

Stevie Smith — whose highly off-kilter and calmly vexed verse has often struck me as a series of frequently morbid snapshots of what might be called the outermost suburbs of the English psyche — was born in humdrum Kingston upon Hull, in Yorkshire's East Riding, in 1902. Her father, a failed shipping agent, ran away to sea when she was barely out of her christening gown, at which point her mother promptly upped sticks and moved the family (herself, little Stevie, and Stevie's older sister, Molly) to the cultural cold spot, then as now, otherwise known as Palmers Green, in North London. When Mrs Smith fell ill, 'Aunt Madge' (immortalised by Stevie as the 'Lion Aunt'), an improbable mix of High Tory harridan and devout proto-feminist of the Marie Stopes and Sylvia Pankhurst variety, moved in and stayed forever. Which being the case, Stevie grew up in a household of women where the idea that 'father knows best' had not the slightest traction.

She spent three years from the age of five struggling with tubercular peritonitis at a sanatorium in Broadstairs, which was where, she later said, she began to be preoccupied with death. Educated at Palmers Green High School and North London Collegiate School for Girls, she worked as private secretary to Sir Neville Pearson at the Newnes publishing company from 1923 until 1953, when she had a near-suicidal nervous breakdown and retired on a pension. She was celibate throughout her life but always, and quite justifiably, rejected the idea that she was lonely. Other writers, including George Orwell and Naomi Mitchison, enjoyed her company, and she enjoyed theirs. Her brilliance as a reader of her own work has been captured in numerous BBC recordings, and I can't help remembering that the first time I heard her on the radio, she sounded just as I thought she would — Received Pronunciation, aka the Queen's English, wickedly transformed by a no-nonsense, razor-sharp and systemically unapologetic knowingness.

In a *New Yorker* article published last year, Cynthia Zarin, who teaches at Yale, certainly had the measure of Stevie's quintessence — 'sugar laced with rat poison' — and described how she read the huge new edition of all of Stevie's poems 'with the hair rising on the back of my neck', and how startled she was by how very 'uncanny' the poems can be. 'It is this doggedness of the radical child throughout Smith's work,' she noted, 'that is at once invigorating and maddening. Reading this eight-hundred-page volume straight through is like being caught and held by the wrist by an imp or enchantress: Tinkerbell, on a lighthearted day; Ophelia, on a bleak one. One wants to get away but somehow can't.' The British critic Hermione Lee has commented on the fact that reviewers of Stevie's work consistently make comparisons to Christina Rossetti, William Blake, Samuel Beckett, and Sylvia Plath — but Cynthia Zarin contends that there are no real comparisons. 'Smith's verse,' she says, 'is pitched to a particular frequency.' Interestingly enough, Sylvia Plath wrote to Stevie Smith a year before she killed herself, declaring, 'I am a desperate Stevie Smith addict.' There are worse things to be.

STEVIE SMITH

1902 - 1971

THIS ENGLISHWOMAN

This Englishwoman is so refined
She has no bosom and no behind

MY SOUL

In the flame of the flickering fire
The sins of my soul are few
And the thoughts in my head are the thoughts of a bed
With a solitary view.
But the eye of eternal consciousness
Must blink as a bat blinks bright
Or ever the thoughts in my head be stilled
On the brink of eternal night.

Oh feed to the golden fish his egg
Where he floats in his captive bowl,
To the cat his kind from the womb born blind,
And to the Lord my soul.

ADVICE TO YOUNG CHILDREN

'Children who paddle where the ocean bed shelves steeply
Must take great care that they do not,
Paddle too deeply.'

Thus spake the awful aging couple
Whose heart the years had turned to rubble.

But the little children, to save any bother,
Let it in at one ear and out at the other.

THE FACE

There is a face I know too well,
A face I dread to see,
So vain it is, so eloquent
Of all futility.

It is a human face that hides
A monkey soul within,
That bangs about, that beats a gong,
That makes a horrid din.

Sometimes the monkey soul will sprawl
Athwart the human eyes,
And peering forth, will flesh its pads,
And utter social lies.

