

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)

