

## Poems by Claire Smith

### The Karamana River\*

We pass slowly downstream in a riverboat;  
We witness the countless outskirts of villages -  
Their transformations from noise filled days to silent nights -  
And the switch back from nights to days.

At dawn the riverbank reminds me of a patchwork;  
Bright-clothed women wash their faces, arms,  
And dip their heads in the shallows. Some plunge deep  
And splash; string-weeds wrap themselves round their legs.

Later others do laundry jobs in the morning's heat.  
They stoop over ochre grass with necks bent, and we see  
Their oiled-black hair reflected back in the ripples  
They create with each of their bird-like movements.

They duck the cloths as swans' heads bob underwater  
In search of algae to feed on: In and out; in and out,  
In, out. Finally, they raise the sheets from below the surface;  
Weigh, measure, and regard every piece.

The cotton material is clean, white, and transparent in the daylight;  
The bed linen beats in the breeze, swans' wings unfolded to full span.

\*The Karamana River runs through the South Indian City of Trivandrum. I visited it in 1997 while teaching in a school in Southern India.

## Remembering the Fifth of November

That night of every year;  
My fear marked by the fifth of November...

He'd make me hold it, with a gloveless hand,  
Stretched out straight in front

Of me.

A bare hand holding a miniature fire;  
My fingers trapped round this stick of lighted gunpowder...

I dreaded it dropping onto my new duffle coat,  
And me shooting up into the sky, in flames,  
Like the banging fireworks.

*Be careful.*  
*Grip it. Tight!*  
*There's a good girl.*

I created miniature circles with the sparkler.  
I squinted at its brightness.  
Round and round;  
But slow. Slow...

Star-flies skit into the darkness in all directions;  
Then they disappear to nothing.  
I'd wish I was a dancing leaf floating on a sparkling lake.

I scrunch up my eyes  
And I'm there looking over the shore;  
My tree overhangs its edge.  
I somersault from a branch  
And pirouette away on the current's ripples...

And then my sparkler would finally be extinguished;  
Its remains submerged,  
By my dad,  
In an orange bucket full of water.

## Memorial

A dark green ribbon of trees is pinned onto the far off hills.  
You sit next to me reading a book silently; your eyes flick,  
Flick back and forth across the lines of print.  
You position your fingers ready to unfold,  
To unpick the story further as you turn every page.

I look around the park; realise I'm listening  
To a youngster practise his guitar. He sings the lyrics:  
*Tell me that you've opened your eyes.*  
They spin round my head, stir the air, wrestle with the quiet.  
I know the melody, even the words, but can't recall

The name of the song; its title skips stitches beyond my reach;  
But this line is now intricately hand-sewn into my memory.  
I lie down and peer up at the tree above me – its leaves  
Spread into a tie-dye pattern – illuminated by the sun's last rays.  
Two wood pigeons tussle, rustle, and fight;

They argue with one another, for a perch on a branch,  
Above our heads; their angry cooing disturbs the kaleidoscope-  
Patchwork I'm creating with my eyes. The tree  
Seems as though it's hollow; but the echoes fade gradually  
And dusk begins to cover over the Yews and Cyprus's.

The scent of lavender still lingers  
Behind us as he helps me to stand up, leads me along the path,  
And we go through the gardens' wrought-iron gates.  
The name on the plaque beside them is engraved with the precision  
And care taken by a seamstress.

We step out onto a candle-lit pavement  
With our hands entwined; tacked back together.