

J.D. Smith

Golden Years

A few more trips around the sun
 And done.
While working limbs and lucid brain
 Remain,
A chance to make experience
 Make sense,
Locate some kind of narrative
 Or sieve
Whatever shines from years of dross
 And loss:
Awards, degrees, connections made,
 Bills paid,
A guilty rendering of alms
 And psalms,
Feats few and notable as all
 Quite small
When set beside a younger man's
 Great plans.
For want of energy or nerve
 To swerve
Off of long years' inertial course,
 Then force
The self into a stiff new mold.
 But old,
One comes to circumscribe the scope
 Of hope
To looking for a trace of grace
 In place
And working, if no wondrous charm,
 No harm.

J.D. Smith

Memoir

The year without a summer jam
Unfolded mainly like the rest.
The days grew long, then shortened, fruit
Encumbered vine and prickly twig.
The gears of commerce meshed with force.
Talk cheap and dear suffused the air
And airwaves, but nowhere did there sound
A note that could take flight above
A death that muted every song.

Red-Letter Dates

A generation if not more would know
The way a question ended that began
Where were you when — when, that is, you learned
Of what would blot out Saint Cecilia's Day
From calendars of common recollection,
Make Dallas mean event as well as place
And reclaim grassy knolls from pastoral lore.

This blood-made bond did not encompass me,
Two months and four days old, and long from knowing
The television or my mother's sobs
As anything but noise. I'd make my own
Eventually in trying to extract
A joke from horror. Curling up a lip
Like some Chicago gangster I would snarl,
"I painted my first house that day." The next
Laugh that comes out of this will be the first.

My envy of what others shared was cured
By gathering a slender portion of it.
The news from which too many learned
About debris fields and O-rings reached me
On FM in a late-learned second language.
At 105.1, at not quite noon
A voice said something, something, *algo* about
El Challenger — but why? Space shuttles launched
The same as planes took off and buses left
Their stations without making any news.
Then came more words, among them *estalló*.
No way. That couldn't be. What did I miss?
I cringed to think my Spanish wasn't quite
As strong as I had let myself believe,
Except it was, and wishing otherwise
Would fail to make catastrophe not so.
Streets on the way to class were lined with snow
And silence as if everyone were shorn
Of their respective tongues and their discernment
By way of some inverted Pentecost.
On that day and that day alone, wit fell
Away from one professor whom I followed

J.D. Smith

Far more for his delivery and quips
Than learning the aridities of finance.
“We must begin,” he offered, so we did.
That night, no less than David Letterman —
Still antic and pre-heart attack — would fail
to lift the shadow from his monologue.
What bulwarks would we see demolished next?

One answer came in 1989.
By night a wall was sundered when
The will to keep it whole collapsed
As hammer paired with chisel, but not sickle
As pickaxe rang against cement with song
And popping corks, the top become dance floor
Or stage where anyone could play, or cross.
The chips, then falling sections would set off
A toppling of edifices, stone and state,
Until it took no leap of faith to think
The outlines were emerging of a world
Where history was ending, give or take the lag
Of news arriving in the provinces.
The minor-seeming brushfires of far places
Could go unquenched — contained when all else failed —
While markets were emerging by the month
And we were counting our peace dividend.
If, finally, there were no other shoe,
It couldn't drop.

 There was. It did, one Tuesday
September morning of a brilliant sky.
Impossibilities were once again
Announced as fact: breached towers burning down,
The Pentagon recast into a C
Of some new font spiked with depravity,
A fourth jet wrestled down into a field.
In Washington, word came of what would close
The capital in spasms of panicked traffic
And later seeded it with bollards — in time
Made useful by a pair of needless wars —
As work hours started, ending with the facts
Such as were known, surrounded by the fog
Of war, if war it was. Apocalypse! one said,

And who could prove her wrong? We only knew
Our daily offices of plain accounts
Had magnified into a crisis center.
Most called and typed out reassurances —
A luxury afforded to the living —
And some who lingered would attempt to plan
Their trips to donate blood (as we would learn,
A gift that wanted for recipients).
Yet, clear and urgent work was set before us
And, in the clarity of hours between
Dead panic and dead drunk, I gathered how
I stood before a dread significance
That placed the solemn charge of memory
On even its most distant witnesses.

These scattered dates still buoy above the rest,
More present than the middle of last week
And clearer than the morning's route to work.
Each unique this called for our full attention
And elevated us into, if not
The rumored Oversoul, a team
That gave us at least the opportunity
To show more than our daily tangency,
To show the greater selves so rarely seen
And, looking through those days' heroic screen,
Were left to gather what the others mean.