

The Doctrine of Water

A blackened penny the Baptist looked,
Metal of Israel nicked and bent in hard dealing.
But he was miraculously struck, uncommon coin
Generated by four old naked legs
Dutiful in a barren marriage bed.

Begotten of age and dryness
John grew to be a granular man,
A lover of deserts and crackling locust meat;
Hard white stars and blue, blue nights;
Fever, thorns, potsherds, and prophecy.

In those burning pulsing spaces
Where horizons jump and twitch like animal skins
And carrion birds swirl in chalky skies
Dreaming of viscera, torn fur, blood bright on gravel —
There Yahweh taught him the doctrine of water.

Schooled him to preach to red rock and devil winds,
Goaded him to shout until his swollen tongue,
Fleshy cracked clapper, could bell no more
And only his hot eyes continued to expound
To sharp-eared fox and scorpion charmed in its armour,
The doctrine of water.

Even in the dry months of his apprenticeship
The curious scholars of puzzling Jerusalem
Pursued him over scree and crumbling shale
Calling: *Are you the Messiah?*
And his heart thundered, thundered.

Then on a windy night he dreamed the dove.
The sky was cleft and the bird descended
To the river, to the brown water.
He felt its bright exuberant wings
Stir the air in trembling passage,
A fleet shadow briefly dark upon his face.
But see! It passes to cousin Yeshua!
And hovering, blesses his kinsman with its motions.

Then full of grief the Baptist woke to weep
And splashed Judea's soil with mere prophet's tears,
The only silver coins he ever dropped
In pleading beggar-dust.
And in that charitable watering of his thirsty host,
Proved himself ready for the river,
A worthy exponent of the doctrine of water.

Guy Vanderhaeghe