for the women's page of *The Ottawa Journal*. At parties she would often ask about Barker, saying she wanted to meet and marry him. Soon she began a correspondence with the poet.

Relationship with George Barker

Eager to launch her writing career, Smart quit the *Journal* and left Ottawa for good. Traveling on her own, she visited New York, Mexico and California, joining a writers' colony at Big Sur. While there, she made contact with Barker through Lawrence Durrell, paying to fly Barker and his wife to the United States from Japan where he was teaching. Soon after meeting, they began a tumultuous affair which was to last for years.

In 1941, after becoming pregnant, Smart returned to Canada, settling in Pender Harbour, British Columbia to have the child she would name Georgina. Barker attempted to visit her in Canada, but Smart's family exerted influence on

government officials, and consequently he was turned back at the border, cited with "moral turpitude".

Smart soon returned to the United States and began work as a file clerk for the British embassy in Washington. Two years later, in 1943, during the height of the war, she sailed to the United Kingdom to join Barker. There she gave birth to their second child, Christopher Barker, and obtained employment at the British Ministry of Defence to support her children.

It was during this time that Smart produced what would become her best-known work, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. Just 2000 copies were published in 1945, and it did not achieve popularity until a good deal later. It is a fictional work, largely based on Smart's affair with Barker up until that point. "The power of emotion to transform one's perspective on the world," a recent *Open Letters Monthly* review of the novel writes, "is the theme of this wildly poetic novel. The inspiration for Smart's classic work of prose poetry is just as famous as the book itself.

Smart's socially conscious mother Louise ("Louie") was not pleased with the book. Again availing influence with government officials, she led a successful campaign to have its publication banned in Canada. Of those copies that made their way into the country from overseas, Louise Smart bought up as many as she could find and had them burned.

Barker visited Smart often in London where she worked. She became pregnant again, and was fired from the Ministry of Information. Their affair produced two more children (Sebastian, born 1945, and Rose Emma, born 1947). Through it all Barker, who was Catholic, said he would leave his wife for Smart, but this never happened (he was to have fifteen children by several different women). They lived a bohemian lifestyle and associated with many of the 'Soho' artists. Christopher Barker writing in the *Guardian* about this period: "On many occasions through the early Sixties, writers and painters such as David Gascoyne, Paddy Kavanagh, Roberts MacBryde and Colquhoun and Paddy Swift [Swift lived downstairs from Smart and his wife, Agnes, wrote cookbooks with Smart] would gather at Westbourne Terrace in Paddington, our family home at that time. They came for editorial discussions about their poetry magazine, *X*."

In addition to the unconventional nature of the relationship, the affair was fraught with turmoil. Barker was a heavy drinker and Smart took up the habit, which intensified when the two were together. The couple were involved in numerous fights; during one argument, Smart bit off part of Barker's upper lip. Nonetheless, as evidenced from writings in her journals, Smart's love for Barker

continued for the remainder of her life.

Single Mother and Writer

Raising four children on her own, Smart worked for thirteen years as an advertising copywriter. She then joined the staff of Queen magazine in 1963, later becoming an editor. She became at length the highest-paid copywriter in England. During this time her physical involvement with Barker waned; she lived a bohemian lifestyle in Soho and took several other lovers, some men and some women.

Meanwhile, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* had been circulating in London and New York, acquiring a cult following that led to its paperback reissue in 1966 and critical acclaim. In the same year, Smart retired from commercial writing and relocated to a cottage in north Suffolk named "The Dell".

It was at The Dell that she produced the bulk of her literary work, much of which has been published posthumously. Eager to make up for the time away from creative writing forced by the demands of raising her children, Smart wrote voluminously and on a number of subjects, poetry and prose, even her passionate love of gardening.

In 1977, following a 32-year absence from the book world, she published two new works, *The Assumption of the Rogues & Rascals* and a small collection of poetry, titled *A Bonus*. In the Meantime (1984), a collection of Smart's unpublished poetry and prose, and her two volumes of journals, *Necessary Secrets: The Journals of Elizabeth Smart* (1986).

Smart returned to Canada for a brief stay from 1982 to 1983, becoming writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta. Afterward she spent a year in Toronto on a Canada Council writer's grant before returning to England. In 1986 she died in London of a heart attack. She is buried in St George's churchyard, Saint Cross South Elmham, Suffolk.

On the Side of the Angels (1994), brought further, posthumous critical appreciation

Influence

Ian Brown used a passage from Elizabeth's poem *A Musical Note* to name his third solo album *The Music of the Spheres*.

The former singer of British band The Smiths, Morrissey has also talked of his love for Elizabeth Smart. References to 'By Grand Central Station' are littered throughout Smiths songs such as 'What She Said' 'Well I Wonder' and 'Shakespeare's Sister'.

A Bonus

That day i finished
A small piece
For an obscure magazine
I popped it in the box

And such a starry elation
Came over me
That I got whistled at in the street
For the first time in a long time.

I was dirty and roughly dressed
And had circles under my eyes
And far far from flirtation
But so full of completion
Of a deed duly done
An act of consummation
That the freedom and force it engendered
Shone and spun
Out of my old raincoat.

It must have looked like love
Or a fabulous free holiday
To the young men sauntering
Down Berwick Street.
I still think this is most mysterious
For while I was writing it
It was gritty it felt like self-abuse
Constipation, desperately unsocial.
But done done done
Everything in the world
Flowed back
Like a huge bonus.

Elizabeth Smart

Blake's Sunflower

1

Why did Blake say
'Sunflower weary of time'?
Every time I see them
they seem to say
Now! with a crash
of cymbals!
Very pleased
and positive
and absolutely delighting
in their own round brightness.

2

Sorry, Blake!
Now I see what you mean.
Storms and frost have battered
their bright delight
and though they are still upright
nothing could say dejection
more than their weary
disillusioned
hanging heads.

Elizabeth Smart

O Poor People

Let us invoke a healthy heart-breaking
Towards the horrible world:
Let us say O poor people
How can they help being so absurd,
Misguided, abused, misled?

With unsifted saving graces jostling about
On a mucky medley of needs,
Like love-lit shit,
Year after cyclic year
The unidentifiable flying god is missed.

Emotions sit in their heads disguised as judges,
Or are twisted to look like mathematical formulae,
And only a scarce god-given scientist notices
His trembling lip melting the heart of the rat.

Whoever gave us the idea somebody loved us?
Far in our wounded depths faint memories cry,
A vision flickers below subliminally
But immanence looms unbearably: TURN IT OFF! they hiss.

Elizabeth Smart