



Mark Smith-Soto, photo by Austin Iglehart

***Any Second Now*, by Mark Smith-Soto**

(Charlotte, NC: [Main Street Rag Publishing Company](#), 2006)

Any Second Now is Mark Smith-Soto's second book of poems. He did not have to advance far from his first book, *Our Lives Are Rivers*, to secure a place in the front ranks of American poetry. With his new book, he has taken that decisive step.

The voice we might describe as "traditionally modern," with its sardonic, mordant humor in, for example, "Gone Shopping." There is humor throughout, though mingled with dark, moral abrasiveness. When I read "President in My Heart," "In the Paradise Café," "Virgin," and "Winners" I think of poets of no less stature than Baudelaire and Villon, E.A. Robinson, and Victor Hugo. Yet the lines are all Smith-Soto's own, with a diction both serious and bantering, urbane and colloquial.

In fact, for all its resonant echoes, all of *Any Second Now* stands as a prime example of originality that finds its place in an established tradition on the basis of its own excellence. There are few contemporary collections that can match it in this regard, in any regard. It is simply fine.

--Fred Chappell

Fred Chappell was North Carolina's poet laureate from 1997 through 2001. He was a professor of literature and creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro from 1964 to 2004. For his many works of fiction, poetry, and literary criticism he has received a long list of awards -- among them the Best Foreign Book Prize from the Academie Francaise, the Bollingen Prize, and the Aiken Taylor Prize. He lives in Greensboro with his wife, Susan.

Breathless

I'm trying to get something important down but
the television's on in the next room, a cowboy
complains and snarls at his friend, won't you
just shut that damn mouth of yours before I
shut it for you, no answer since my wife hits

the button to some beautiful green place where
big cats chase deer at seventy per hour and break
their necks though my wife hits the button even
as the cheetah leaps, one two three quick blips and
the famous reporter is dark and serious, why

did you do it, how could you do it, did it
ever occur to you how much pain you caused,
and she hits the button again and I hear her sigh,
now there's only silence coming from the next room,
she has left me out here without a word to say.

Command That These Stones Be Made Bread

We want miracles, those of us who cry
fat tears at the feet of our own death;
we want the fish and loaves to multiply,
and Lazarus to stun with his bad breath

a bonus morning or two. Otherwise,
we've nothing to hold on to, beyond gluttony
for dogwood blossoms, Bach, and pecan pie,
and the minimal, madcap mutiny

of sex -- Yes, sure, these too are miracles,
but what use are miracles that we can't
keep, and that won't keep us? What a circus
life veers into then, what a pile of cant!

We don't ask much, Lord -- a little mind over matter,
the skate of our heels on the astonished water.

Watched

Sometimes you feel the full moon like a clock
through the wall, you feel looked at by life,
no closet where you can hang in the dark
beltless and blind, you peel a grapefruit then,

your thumb tears into the navel and rips back
a flap of peel, bitterness in the air around you,
your nails catch on the rough skin, juice squirts
up your wrist, you split the fruit open and begin

to eat, you are there standing by the sink you
think you are not perceived, what a fool you
can be, your eyes sting, tough fibers are stuck
between your teeth, chew as you will you will

not be long for this world, I see you there
trying to swallow, don't you think I don't.

Chain of Being

In the bush begun to flower, hidden birds
stop singing at my step. Not having heard
their sound until it ended, I wonder then
how much small harm of this same sort I cause

without knowing it, simply by breathing and
by moving. I remember reading once how
Ghandi's mother swept ahead of herself with
a short broom to spare unseen souls, and could not

sleep for having crushed a worm under her sandal.
I think then of the herds of pachyderm that powerful
microscopes reveal grazing on the human skin,
and the massacre that a mere scratching is --

But death at the molecular level strains my thoughts
into a squint, and for relief I turn my eyes toward
the afternoon horizon, where one or two stars now
prick the air -- bare beauty, yes, but at this moment

the uncertain lights bring only implications of galactic
perishings so vast they make a quark of mine. I shudder
and look for gods then! but cannot find them, although
I feel I just heard them singing, one moment ago.

