

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

8 *Ballad of the Trial of Sodom*

God came to Abram,  
Abram the man  
Who knew no glory  
Could resist God's ban,  
And God said: '*Abram,* 5  
*I come to destroy*  
*Sodom, Sodom,*  
*Sodom, Sodom,*  
*That golden city*  
*Of sin and joy.'* 10

Thunder. Thunder. Thunder. Thunder.  
Death is terrible, a thing of wonder.  
First is a lethargy that no man likes,  
Then comes the moment when the lightning strikes.

Then Abram, trying 15  
To save that place,  
Thinking of the dying,  
Fell upon his face.  
'Lord, if there were fifty  
Righteous men 20  
In Sodom, Sodom,  
Sodom, Sodom,  
Men who were steadfast,  
Would you destroy it then?'

Heaven knows what payment 25  
An advocate should ask,  
But old man Abram  
Had the hardest task.

He looked at Sodom  
And he heard God's voice: 30  
*'Sodom, Sodom,  
Sodom, Sodom;  
Hide not the city  
That my hand destroys.'*

And Abram was trying 35  
To save that place.  
He lay for a long time  
And could not lift his face.  
*'White though the lightning  
Where the thunder rolls 40  
Towards Sodom, Sodom,  
Sodom, Sodom,  
I shall not destroy it  
If there are fifty souls.'*

And Abram pondered. 45  
He could not make amends.  
It lightened and thundered.  
He counted up his friends.  
*'Lord God, have patience.  
May flesh be left alive 50  
In Sodom, Sodom,  
Sodom, Sodom,  
That doomed city,  
If the fifty lack five?'*

The Lord God darkened 55  
Like a fiery cloud.  
Abram waited  
As he lay there bowed;  
He saw Hell's demons  
In a midnight dive 60  
In Sodom, Sodom,  
Sodom, Sodom.

*'I shall not destroy it  
For the forty-and-five.'*

‘Lord God, have patience. 65  
Destruction is just;  
To hide the accursed  
In the darkest dust.  
But should there be forty  
In the temple found 70  
Of Sodom, Sodom,  
Sodom, Sodom,  
Then would you brand it,  
Raze it to the ground?’

Abram breathed. 75  
A long breath he took.  
He thought of the temple,  
And the temple shook.  
Monsters of sacrilege  
Sprawled where it stood 80  
In Sodom, Sodom,  
Sodom, Sodom.  
*'I would not brand it  
For the forty good.'*

And Abram knew, 85  
Abram knew,  
This was the hardest  
Peace for which to sue.  
‘Lord God, forgive me  
That I should speak again 90  
Of Sodom, Sodom,  
Sodom, Sodom.  
Would you spare the city  
For thirty good men?’

Thunder. Thunder. Thunder. Thunder. 95

Death is terrible, a thing of wonder.  
First is a lethargy that no man likes,  
Then comes the moment when the lightning strikes.

And Abram counted.  
Try as he would, 100  
He could not make the number up  
To thirty good.

The Judgment's answer  
Came upon him then:  
*'Tell Sodom, Sodom,* 105  
*Sodom, Sodom,*  
*I shall not destroy it*  
*For thirty good men.'*

Abram was silent.  
Abram was dumb. 110  
He heard Hell's demons  
Beating on a drum.

He saw men carried  
Under long, slim poles  
Through Sodom, Sodom, 115  
Sodom, Sodom.  
*'Lord, would you save it*  
*For twenty souls?'*

This was the last time.  
This was the last. 120  
Now for the brimstone  
And the blinding blast.

He saw huge darkness  
Like a hangman's hood  
On Sodom, Sodom, 125  
Sodom, Sodom.  
*'I still would spare it*  
*For the twenty good.'*

'Lord, Thou art just.  
Lord, Thou art just. 130  
How should we utter  
Who are less than dust?  
Yet so wicked  
Are the hearts of men  
In Sodom, Sodom, 135  
Sodom, Sodom.  
Still would you spare it  
If the good were ten?'

Fearful the silence,  
Fearful the span 140  
Stretching that moment  
Between God and man.  
Abram sweated  
His life out then  
For Sodom, Sodom, 145  
Sodom, Sodom.  
*'I shall not destroy it  
If the good are ten.'*

Abram the father  
Counting up the cost 150  
Saw faith plainly  
And knew that he had lost.  
God looked at Sodom  
In that pleading place,  
Sodom, Sodom, 155  
Sodom, Sodom.  
Down looked Abram,  
And he lost his case.

1954

(From *The Death Bell: poems and ballads*. London: Faber  
and Faber, 1954)

