

Michael

the

Paphlagonian (Paphlagonian) (Paphlagonian)

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Michael the what??????

By

Jack

Harve Y

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... Far more than beauty, 'Betrayal' is in the eye of the beholder. Jack Harvey tenderly exposes this truth. Seeds swell, buds blossom, petals fall as sure as temptation engenders remorse, "...home is never far away / and there, betrayed, / she waits." Thank goodness for 'Spring,' "...in dens and burrows / the work begins...Sunup comes early, / the sun swoon late...in this happy fierce world." Jack masterfully captures both Nature's innocent beauty and harsh indifference. Now, for those of you who are longing for those bygone Byzantine days, we bring you 'Michael the Paphlagonian.' Not to worry there's no test afterward, "...the groping fingers / find the reins."*

Michael the Paphlagonian

Michael's fingers
were big as his arms,
riding in from
a good war;
sick as a dog,
he won acclaim.

A long disease does more
to our souls
than our bodies;
the fretful blood
and flesh accept.

God called,
Michael answered
at the last;
the crown of gold
exchanged for
the white robes
of the anointed,
the helmet of salvation.

At the sacred font,
omphalos of
God's mother,
Michael stands;
dipped in the
watery hole
Michael emerges,
waiting on death
like a good servant.
The mystic waters
close again,
unbroken
as Christ's belly.

Take, O take
these bleeding guts
away, whispers Michael
to his servants.
Tottering off,
he remembers Zoe
betrayed in her palace,
a moment's pleasure repaid.

He has gone to
his reward,
they say,
looking skyward.
In a golden halo
he smiles from
his beautiful picture;
art for life.

Psellus told too much
and not enough about
those troubled times;

again and again
never to touch
the groping fingers
find the reins.

Betrayal

Touch holy balm
to your hands, your lips,
a pilgrim on the road;
climb a crooked hill,
see a small town
far away, a fair city
gleaming close by;
a stranger coming
to foreign lands.

My love at home,
waiting for me,
faithful and steady
as the clock
on the bedside table.

So I came.
Courting rare foreign beauties
I thought of her,
under flowering palm trees
talking with ambassadors,
bright-clothed as butterflies,
I thought of her,
deep in the palace
in a great red bed
I thought of her
and still betrayed her.

Was I wrong to stray?
Did my breach of her trust
cause the world to stop?
Did my guardian angels
look on aghast?

I felt remorse,
but too weak in spirit
and too quickly forgot.

That's the trouble

with time, in its passage
turning out the lights
for the unwary
and playing its monotonous
soothing seductive tune.

Given the opportunity
too easily enchanted
we find our way
in the glamorous fragrant dark,
fitting ourselves
to the sweaty handling of another
telling ourselves
who can see us?
Who will ever know?

And forget too soon,
too easily, that
in the leaving
what's been done
cannot be undone.

Coming out of our
bower of bliss
in the light of day,
home is never far away
and there, betrayed,
she waits.

Spring

When spring is here, plump
bountiful spring around us,
birds, experienced in song
tune up and begin to sing;
winter finally says goodbye
and wings off to the north.

Flights of birds, like to like,
everywhere in the sky
and down below
on the fertile earth
in dens and burrows
the work begins,
the joy and sorrow
of growing life, delivering food,
prodding the greedy brood to excess,
culling out the fallen.

The sun comes shining long days
on the mountains and valleys,
on the lakes and streams;
upriver, the glittering fish
one more time
fluttering their way
to the beginning water.

Beasts that hunt enjoy
the warmth of the chase
and the taste of blood,
bold and fearless
bears and wildcats stalk their prey
in weather mild as mothers' milk.
Hampering the hunt,
occasionally a quick storm,
one black petal of cloud,
one peal of perfect thunder
to warn the unwary
or wake the careless.

Spring comes and things
flower and flow in the moment,
live or die in the relentless press;
spring forward with a light step
full of hope and heedless of peril
under a seemingly endless blue sky.

