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On Ken Smith's Heart

In the late 1980s, Ken Smith survived a heart attack. In 'Then the heart' (*The Heart, The Border*, 1990), he navigates the uncertainty, anxiety, and fear of physical pain, treatment, recovery, and subsequent return to ordinary but profoundly altered life.ⁱ The cardiac event is not a short, sharp experience as 'attack' might suggest; rather, it is part of a narrative of illness that stretches across time, place, and the geographies of the self. Smith's vantage point at the writing of this poem takes in a genealogy of familial heart disease that invokes his difficult relationship with his father, now seen afresh through the lens of imitated pathology. Re-reading his own history, the poet sees a kind of destiny in his following in his father's footsteps that he finds frightening rather than consoling. In this reading I consider Smith's illness experience poem, and its rich and various deployments of metaphor in descriptions of emotion, pain, and the heart.

The poet is travelling and working, 'over the mountains from one sea / to the other', when he is struck by:

[...] sudden panic, in the chest's
left pocket a sharpness persisting into pain,
fear of more of it: of death's knife
and a surgeon's chainsaw to the breast,
and beyond the old fear it always was –
some moment I will die, and the universe
go on making light of itself.

The language we – as patients, writers, doctors, and caregivers – use to describe physical pain almost always takes the form of metaphors of weapons, injury, and damage.ⁱⁱ Smith participates in this cultural tradition – 'sharpness' is felt pain figured as injury – but plays with the metaphor of heartache as emotion to explore the entanglement of psychological and physiological experiences. The 'surgeon's chainsaw' is both itself and a metaphor: the poet's fear of disease and major surgery also imagines the symptoms of angina pectoris as an infliction by an external agent with a weapon. The image is extended:

This pain: a crowbar to the chest. Small men
in black suits at the meeting of my ribcage
are forcing a door, muttering in a language
without a word for *No*. Now I can say
how Tom Thumb felt in the giant's fist
and what the cut worm won't forgive,
what the vampire howls with the stake
to the far side of his screaming. [...]

The 'crowbar' metaphor is produced by an encounter between physical and emotional pain. The poet's vulnerability produces metaphors of injury in fairy tale and myth. Tom Thumb is squeezed, the worm is sliced through and the vampire is impaled: three different, concurrent forces convey the complexity of the poet's experience of pain. Elaine Scarry writes that

physical pain is ‘language-destroying’ (p. 19), and as the surreal personified attackers imply, Smith is pushed beyond articulacy into pre-language – as later, recovering from surgery, his selfhood is foetal, undetermined, un-made: ‘I have no beginning’; ‘When I sleep / it is far back in the cave of myself’. Pain here is unstoppable, irresistible and overwhelming:

to the far side of his screaming. This pain
begins at the horizon, it begins
promising only more of itself, then
down the distance’s swift oncoming
takes on the sudden likeness of wolves
in a slick dark river of fur pouring east
through the breastbone, left at the rib,
bunched down the shoulder, the arm, elbow,
wrist, knucklebones and out down the fingers
gnarled all the way, and beyond
more wolves coming. [...]

This pain is embodied, visceral and transgressive. It appears both that the body propels itself forward and that the ‘distance’s swift oncoming’ is the wolves approaching. In either case, this narrative – like the ‘sudden panic, in the chest’s / left pocket’ – is not isolated, but is embodied in the past and the future, in what was always there beyond the horizon even before we were able to see it. The body is a topography that the wolves navigate, ‘east’, ‘left at the rib’, as though they have seen the map and know the journey. They are a swarm rather than a group, liquid rather than flesh, and the ‘slick dark river of fur’ challenges the materiality of the poet’s own body by entangling wolfish fur with human blood and nerves. ‘Bunched’ and ‘gnarled’ ostensibly refer to the movement of the wolves, but the reader understands these words as visceral descriptions of a body wracked with pain, joints tensed and muscles in spasm. Writing after illness, Nietzsche deploys a related metaphor:

