

THE HORSES OF XIAN

DAVE SMITH

Row upon row of carved stallions time
and earth-weight endow with grace
that pulls still the armies of the Emperor.
Perfect, too, padded vest, lance, brass
wheels no sun can outroll. Warriors
mounted to ride beyond anything alive.

But the fixed step of such battalions—
farriers have told the makers this—
can fade into shriek, a thigh's bone-snap,
one elegant hoof, and the maker drifts
from his poem to pray—no rip
of harness tumbles his finest squadrons

who can go like wind up cliff's breast
or gleam little spruce meadows gold
if fear strikes the gods to hurl them.
But if foreheads seem to tremble
as even great horses do, they dream
they are already charging. Art insists

none think to flee when shapes shift.
The visage of the truest blinks

only once, for these it will be never.
All hooked—fist, saddle, forelock
grip upon blade upon bone—to deliver
what matters—duty’s alignments

of flesh, brutes, boys in cocked-up hats.
How could they fail? sculptors boast.
In battle, spit’s drip and blood-bubble
perfectly measures a man, the best
horse for field-clamor, the struggle
of hearts buried. See, each pulls for that.

About the Author

Dave Smith’s 16th book of poems, *Looking Up: Poems 2010-2022*, will be published in December 2022 by Louisiana State University Press, where it has been awarded the Les Philabaum Poetry Prize. Smith retired from teaching at Johns Hopkins University in 2013. He had previously held the position of Boyd Professor of English and co-editor of *The-Southern Review* at Louisiana State University. Smith has been awarded grants from the National Endowment of the Arts, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Lyndhurst Foundation, and the Rockefeller/Bellagio Foundation. He lives with his wife of 57 years in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).