

.. DOWN, by the *river* & (and)

The *SPIN* of a WHEEL ooo

By Ian C Smith

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

I went to Australia for a three-week period. My friend and I had begged, borrowed, and saved all that we made from work, family, and asking the homeless on the streets of rural Illinois diligently. We started in Melbourne and took a bus all the way up to Canberra, stopping intermittently, Rockhampton, Tangalooma, Brisbane, it was and is one of the best experiences of my life.

What immediately connected me to Ian C. Smith's "Down by the River & the Spin of a Wheel," was a singular word: "kookaburra." I thought two things. One, that I was completely stupid because I had felt like that bird was only in Australia/Pacifica and I was losing my mind in the sense that the way I read it first was a complete misappropriation of time and space. Two, that I had never heard another human have a rhythm as such since I had been to Australia.

I could tell you the plot, but I won't.

What I can tell you is that this story has a pacing unlike any other I've read in a long time. I can tell you that the style is dedicated, ground in the dryness of heat. Smith's story has a rhythm to writing that you would be real fucking hard pressed to find by anyone else. What he can encompass in a paragraph is potent, palpable.

He's like being trapped in an eddy, get ready to drown and, as you die, you have no idea why you're dying except for the fact that it is releasing as you let go of all the control of your life.

This is good work. I may use bland description, but good work is of my highest quality. Otherwise, I would call it poor.

This story is honest, which is more than most can ask for from a story. This story has style. I'll say it again, what separates Smith from the other Smiths is that he has inflection, tone, rhythm, and meter that I have never seen before. There is a special work of timbre that rolls

here, and, if you're not paying attention, you will get worked. The words don't wave, they crash, over and over and over...

Poor metaphor aside, this guy knows his business. He knows his voice.

We should all be so lucky to have worked that hard to write a piece such as this.

As someone who has stage managed, the details are in the devil.

Nice work. Nice work all around, Mr. Smith.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

Eleven years later we trod the same path, opened the familiar gate, but slower, as though worn down, our destination the weeping cypresses beyond the donkeys.

A cirrus sky puffs up the day, kookaburras cackle in high branches, a throbbing anticipation of hot motors bursting into life, of applause, hope.

Down, by the river

Following my feet through long soft grass to this riverside haven of quiet near where I lived with those loved, I see a pelican pair soar past the sun. The fallen tree, a pier to midstream these years since, sprouts new growth reflected in the depleted water's pebbled pools. The boy, strange, grown up, gone, I listen, preoccupied, for a ghost swimmer's splash. As market gardeners work lettuce rows beyond willowy fringes on the opposite bank, I count years again, time's tendrils, a kind of paralysis.

Backlit by morning light the boy, teenaged, already muscular, helped me slide a feed sack over our stilled bitch, raise, place her tenderly in the battered yard sale wheelbarrow I sat him inside in days when we zigzagged past Japanese lanterns pretending it was a racing car, rushing, rapt, through our narrow walkway with a heartbeat to spare, this dog at my heels, excited yips echoing to this day, heading towards our donkeys' paddock. Eleven years later we trod the same path, opened the familiar gate, but slower, as though worn down, our destination the weeping cypresses beyond the donkeys.

What would an alternative life have been? The same beauty? Inevitable loss? Time's shape distorting into a different steady spiral? Nesting swans fly south, above the waterlogged tree, towards the rivermouth. Watching the tiny wake of an unseen creature I feel if I look away it shall disappear like a limb torn from me, my mind going over conversations I might have had, ever reviewing the past. I can't remember doing much wrong. Yes, I can.

The spin of a wheel

The TV news, road mayhem again, my own darker days lapsed now I putter about ferrying children in an urban van. Siblings line up grin to grin on the mantelpiece like certificates of achievement. Your sister calls, an odd time for her. Worry gradually bullies your voice. Oh! the phone as doomsayer.

Three families a rural convoy towing trailers, motocross bikes, pull off-road in the bluish dawn. They travel to compete where daredevil sons' helmets lean into risky bends. A cirrus sky puffs up the day, kookaburras cackle in high branches, a throbbing anticipation of hot motors bursting into life, of applause, hope.

They group around thermoses, except for one boy slipped away, unmissed in a trailer, an unseen truck lumbering their way. This behemoth veers across the road, crunching their coffee break before wallowing on its side like a stricken beast, half of its many wheels spinning in air, vertical headlights now spotlighting peppercorn branches.

Awake all night on back roads dodging inspection, the interstate truckie drifted into dream. Road dust ghosts upwards in the ticking aftermath, unscathed truckie's good luck medallion trembling on his tattooed chest. Irreligious people praying, their frantic check finds no blood staining that road but they can't see the boy. Quiet, spoiled, temperamental, often clashing with his parents, he remains silent.

My sister-in-law finds him inside the trailer, safe from death's random swipe, breathes again, enfolds him with clichés, her heart this wild thing rattling her breast, her son, who ignored his name being called, demanding answers.

As you, who at this stage manage to hold our family together, relate this vivid tale, my TV redundant, an old fear prowls, a juggernaut threatening innocence, its searchlight crisscrossing those dear to me.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Since I was a boy, books, movies, documentaries, about artists' struggles have inspired me. They don't have to be writers, could be painters, choreographers, any artist striving for truth. Forget about facts. When young I believed this other world, this artistic community, couldn't possibly be mine, but I was wrong. I love my work being published alongside that of established writers, and, importantly, new writers, young and old. Among my favourite writers: Dos Passos, Kerouac, Carver, & Alice Munro. Go for it.*

AUTHOR BIO: Ian C Smith's work has been published in *Antipodes, BBC Radio 4 Sounds, The Dalhousie Review, Griffith Review, San Pedro River Review, Southword, The Stony Thursday Book, & Two Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.