
Wilderness House Literary Review 1/4

a letter to Doug Holder from Jared Smith

A Poet in the 70's -in Greenwich Village- in love with life...

You sank me into memories. I don't know how one could write an essay of what life was like in The Village in the 70s... or what my life was like. I was riding a drunken comet...a young man who was making it into the big leagues almost and was able to hang out with and be tolerated by the big boys. And they were billboard big, and I worshipped them and wanted to be able to think like they did and speak as they did, but at the same time I had to figure out how to start to make a living and how to get as many girls as I could into bed and do as many other crazy things as I could.

My writing took off while I was still in graduate school at NYU...30 poems published in literary magazines, some good and some bad in my first year...as many as 120 publications in 12 months only four years later. William Packard invited me to join the screening committee of The New York Quarterly, and later the Board of Directors. Don Lev invited me to be a Guest Columnist on Home Planet News. Harry Smith pegged me as the next big thing, and Walter James Miller had me on his NPR author-interview show twice. I drank and cried with Gregory Corso, watched Allen Ginsberg wander around The Eighth Street Book Shop ("Where Wise Men Shop"), a hulking heavy man bent over with a canvas bag draped over his shoulder, in which he carried an American Express Card machine and copies of his books so people could buy them from him on credit, and I mused about how he looked like a cave man, but he really could howl. I thought nothing of taking multi-hour bus trips to hear poets like Robert Bly read when they blew into New Jersey or wherever else—he reading to my girl and me and three others with his bright serape flailing across his shoulders until he kissed my girl and she fainted dead away

Jared Smith

at his feet. We wrote back and forth for years afterwards about dragon smoke and other things. And Albert Goldbarth, who like me as years went by, turned into science and technology as well as poetry. Harry Smith, my first publisher, with Lloyd van Brunt and Sydney Bernard and Tom Tolnay, equaling the mighty Smith Press. Talking with Bill Packard in his apartment surrounded by enormous plastic garbage cans — industrial size — which filled his living room and served as waste paper baskets, thinking up personal notices to run in the end pages of NYQ — nasty digs at the lady poets he loved to publish and really didn't want to feel close to. Writing story-boards for almost-produced PBS films on the works of Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Charles Bukowski, and Packard's Ty Cobb Poem...and how I lost that contract because they decided they'd only do those if I could deliver Kurt Vonnegut as well, and I didn't know how to get to him. A woman from the suburbs who ate my soul because I couldn't burn it bright enough, and another who saved it by throwing water in my face until I choked. Coordinating readings at The Basement Coffee Shop and The Café Feenjon. Having Jerome Rothenberg attend three of my readings in a row and being too stunned to ever talk to him because his Banging On The Pumpkin had just come out, and I was still a kid and wouldn't know what to say to him. And Menke Katz — no man who knew Menke or his writing could ever forget the man, nor could any woman, for other reasons which the women could tell you of. His Burning Village remains an incredible epic, and all of his work haunts me. The names come back in different contexts too...Don Lev was my best friend's roommate, and a good friend of mine as well. I remember him starting up with Enid Dame when they first met each other. Galway Kinnell...well, we're going to 1963 for this...but him reading from What A Kingdom It Was when that first came out, long before Body Rags and The Book of Nightmares. He had always wanted to spend time on Cape Cod when he was younger, and couldn't afford to...so one winter when the vacation homes were all boarded up, he dug up through the floor of one. He was a fighter then too: he marched for civil rights in the south and had to be busted out

of jail by calling the Dean's office at NYU's School of Continuing Education. He never told me this, but it was true. It was just a time to live. I resided for a year at the top of Judson Church, in the room Edwin Arlington Robinson lived in, and above a myriad of tunnels that connected the New York underground and its radicals so that they could slip from building to building without coming up. And I lived at the corner of West 12th Street and West 4th—where parallel lines come together in infinity. An essay could not be written of infinity...of the open doorways between apartments where film-makers from Paris and poets from Canada and artists from wherever came through and stayed a week and left and were replaced by others without the apartments ever changing hands...a building that had first opened in the 1800s as a hotel for whaling men in for a few days from sea. Never enough to eat, but never hungry because you could always find someone with something and it was an endless circle of energy.

And then I had to leave for a while, and was relocated to the Midwest where I kept writing, but more and more had to devote my creative hours to technology research and business education while raising a family. Would you believe, I—with only my two degrees in literature--ended up assisting in the development of international energy policy, consulted with most of the Fortune 500 and with McGraw-Hill and The New York Merc and several universities, worked with various government agencies, finally advising several White House Commissions on security and emergency response under Clinton, and then landing a major Defense Department research contract and working on that with a team of scientists, before serving as a Special Appointee to Argonne National Laboratory and assisting in various critical infrastructure studies relating to energy and telecommunications. Literature must be a way of thinking in unique ways about a lot of things that are worth a lot of money to other people, I guess. Too bad more people don't read.

Broke free again in 2000 at the age of 49, and I've been writing fulltime ever since. But you can't put all that into an essay, and it doesn't scan, and people don't see how the one set of life experiences fit with the other anyway. I think that too much of what is published today in literary magazines is merely a matter of lay-out and putting down what sells. Poetry is living. You know that, but I don't know how many others really understand. It doesn't really matter. You do what you can with the words when they come while you're riding the cattle car. They never last very long, but sometimes I think they'll help me and a few friends get through life in better shape than we might otherwise.