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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