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I picked these roses because they looked so disgusting, just waiting for the bees to come and fuck them.

Elizabeth Smart was a contradiction. She looked like my grandmother, a sweet motherly type, ready to take it easy in her old age. But her appearance belied her tough, indomitable spirit, her unconven-

tional lifestyle, her ability to write clear, precise, hardhitting poetry and prose.

Smart died in early March, at her son's home in London. Her obituaries decried an eccentric, whose first novel, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, is a cult classic. None mentioned her life was a constant struggle to survive, nor that her writing was a mirror for her experiences.

Elizabeth Smart was born in Ottawa, but spent most of her 72 years outside of Canada. In 1982, she spent a year at the Univer-

sity of Alberta as the writer-in-residence. I met her in the spring of 1983 when she came to do a reading at Memorial University. She attracted a small crowd of followers at the reading, all familiar with her work, but there were others, encountering her work for the first time, who saw Smart as a women's writer, her voice that of all women crying in their joy and in their pain.

"To be in a very unfeminine, very unloving state is the desperate need of anyone trying to write," Smart said in one of her poems. And she understood too well the problems of writing and trying to find time to write. Her first novel was published in 1945, but her second, *The Assumptions of Rogues & Rascals*, didn't appear until 30 years later. In between, Smart had four children, the result of a long-running, tempestuous affair with the British poet, George Barker.

"*Grand Central Station* took me three years to write," she said in an interview in a noisy cafeteria. "The other, I can safely say, took me 30 years to write, with a few interruptions."

The interruptions to which Smart referred were many and varied. She began her writing career by working for the *Ottawa Journal* in the 1930s at a salary of \$2.50 a week. Not satisfied with merely writing news nor with the pay, Smart left Ottawa for Mexico. She later moved to New York where she discovered George Barker. They became lovers, in spite of his wife, and carried on an affair for 20 years. But in 1945, Barker left Smart, who was pregnant. These years are chronicled in *By Grand Central Station*. When the book was published in a run of 2000 copies, Smart said her mother bought up all six copies available in an Ottawa bookstore and burned them. Her mother also used her own influence as the wife of a prominent lawyer to stop any further distribution in Canada.

Smart's writing is characterized by a dry, ascerbic wit, accompanied by a condensed and tightly structured style. "I'm tired of people telling me my novels have no plot, no background. They keep asking me for three volume genealogies," she said. "I don't want to write like that. I want to write a nugget of a thing."

Chapter nine of *Rogues and Rascals* was written with family tree hounds in mind, she said.

Chapter One: they were born.

Chapter Two: they were bewildered.

Chapter Three: they loved.

Chapter Four: they suffered.

Chapter Five: they were pacified.

Chapter Six: they died.

In some ways, the above could serve as a suitable epitaph for this remarkable poet. Her life was composed of bits and pieces, and her writing reflected this haphazard structure. "Critics always refer to my slim volumes and small output, but I don't want to write more for the sake of it. Perhaps if I had written *Grand Central Station* as a very long poem, people wouldn't say that."

Smart attributed her preciseness and neatness of style to her being a woman. "It's very hard to write the truth. It's very easy to get away with nothing," she said. Women have to be even more truthful than men, she believes. "Lies are boring, among other things."

In her work, Smart considered the themes of power and domination between men and women. Not only did she look at her subject in terms of personal relationships but also in terms of the way men and women write. Her "feminist" poem, as she described it, just popped out in one piece. "It must have been something I was brooding about, unbeknownst to me," she said of "The Muse — His and Hers."

When his Muse cried

He replied

Loud and Clear

Yes. Yes. I'm waiting here.

(...)

*Her Muse called
In her crowded ear.
She heard but had
her dirty house of clear.*

"Women have been subtly squashed. Men use putdowns like military manoeuvres," Smart said ruefully. "The more they say it, the more you believe it's true. George (her former lover) used to say his wives were monstrous ego maniacs. Well, that's not true, he is."

Smart was emphatic when she said "Women have to turn to men who do that and say 'No, you're awful!' or else they will be lost."

Smart's writings are woman-centred and she was quite proud of that fact. "It's got to be," she said. "Only women can write about how women feel."

"Some people have accused me of writing on trivial little subjects in my poems," she said. "Writing about twin sets, now that's really trivial." Smart worked as an advertising copy writer, creating the little bits of information which surrounded fashion layouts. She also wrote little booklets on how pantyhose were made.

Smart recalled those years with some regret. "It took up a horrific amount of my time. By the time the day is over, you can't really come home and write about your soul." Raising a family of four children on her own was not conducive to writing either. "I was really desperate about wanting to get back (to writing)," she said. "I felt it was my duty to write, but I couldn't leave my children."

But with her children grown, Smart accepted the position of writer in residence at Alberta, and published two books of poems, *The Bonus* and *Eleven poems*. These led to her "rediscovery" as a poet and prose writer of considerable talent, with Canadian roots no less.

"I think it is lovely to be rediscovered," she said with some glee. It's a sign she was pleased to note, of women's increasing prominence in the writing world and in the public recognition of women's culture. "Women have been sneered at a lot in writing about themselves," she said. "But people don't sneer at things now because they were written about women by women. I think there are marvelous things happening in women's culture. More things are being discovered."

Women must also write for other women, Smart said. Her exposure to Canadian women writers led her to see the relationships among all women writers. "When I read Margaret Laurence, I felt a sisterhood, a kinship with her," she explained. It was important for Smart to emphasize the universality of women writers and how they affect women individually and collectively.

Smart agreed with Virginia Woolf's comment that for a woman to write, she needed a room of her own. "You need place, even a book cupboard will do," Smart said with the familiarity of a mother who had no privacy. She would get up very early to read, then write in bed. "I can only write when I am alone. I've never really lived with anyone except the children (but you end up giving all your energy to them.)" Yet in spite of the frustrations Smart said she didn't regret taking the time off from writing for motherhood. In the last couple of years of her life, she took care of her daughter Rose's children after Rose died.

Smart was matter-of-fact about her life experiences. "Suffering helps people. We're so lazy, suffering is the only way we can learn. The whole secret of life is to keep yourself from being bored. You have to keep learning, laughing."

When Smart died, she left a collection of works from which literary critics will glean facts and perceptions. In reading Smart's poetry and prose, the reader gets a sense of an exciting life, masked by an ordinary existence. As she said in one of the poems: "Don't telephone anyone: write it all down. Maybe someone will understand you better after you're gone."

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Ideal applicants should have experience in advertising sales, the student press, and some bookkeeping background. However, nothing is etched in stone.

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