You and Other Seductions

These open invitations: an angled ear,
an empty chair, a long book to fall into,
a dangled sandal catching light, a dream
of windows, a velvet scone, your eyes

turned unseeing toward me, blank page
on a walnut table, the sound of dishes,
on the sidewalk an abandoned bicycle,
your body across the room, black

sweater, white neck, a cup of coffee,
awareness of the man staring at you,
the jazz violin begging, your watch,
your handbag, your embarrassment,

the exit, a long, long look, the last
of the whipped cream, the tilted moment.

War -- Charging In

Looking up from the dirt, smeared forearms
scraped to the elbow, face a surprised
moon at the field's edge, concatenation
of crows ready to go off, a red ant preening

at the base of the neck, grit in the hot wind
and insects' soft-thunder hung, imminence
of pain in the thigh bones, the beginning
of all effort almost ready to unleash, sweat

burning into narrowed eyes, attention
focusing the finger tips, cocking the ear
to catch the blade of an order screamed
between clenched teeth, triggering a cold

hard cramp in the warm air, an argument
to stanch all prayers before they can begin.

War -- Pulling Out

Not just anyone can grab the handle clean
and jerk the metal free from bone, slice
white gristle and skin and let the wound
expel its puff of heat into the night,

the body-smell to pervade all dreams.
So much more effortless and simple proved
the pointed plunge into the sternum,
bone that crumbled around the powerful tip

only to clamp it with hard lips, to squeeze
like stone. What now then? Let go and run away
under the winking moon, tear off our camouflage,
escape to town? Or, gagging, brace ourselves

against the sagging weight and take back hard
what's ours now--what we have deserved?

Winners

The morning after the election they avoided my eyes,
they knew I was one who had hocked his heart and couldn't
buy it back, they shook their heads at me but secretly
they were all tired of my aggressive shoulders and my political button
with the face like a sad gate on it, the face of a man
who would never be president, whose goodness
was generally hated. That very day, collapsed and bleak
as an empty purse, a famous poet called me on the phone
and told me in a golden voice, the voice of a man
about to make a marvelous admission, that I had won
twenty thousand dollars, twenty thousand dollars,
and I stuttered my thanks and said, "Wow,
I can't believe it," but really I had already believed it,
taken it fully and deeply to myself, it was
already old inside me and hardly mattered, and I wondered,
Wouldn't I be happier not to have won but to have the man
on my button crack into a smile, saying

*"We did it, man,
put it here! the dark moths will fly from the silks of peace,
caramel and licorice will soothe the long days of the poor,
and the persimmons of my promises will ripen on the tree!"*

Or was it all for the best he lost and I picked up the phone
and twenty thousand dollars rained on my election,

on the ten poems I sent the National Endowment for the Arts
sponsored by the government I have bitterly resented?
Oh forgive me, Ms. Fortune, that I thank you with my ingratitude,
forgive me and don't turn your face away toward other suitors,
but today I walk out with the terrible absence of my button,
not a dream flying its long blue tail behind me, and I look
into the faces that I meet and think, *Poor fools, you lost
everything and you don't know it, and I won, I won.*

Costa Rican-American Mark Smith-Soto is director of the Center for Creative Writing in the Arts at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where he edits International Poetry Review. A 2005 winner of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in creative writing, his poetry has appeared in Nimrod, Carolina Quarterly, The Sun, Poetry East, Quarterly West, Americas Review, Callaloo, Chattahoochee Review, Literary Review, Kenyon Review, and various other literary magazines. His poetry chapbook Green Mango Collage won the North Carolina Writers' Network Persephone competition in 2000. Another poetry collection, Shafts, won the North Carolina Writers' Network's 2001 Randall Jarrell-Harperprints poetry competition. His first full-length book of poetry, Our Lives Are Rivers (University Press of Florida, 2003), was runner-up for the Best N.C. Poetry Book of the Year award offered by the Poetry Council of North Carolina. Main Street Rag Press published his most recent collection, Any Second Now, in spring 2006. The Greensboro Playwrights Forum has produced several of his ten-minute and one-act plays. Theatre Orange, a program of the ArtsCenter, in Carrboro, North Carolina, produced Trio, his first play in verse, as one of ten winners of its 2003 "Ten by Ten in the Triangle" competition. Dramatic Publishing Co. published Trio in 2005.