

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Michael Simms: Two Poems

Michael Simms · Wednesday, February 3rd, 2021

### Tree of Life

When the young man wearing a yarmulke  
Asks *Excuse me sir are you Jewish?*  
I want to say *Yes*  
I've studied history and know  
Something about suffering  
But that's not what he means.  
He's trying to find ten men  
For a minyan  
At Rodef Shalom down the street  
And when the young man carrying a bible  
Asks *Have you heard the Good News?*  
I want to say *Yes!*  
*The cherry trees are blossoming!*  
And when he asks *Have you been saved?*  
I want to say *Yes!*  
*I've been saved by poetry*  
*From a childhood of abuse*  
*And humiliation —*  
*That's a kind of miracle*  
*Isn't it?*  
But I know  
He wants to know  
Whether I've accepted Jesus  
Into my heart and there's the rub  
Because my heart is so small  
And Jesus is so big  
When I walk into a cathedral  
My heart sings, when I walk  
Into a forest the trees sing  
And when I walk down the street  
The legless man on the sidewalk  
Puts his whole heart into the ukulele  
Oh Susanna we are saved

It is springtime in Pittsburgh  
 And in America  
 My friend Rashid is an atheist  
 Because his mother was killed by a bomb.  
 His father died unhappy and his sister  
 Has moved to Australia. Rashid blames  
 All his tragedies on religion  
 And he may be right.  
 We all have our tragedies  
 And maybe God is to blame.  
 What do I know?  
 Well, I know this much:  
 Anyone who has grown a garden, raised a child  
 Or looked at the sky far from a city  
 Knows the truth. So, yes, I'm a believer  
 In the Big Dark, the Ur-unknown,  
 The sense that my little mind  
 Is part of the Big Mind  
 I'll never know  
 But I have to say  
 God, like a lazy cop,  
 Never seems to be around  
 When you need Him  
 Somewhere a soldier is beating a boy  
 For throwing stones. Somewhere  
 A priest is raping a child.  
 Somewhere a girl in a marketplace  
 Has a bomb strapped to her chest.  
 My friend and her mother  
 Were in the Tree of Life synagogue  
 When a man who hated immigrants  
 Pushed through the door of their faith  
 With an automatic rifle.  
 You know the rest.

—  
*For Arlene Weiner and Philip Terman*

*Note: On October 27, 2018, the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh was attacked during Shabbat morning services. The shooter killed eleven people and wounded six. It was the deadliest attack ever on the Jewish community in the United States.*

\*

## Hands

Every man who works with his hands  
 Has seen that look. Perhaps we showed up  
 To patch the roof, service the furnace,  
 Or unclog the sewer, and the pasty

Bank manager expounds his idiotic theory  
Of what should be done. His wife  
With her \$200 haircut points her  
Manicured finger at the wet place  
On the ceiling. We do the work  
And stand there, not knowing what to do  
With our hands as she makes out the check  
Complaining of the cost. As we explain  
What was involved, she looks at us  
As if we were just released from prison,  
Correct in her questions, rude  
In her attitude. Her husband brags  
How he could've done the work  
But doesn't have time these days  
busy with clients, blah blah blah.  
They despise us because they depend on us.  
How long will they survive in the coming collapse  
Of their roofs, their pink bathrooms  
Filling with shit, their Wedgewood china  
Traded for scraps of food.  
After they've burned the last stick  
Of furniture in the fireplace  
They'll flee their useless homes,  
Beg to join us beside the fire,  
Greedily devour our rabbit meat,  
The bowl of weeds our wives gathered,  
Admire our hairy large-knuckled hands,  
And tremble as we howl with the dogs at the moon.

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