

GUY VANDERHAEGHE

THE DOCTRINE OF WATER

Guy Vanderhaeghe (1951-) was born in Esterhazy, Saskatchewan. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master of Arts degree at the University of Saskatchewan, and he earned a Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Regina. In 1973 he worked as a researcher at the Institute for Northern Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, and from 1974 to 1977 he worked as an archivist at the university library. From 1976 to 1978 he also served as editor of the *Journal of Orthomolecular Medicine* in Regina, and from 1978 to 1979 he taught English and history at Herbert High School in Herbert, Saskatchewan. He then began publishing his writing in various journals, and he won the Governor General's Award and the Faber Prize for the story collection *Man Descending* (1982). The following poem was published in the winter 1981-1982 issue.

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,
 Fleeshy 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.