

## REVIEW

*Primer*, Aaron Smith  
University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016

Aaron Smith's third collection, *Primer*, offers us "The Unknown Buried in the Known." We know poetry, and we know Smith. We come to both to brush up against a distilled experience outside our own, told in language beyond our own. *Primer* delivers both generously: Smith writes out of the black body, a gay man's body, a body reconciling loss, a body born out of a difficult family, the depressed body, the poet's body with such blue-tinged acuity that we grow into its limbs. Reading *Primer* is like confronting this body in the mirror, a body that we take on as our own—as if to both bear some of its burden and revel in some of its ecstasy. Smith is unapologetic in confronting us with the unknown, colored by the familiar—the poems in *Primer* pulse with pain and pleasure, love, sex and death, good health and depression and illness, kindness and cruelty. Smith strips away embellishment, as if applying paint thinner to a found piece of furniture or sanding worn wood floors, until what's laid bare sings: undecorated, raw, primed.

In "Sky," part three of "The Unknown Buried in the Known," he writes:

Maybe it's the sky that brings you  
back because it's the sky the night  
  
you were dying I most remember...  
  
... and the moon was nearly  
  
full and the stars were what you  
see in movies about space, a rash  
of light and magnificent, bigger  
than our ideas of wherever it is  
  
you were going or not going.

Smith breaks open pain to find beauty and undoes beauty to find pain. The night sky is colored by death, but it's much too large to be bleak:

... I know  
that light was from stars already dead,  
  
but why did it make me feel alive  
while you were dying?

*Primer* weaves precise language and these apparent paradoxes of feeling into an expert post-confessionalism. The poems within the collection reveal a deep and shining wound—a wound that the poet confesses openly again and again, often with a humor that cuts through the poem

with a sharp surprise. "David Beckham is *People* Magazine's Sexiest Man Alive" is a prism. It contains all of *Primer*'s anxiety around the body, but sends a biting wit through it, shaping it into something else, something lighter:

I'm bald and hungry with a pillow-  
y chest, my skin fits looser every day.  
(Or course he sleeps naked,  
or only in underwear.) David

thinks his fans will be surprised  
he's shy. I think my friends think  
I talk too much. The magazine's

on the floor by my toilet: his cheeky  
face a perfect way to start each day.  
At least I'm not losing my aim.

Smith's *Primer* is exhilarating for its continued surprises—the unknown buried in the known. It prepares us, like any good primer, for something: for life, for the inevitability of pain and for how to live compassionately and complexly through the wounds that shine through us. To the question, "Are you going to hurt yourself?" Smith offers, "Isn't that what it means to be alive?"