Sunup comes early,
the sun swoon late,
plenty of light
in this happy fierce world
busy with new life
and sudden death;
all eat and strive
and some fall
by the wayside,
so ordained
by indifferent nature;
no matter, the sacred rounding
of the marks and metes
goes on, shuttling to-and-fro,
weaving a green robe
tacked down
with flowers and blood.

All this fertility and turmoil
what's the sense of it?
Tennyson's "nature red
in tooth and claw"
furnishes cold comfort
to those already fated
to the ultimate cold.

Paradise is only found in books
or dreams of poets and philosophers.
The world is hard, ruthless
and every season fails us
in the same way,
reminds us that this panoply,
this march of recycled events
making the seasons' rounds,
is no pattern, no template
abiding our need
for a just and beneficent universe.

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THE POET SPEAKS: *I would say Ezra Pound, Dante and Horace were major influences on my poetry, but there were many others, developed over a lifetime of reading poetry in different languages.*

What inspired these three poems? Other than Michael the Paphlagonian I am not entirely sure. I think what poets write does not come entirely from conscious creation, but involves the muse itself in some form, coming in from outside. I believe the creative process takes place, at least in part, at some lower level of the conscious or comes from outside- maybe there is really some sort of Jungian kollektives Unbewusstes.

On a historical level, Michael the Paphlagonian was inspired by various readings over the years in Psellus' Chronographia, Ostrogorsky's dated but still useful History of the Byzantine State, Threadgold's more up to date A History of the Byzantine State and Society and John Skylitzes A Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057. Michael the Paphlagonian came to power as emperor "up the hawse pipe," to use a nautical term, actually up the empress Zoe's hawse pipe. After becoming emperor, he confined Zoe to a kind of purdah. Michael was sickly and developed dropsy sometime before his campaign against the Bulgarians, hence the reference in my poem (based on Psellus) to his swollen fingers- "Michael's fingers were big as his arms..."

Betrayal was based on a reworked, inflated and more or less misrepresented incident from my own life, as well as some half-remembered passage from Walter Pater.

Spring is the result of being well into my ninth decade and musing on the fact that the "light-going seasons" really bring nothing to help us see any change in our human condition, symbolic or otherwise, other than the downward slope to death. The poem primarily came out of a rereading of Tennyson's Tithonus and Beddoes' Death's Jest Book.

Why does poetry matter and why do I read and write poetry? I persist in writing poetry because writing poetry gives me pleasure. And perhaps for some of the reasons Orwell sets forth in Why I Write. I think poetry matters in this age of iron where language and especially the written word are degenerating at a rapid pace. Poetry makes mythology and mythology is the third eye for all of us, opening our minds to possibilities beyond the daily bread of our lives. Still, poetry is a tough sell these days and really any days and even tell-all prose books by prominent windbags and assorted Promitussis are not selling like they used to. People do not read much any more and the book business has fallen on hard times.

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world?" Or rephrasing Morris, "Idle singers of empty days?" Nor one nor the other. Freud said that "artists, like neurotics, flee a reality that is hardly satisfactory to them and take refuge in a fantasy world, but unlike the mentally ill, are able to find their way back." Maybe artists are all lunatics, despite what Freud said. According to Horace, Democritus would only admit crazy poets to Helicon- excludit sanos Helicone poetas Democritus. Assuming artists are not lunatics, what they find when they make their way back

from their fantasy world is another matter entirely. An unsatisfactory reality composed of one more species of lunatic asylum? Maybe better to seek an enchanted kingdom to show to others- a kingdom just as real as it has to be. Certainly better than the daily insanities and ruin bleeding .

AUTHOR BIO:

Jack D. Harvey's poetry has appeared in Scrivener, The Comstock Review, Valparaiso Poetry Review, Fleas On The Dog, Typishly Literary Magazine, The Antioch Review and elsewhere.

The author has been a Pushcart nominee and over the years has been published in a few anthologies.

The author, now in his ninth decade, has been writing poetry since he was sixteen and lives in a small town near Albany, New York. He is retired from doing whatever it was he was doing before he retired.

