

MICHAEL TOWNSEND SMITH —TALENT SETTLES IN SILVERTON

By Cynthia G. Evans, a.k.a. Ariel

While involved in Brush Creek Playhouse near Silverton, I had the pleasure of getting to know a local playwright, Michael Townsend Smith, and acting in one of his original plays, “Summer Lightning.” A shaper and veteran of Off-Off-Broadway theater in New York, Smith now resides in Silverton, writing and directing plays. While browsing through the Oregon Poetry Collection one Saturday last year, I was pleasantly surprised to come across a thick book of his poetry, *Every Day Arising* (Fast Books, 2010). Having read several of his scripts, I already knew him to be a fine, creative writer in different voices. Here was a book distilled to just his voice.

Although he describes himself as a playwright, director, and critic, “not a poet,” Smith has put out four engaging books of poetry: *American Baby* (1983), *A Sojourn in Paris* (1985), *Every Day Arising* (2010), and *Rhapsodic Photography: Selected Poems* (2013). He also co-edited, with Ruth Hudgens, a Silverton Poetry Festival anthology titled *Yes Poetry* (2007), which includes two of his own poems.

According to Smith, it was after he met Frank O’Hara and Diane di Prima that his poetry began “coming into the present.” He certainly started off in publishing with the most ambitious of his poems, “American Baby,” a 37- page chronicle of his journey as a new father in the mid-1970’s. It unfolds his and his wife’s excitement and trepidation at becoming parents:

Future so strong
in the present we still don’t know
flying straight across the continent making all the stops
like a faithful trolley car what
we are doing
I’m writing a story about us
making baby ...

A Sojourn in Paris features drastically shorter poems, bite-size. It, too, is a chronicle but of a brief time in Paris, divorced and working in a harpsichord shop. The poems read like song lyrics, as in this passage from “Easter Sunday”:

Everybody’s gone to the country
or the moon. It’s raining. Leaves,
anyway, adorn the tree in the court,
formerly bare, daffodils my room.

Every Day Arising is Smith’s collection of poems harvested from his blog. I spent December exploring this book, and I can say that, in accord with his practice as a director, he has not let himself fall back onto old habits. *Everyday Arising* is an eclectic mix of poetry and prose. Smith’s lines go from metrical lyrics to staccato beatnik poetry.

Last spring, attending an Oregon Poetry Association conference in Smith’s town of Silverton, I had the pleasure of “coming home” the first evening to find his latest book, *Rhapsodic Photography: Selected Poems*, waiting on my turned-out bed. I spent my late hours curled in a chair, homemade cookies in one hand and *Rhapsodic Photography* in the other. Its lines were melodious and harmonic, a slow train ride to various destinations. It was hard to leave it at the end of the weekend.

Every Day Arising and *Yes Poetry* can be found in the Oregon Poetry Collection at the State Library. You can further enjoy Smith’s poetry on his blog “MichaelWrites” at <http://michaeltownsendsmith.blogspot.com/>. There he tells us, “Since about 2000 I have also been working on a prose style that partakes of poetry, the language drastically pared down, each word activated, grammar thrown to the winds.”