I have given a name to my pain and call it “a dog,” – it is just as faithful, just as importunate and shameless, just as entertaining, just as wise, as any other dog – and I can domineer over it, and vent my bad humour on it, as others do with their dogs, servants, and wives.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet while Nietzsche designates his pain as a domestic creature, divided from himself and under his power, Smith’s wild canines reveal the poet to be an embodied creature, subject to influence from elements, materials, and forces over which he has no control.

more wolves coming.
Then it stops
like a toothache lugged all weekend
at last to the dentist, folds to a bat
hanging upside down in the ribs’ raft,
a far off murmur of wolves, a snarling.

in poetry, the ‘heart’ has been so much subsumed by its referents that when writers want to address the organ (rather than a metaphor) they often become self-conscious in their use of the word ‘heart’. Smith exploits the awkwardness inherent in the disjunction between a physical construct and what it means (health or illness, life or death), and a metaphorical construction and what *it* means (love, emotion, pain), in the connection he draws between ‘love’ and scar tissue. From culture the poet has inherited and internalised the idea that love comes *from the heart*, and so the shock of the heart attack is profound for him not only because it forces on him a heightened awareness of his mortality, but also because it demands he rethink the metaphorical weight of the human heart that he has always carried, untroubled. His language mimics that of a spurned lover not to undermine the expression of loss that we call heartbreak, but as a potentially useful assertion of the connections between different experiences of suffering. In ‘Here’ (*Wild Root*, 1998), Smith describes his symptoms:

I point to where the pain is, the ache
where the blockage is. Here.
The doctor shakes his head at me. Yes
he says, I have that, we all have.

Yet in the next stanza the poet is watching ‘the grey map of my heart’ on a screen as the medical team insert a wire in order to perform a bypass. This is not the heartache that ‘we all have’, but something in addition, a physical pain that is compounded by a pre-emptive grief for the loss of his own life, which he feels profoundly and alone as he is wheeled along hospital corridors back to his ward: ‘and no one / can talk of it’. The poet grieves – for the body, mind, and way of life he used to have – and the ‘bruised, scarred, [...] dead’ parts of his heart are both literal and metaphorical. We might recall Reverend John Ames in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, who struggles with the knowledge that his coronary artery disease diagnosis is terminal: ‘No sleep this night. My heart is greatly disquieted. It is a strange thing to feel illness and grief in the same organ. There is no telling one from the other’.^{vi}

The final lines of ‘Then the heart’ focus self-consciously, again, on language, as Smith describes himself:

[...] sitting in his shed
all summer long, writing *Heart*
like the fennel root. Heart
like a great horseradish. Heart
like a loaf of hot bread new minted
from the oven, keep beating,
brave messenger, bearing news of yourself.

Smith plays with simile and visual metaphor as he grapples with the new place his heart occupies in his experience. Extending the metaphor of the geographical body, the root and the root vegetable planted in the earth of his flesh hold organic potential, while the bread is fresh and nourishing. These lines convey a different vision from the poet with the ‘bruised, scarred’

heart – now he seems able to temper fear with hope, but he does not feel to himself like the person he was previously. Before the heart attack, he ‘couldn’t hear / what his heart said’; now, he is highly conscious of it, an awareness that brings a new kind of love for his heart, albeit a love that is anxious with pre-emptive grief and fear of death. Heart in a pocket, heart as Tom Thumb, wolves, bat, toothache, pump, love, loss: heart metaphors are sequenced and played out until the final metaphor, heart as communicator, seems able – again, and for some time at least – to do the job for itself.

ⁱ Ken Smith, ‘Then the heart’, *Shed: Poems 1980-2001* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2002), pp. 151-54.

ⁱⁱ See Elaine Scarry’s seminal work, *The Body as Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

ⁱⁱⁱ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Thomas Common (New York: Dover, 2006), p. 137.

^{iv} Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 56.

^v David Biro, ‘Redefining pain’, *Palliative and Supportive Care*, 9 (2011), 107–10 (p. 109).

^{vi} Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago, 2004), p. 204.