

Lesser Voices

Sherwin W. Howard

Sun-circled history
Paints famous fools
But leaves plain brown men
Unremarked

And yet
With passing years
Who is to say which dust
Is valued more
In garden of the gods

Jonahs

Who bent to drink

Ten thousand proven men and Gideon
Camped close by Harod's well
To melt in ceaseless Midian sun

Then came the tremulous command
And those of us who drank like honest men
Confiding face to cooling stream
Were sent as frightened children
To our tents
While jittery zealots
Distrusting even heaven
Were honored by the fray

Fanatics breed in desert dust
And shadow every wind that blows

Discount what histories say —
Luck hires poets to sing sweet songs
Where only bitterness was sure

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Your prophet Gideon
Spoke by chance
Or even destiny
But not god's voice

What kind of oracle
Would not forgive
At crumbled tower of Penuel
And slew unarmed bravery?

Your Gideon
Guided by whom
Made images of gold
That led all Israel
Whoringly astray

Enough of fevered dust
I follow less inspired clay

Guhrish

Shield bearer for Goliath

I say he was a damn-ed boy
And nothing more
Chin naked, dumb brave
Ego and complexion burst
In grand embarrassment

Spurning humble gods
This David was a hollow dream
Who'd never seen bright
Hawk-scraped clouds
Sure victory's omen

My master scorned
His clutch of stones
As woman's gleaning
But compassion was too kind
To slaughter bending babe
Beside the drying brook —
Wisdom may kill ants before they sting
But honor holds to rules of war —
And so we let his faltering steps
Close to their certain fate

I've seen how heroes die
Surround with battle flame
Where pikes roast genitals
To steamy succulence of life
But this was mockery
Drummed dead by common stone
Tinkling down war-tempered brass

What honor lies in pebble?
What monument in peasant sling?
He was a damn-ed boy
And misery will track
His naive generation

Musca

The third thief at Golgotha

I did what common man must do
When hammered clouds hide sun
And royal guilt accuses innocence

Of course
I'd heard the whispered talk —
He may have been Elias
God-honored even now
But who is thief to say
Or what to do

The other two were friends
Straightforward simple thieves
Embarrassed most at being caught
Before they'd traded spoil
For skins of grape and food
To feed gaunt families
But
All profession holds some risk

I follow Roman soldiers
Tormentors of our carelessness
To watch fat purses drink sweet wine
Until they need sure fingers (mine)
To lighten them, and I oblige

What soul does not seek paradise
Both here and hereafter?

Rachel

Witness to Herod's massacre of children

It was not just
That sister had all joy —
Face fair
Husband most civilized
And four full sons
Good following lambs
That I might tend but never own

Then came mad Herod's fantasy
His holocaust screamed down dark streets
Large knocking at small doors

But we were safe
It was well known
No prince was born
Beneath bright star
Not in our small home
Just baby girl
A failed mother's hope

So
When two soldiers forced their way
I laughed their search of raftered bed
Until a final blindness
Swept her from arms to floor
Where dream spilled out
Against cold stone
To breathe one final cry
Then silence absolute

As God lives
I did not glance
At sister's son asleep
In cabinet-hidden innocence

But somehow soldiers made discovery
And bid him join their master's grisly feast

In Ramah tears may never cease
But prayers for justice stopped
Cold afternoons ago