

Another Attempt at Rescue

M. L. Smoker

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Reviewed by Bill Borneman

Another Attempt at Rescue. What can it mean? A title at once obvious; yet ambiguous. Who is to be rescued? By whom? How many attempts have there been? Why have earlier attempts failed? Is the situation dire? How much time do we have?

M. L. Smoker's first volume of poems is full of questions. Uncertainties abound. She evokes a doubt-drenched world. Simultaneously, it is a remarkably self-assured voice that speaks in these precisely crafted poems. Even as she voices her misgivings about where to begin and how to proceed, the reader is immediately drawn into the very heart of her concerns. Consider the title poem, which includes an exact date:

Another Attempt at Rescue*March 20, 2003*

The time is important here—not because this has been a long winter or because it is my first at home since childhood—but because there is so much else to be unsure of. We are on the brink of an invasion.

The situation may be unclear but Smoker is not about to hide behind obfuscation. It is her unstinting honesty that forces her to

pose so many questions. Like it or not, as citizens we are all forced into reflections on war, on a personal and political level. For her part, Smoker continues:

When I first began to write poems
I was laying claim to battle.
It started with a death that I tried to say
was unjust, not because of the actual
dying, but because of what was left.
What time of year was that?
I have still not yet learned to write of war.

Yes, how *does* one write of war? It is not a trivial question. Let's look at one example of considerable importance: President Bush sent the following letter to the two houses of the United States Congress on March 18, 2003:

Dear Mr. Speaker of the House (Dear Mr.
President Pro Tempore of the Senate):

Consistent with section 3(b) of the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002 (Public Law 107-243), and based on information available to me, including that in the enclosed document, I determine that:

(1) reliance by the United States on further diplomatic and other peaceful means alone will neither (A) adequately protect the national security

of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq nor (B) likely lead to enforcement of all relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq; and

(2) acting pursuant to the Constitution and Public Law 107-243 is consistent with the United States and other countries continuing to take the necessary actions against international terrorists and terrorist organizations, including those nations, organizations, or persons who planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001.

Sincerely,
George W. Bush

In other words, we have still not yet learned how to write of war. The language in this letter is opaque, evasive, perhaps deliberately misleading. An exact date is invoked, but does it really pertain to the situation at hand? It never seemed likely, and seems less so now. Meanwhile, how is it possible to calmly proceed with life on a daily basis—let alone take the time to sit down and write a poem—confronted with this crisis?

I have friends who speak out—as is necessary—
with subtle and unsubtle force.
But I am from *this* place and a great deal
has been going wrong for some time now.

The two young Indian boys who almost drowned
last night in the fast-rising creek near school
are casualties in any case.

There have been too many just like them
and I have no way to fix these things.

“This place,” is the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. Notice here the fine example of what Vine Deloria, Jr., called “Indian humor”? Essentially, Smoker is saying, Did you think things were going badly in Iraq? Try looking in on some of our Indian reservations. Today we can imagine an Indian talking on a cell phone with an Iraqi: “War going on three years now? That’s nothing. Call me when it’s going on 300 years.”

One man’s rescue mission is another’s imperialist invasion. In 1969 Deloria writes: “The current joke is that a survey was taken and only 15 percent of the Indians thought that the United States should get out of Vietnam. Eighty-five percent thought they should get out of America!”

From the Indian point of view, it is undeniable: “. . . a great deal/has been going wrong for some time now.” History is hard to fix. Language suffers physically by genocide and psychologically by assimilation and oblivion. In the poem, “Casualties,” Smoker writes,

*“My grandmother was told that the only way to survive was
to forget.*

Where were you?

Where were

you? Speaking of myself,

for my own neglect: too often

I was nowhere to be found.
 I will not lie.
 I heard the ruin in each Assiniboine voice.
 I ignored them
 all. On

 the vanishing, I have been
 mute. I have risked
 a great deal.
 Hold me accountable
 because I have not done my part
 to stay alive.

Again, the poet is mercilessly self-critical, which is another theme that threads through the book: personal accountability. Yes, these poems are *deeply* personal; however, they are not at all *self-involved*. Her self-examinations always have a social or familial orientation at their core. She concludes this poem with a stammering stanza that goes:

Sound is so frail a thing.

 () hold me responsible,
 in light of failure
 I have let go of one too many.

*I have never known where or how
 to begin.*

Nevertheless, another poem will be attempted. I suspect that

a poem is a makeshift construction in which to preserve fleeting moments of meaning. Poetry is a survival skill. Like a tent on a mountainside in a blizzard, it can save your life, although it is not a place to set up permanent residency. But this is what makes meaning in poetry so incisive, bristling with electric charge.

How else could something so inconsequential be so essential? Poetry is not an escape into fantasy but an engagement with reality. Thus can a mere handful of poems bound into a book actually contribute to “fixing” things that have gone deeply wrong.

An early volume of verse by Frank O’Hara has the beguiling title, *Meditations in an Emergency*. It’s a good description of the poems in *Another Attempt at Rescue*. There is always a sense of urgency, yet the tone is casual. Quickly and quietly we are ushered into a vividly sensual world. Three examples of first lines:

We are the kids outside the bingo hall.

But on a train between Browning and Izaak Walton Inn. . . .

We pull into dirt driveway in Lara’s blue Celica.

With simple, deft strokes Smoker draws the reader into the Montana landscape. Often that means the strange in-between world of “the rez.” The term “reservation” is a troubling signifier. What should be the ultimately comforting concept, “Home,” is always surrounded by parenthetical cupped hands shouting silently, *remember*. (Or is it, *forget?*) Remember what? One’s “place” in the world? History? Whose history and how far back? Who came here first? Who feels more at home on the range? One has to have

reservations about the whole situation. I think of James Welch's "Riding the Earthboy 40":

Earthboy: so simple his name
 should ring a bell for sinners.
 Beneath the clowny hat, his eyes
 so shot the children called him
 dirt, Earthboy farmed this land
 and farmed the sky with words.

The dirt is dead. Gone to seed
 his rows become marker to a grave
 vast as anything but dirt.
 Bones should never tell a story
 to a bad beginner. I ride
 romantic to those words,

those foolish claim that he
 was better than dirt, or rain
 that bleached his cabin
 white as bone. Scattered in the wind
 Earthboy calls me from my dream:
 Dirt is where the dreams must end.

"Dirt" appears four times in two brief stanzas. How could dirt die? What is more vast than dirt? None of us is any better than dirt? Dirt is the end of all dreams? Much as Smoker presents a vision of the world by means of questions, Welch posed questions about the world in cryptic affirmations. "Dirt" is kind of a foul word, while "earth" has dignity—"Earthboy" is downright lovely. However, "Riding the Earthboy 40" is only briefly a pastoral ode to farming the sky with words. Mostly it is a sober look at an existence that has trouble as a birthright, which is true throughout Welch's book of poems. It is also true of this collection by M. L. Smoker.

The truly poetic utterance provokes perception more than describes or recalls it. Smoker does not write to titillate the intellect, but to dissect it. Her questions are not rhetorical or metaphorical but direct interrogations of lived experience. To think of this book merely as a collection of first poems is not sufficient—terms such as "testament" or "manifesto" come to mind. *Another Attempt at Rescue* heralds the arrival of a new voice of clarity and sincerity that is sorely needed in the literature of our time. Of this there is no doubt.