So wretched is this face, so vain,
So empty and forlorn,
You may well say that better far
This face had not been born.

LOVE ME!

Love me, Love me, I cried to the rocks and the trees,
And Love me, they cried again, but it was only to tease.
Once I cried Love me to the people, but they fled like a dream,
And when I cried Love me to my friend, she began to scream.
Oh why do they leave, the beautiful people, and only the rocks
remain,
To cry Love me, as I cry Love me, and Love me again.

On the rock a baked sea-serpent lies,
And his eyelids close tightly over his violent eyes,
And I fear that his eyes will open and confound me with a mirthless word,
That the rocks will harp on for ever, and my Love me never be heard.

DO TAKE MURIEL OUT

Do take Muriel out
She is looking so glum
Do take Muriel out
All her friends have gone.

And after too much pressure
Looking for them in the Palace
She goes home to too much leisure
And that is what her life is.

All her friends are gone
And she is alone
And she looks for them where they have never been
And her peace is flown.

Her friends went into the forest
And across the river
And the desert took their footprints
And they went with a believer.

Ah they are gone they were so beautiful
And she cannot come to them
And she kneels in her room at night
Crying, Amen,

Do take Muriel out
Although your name is Death
She will not complain
When you dance her over the blasted heath.

THE WANDERER

Twas the voice of the Wanderer, I heard her exclaim.
You have weaned me too soon, you must nurse me again,
She taps as she passes at each window pane,
Pray, does she not know that she taps in vain?

Her voice flies away on the midnight wind,
But would she be happier if she were within?
She is happier far where the night winds fall,
And there are no doors and no windows at all.

No man has seen her, this pitiful ghost,
And no woman either, but heard her at most,
Sighing and tapping, and sighing again,
You have weaned me too soon, you must nurse me again.

NOT WAVING BUT DROWNING

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

THE JUNGLE HUSBAND

Dearest Evelyn, I often think of you
Out with the guns in the jungle stew
Yesterday I hittapotamus
I put the measurements down for you but they got lost in the fuss
It's not a good thing to drink out here
You know, I've practically given it up dear.
Tomorrow I'm going alone a long way
Into the jungle. It is all gray
But green on top
Only sometimes when a tree has fallen
The sun comes down plop, it is quite appalling.
You never want to go in a jungle pool
In the hot sun, it would be the act of a fool
Because it's always full of anacondas, Evelyn, not looking ill-fed
I'll say. So no more now, from your loving husband, Wilfred.

AVONDALE

How sweet the birds of Avondale
Of Avondale, of Avondale,
How sweet the birds of Avondale
Do swoop and swing and call.

The children too of Avondale,
Of Avondale, of Avondale,
The boys and girls of Avondale,
Do swoop and swing and call,

And all the little cats and dogs,
Of Avondale, of Avondale,
On their own in Avondale,
Do swoop and swing and call.

And oh it is a pleasant sight
It is a very pleasant sight
To see the creatures so delight
To swoop and swing and call,
In Avondale, in Avondale,
To see them swoop and call.

THE DONKEY

It was such a pretty little donkey
It had such pretty ears
And it used to gallop round the field so briskly
Thought well down in years.

It was a retired donkey,
After a life-time of working
Between the shafts of regular employment
It was now free to go merrymaking.

Oh in its eyes was such a gleam
As is usually associated with youth
But it was not a youthful gleam really,
But full of mature truth.

And of the hilarity that goes with age,
As if to tell us sardonically
No hedged track lay before this donkey longer
But the sweet prairies of anarchy.

But the sweet prairies of anarchy
And the thought that keeps my heart up
That at last, in Death's odder anarchy,
Our patterns will be all broken up,
Though precious we are, momentarily, donkey,
I aspire to be broken up.

BOG-FACE

Dear little Bog-Face,
Why are you so cold?
And why do you lie with your eyes shut?—
You are not very old.

I am a Child of this World
And a Child of Grace,
And Mother, I shall be glad when it is over,
I am Bog-Face.

