
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.

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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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