

# VOICES

*A Short Story by Andrew Corin*



**B**ack off, swine, these slops are mine!”  
The growl through my bared teeth does little to disturb the pigs’ snorting and snuffling as their snouts root around in the waste thrown into our enclosure. They probably think themselves better than me with their thick, bristly skin, cloven hooves and cunning intellect. My skin is beaten and torn, my feet filthy and bare, and my mind – well who do you ask, who would know, when it seems so unsettled? The voices bicker in my head.

“Fool!”

“Oh, hush little one, don’t listen to that beast.”

“Why would anyone care to ask about you – even these pigs ignore you?”

The tavern owner is from Syria, a leader in the city, and he tolerates me sharing the pen with these swine as some sort of token for his gods. I remember Jewish taverns from

another time in my life. Those ones were simple – serving good, robust food, and attempting to stay scrupulously clean. The Syrian’s tavern smells of musty bodies and maltiness laid down over many nights of swilling and spilling, all soaked into sawdust floor sweepings collected at the back door. I watch the taverner cautiously step over the mound at his door; he shoos away two stray dogs squabbling as they pick through debris deposited beside the fence by last night’s storm. Various stenchs from the city have been wakened by the soaking wind and rain, smoke from freshly lit fires chase each other while voices echo around the cobbled courtyards and stone houses as morning meal preparations begin.

I close my eyes to imagine entering a smoky room, lit by oil lamps and warmed by lively banter, an earthen mug of honey beer in one hand and a wedge of warm, soft bread dripping with olive oil in the other. Instead, the taverner slops the contents of his bucket over the rail to the excited squeals of his pigs. Mouldy crusts of brown bread, olive pits, rancid cheese, shells of pistachio nuts, fig skins and bones of some boiled animal smelling only of garlic, all turned into a muddy soup as the pigs and I fight over our meal for the day.

The mud hides my nakedness, so I shouldn’t complain, and makes me little different to the pigs in the eyes of the few people that bring themselves to look, even briefly, at me. The pig herders will soon arrive to add these to their charges for the day, and we all frantically scavenge for whatever morsels of food the tavern guests have left for us before we leave for the pastures on the cliffs of the Sea.

My voices come back as I suck the remnants of flesh from a fig skin.

“That one is looking at you thinking how tasty you will be, gore you with its tusks and chew your bones in its fetid mouth!”

“Perhaps you should just lie down and let it finish you now – what reason do you have to live?”

“Please, please be kind to me, I am just hungry and confused.”

“Such a fool – go on then, eat grass like a pig and live life to the full!”

The pig herders let me walk at a distance behind them as they lead their charges, now in the hundreds. We stop at an elevation of patchy grass, interrupted by exclamations of black basalt rocks, creaking and releasing their earthy scent as the morning sun’s warmth reaches them. The field slopes perilously down to the shimmering blue-green of the Sea of Galilee.

My shouts don’t seem to bother these simple men, the pigs have got used to me, and we are far enough away from Hippos to not draw complaints from my voices. Once my family and friends delighted in hearing me talk and sing, but those times are long gone and my only audience now are these before me and the occasional fisher-folk down in Qal on the Sea’s edge.

My cave on the hill side above Qal is dry and warm enough – at least during this month of Tammuz, when early summer brings harvests of dates, figs, grapes and pomegranates – but in a few months, when the olive harvest heralds Bul’s descent into winter, I will try to find shelter around the fires of Qal. Only one man there, a loner too, will tolerate me; the others have tried to restrain me with ropes and iron when the voices drive me to attack my body, only to have me rip these and my flesh in escape.

The man who, at times when my mouth is quiet, allows me to shelter with him is seeking his own escape and solitude, from memories he describes as demons without any elaboration.

He calls me 'Epimanes' – the madman – and chortles in telling me of another madman with the same nickname whom his Maccabean ancestors battled. We Jews all know of this one. He recounts the telling often, which I too have heard from my father. "The evil one, Antiochus Epiphanes, may my mouth be made clean, we call him Antiochus Epimanes – the fool, calling himself God-Made-Manifest. He refused to let us worship in shalem, and desecrated the Temple of the Most-High. He stole from the Temple treasury, defiled the holy city, tearing up the books of the law, murdering women and children, sacrificing pigs..."

The memory brings my mind back to the pigs surrounding me now, defilement against the serene beauty of the water.

The Sea is calm and gentle today, unlike the torment last night when wind and rain conspired, and drove themselves further into my cave than I ever remember. I tried to shout the elements away from my cowering place in the back, but all I heard was the wind mocking me in derision. Mist rises from the hot springs on the shore edge as dewy steam joins the dance of adulation to welcome the sun's climb into the cobalt sky.

Another climber appears over the crest of the cliff's edge – I can see his ascent clearly from my elevated perch on the precipitously sloping grass. He is tall, with long brown hair waving in the breeze lifting off the Sea, and a yellowed tunic bearing sweat stains from his exertion. Just behind him follows a clutch of similarly aged and dressed young men, panting with the work of climbing the unstable path. They are Jews, like me, and are not changing direction at the sight of the multitude of swine. How interesting!

"They must be blind as well as lacking in smell, for your offense and that of your herd cannot be missed!"

“Stop being so awful to him, you are just as disgusting as he is!”

“I’m so repulsive I could die...he he, how can I cause affront to these unwary travellers?”

“Do be kind, that one at the front is looking straight at us.”

“I know who he is! We have heard talk of him from the tavern. That is Jesus from Nazareth, the one some say is an imposter with his claims.”

“Oh no, we know better, and he is going to be nothing but trouble!”

I bang the sides of my head with two stones to make the voices stop.

The group of fishermen – I know they are for as I walk towards them I see their boat – stop at my approach, whilst the one called Jesus extends his arms towards me with a smile through his short beard. His deep brown eyes are intense as they catch mine and hold them.

I mutter quietly, “Be done with him, turn and run,” before another voice erupts from me like thunder.

“What do you want with me, Jesus son of the Most-High God? I beg you in the name of God – do not torment me!”

I watch as his eyes crease a little and his smile broadens. Behind him, the others are wide-eyed and gaping, much like the fish they may have left in their boat. The man called Jesus asks with gentle intensity, “What is your name?”

I want to say it is Josiah, but another voice beats me. “It is Legion, for we are many,” is the taunted reply, but without its usual confidence.

“He is going to destroy us, do something!”

“Don’t be a coward, you fool, stand up to him!”

“But you know who he is, you know who he is!”

I feel my body trembling and I crumple to the stony ground.

With whistles and thumping of their sticks, the herdsmen move the audience of pigs away from us, to the northern end of the hill, staying on the cliff-side of them to avoid losing any animals over its edge. The sounds coming from my throat are rasping now.

“We are done for – he is about to use his power on us!”

“Stop being so weak. I have the solution – listen!”

My eyes are fixed on the ground, my hands scraping my belly with a sharp stone to draw rivers of crimson and dirt to join with sweat running down my bare legs. A voice of pleading laced with cunning leaves my husky throat.

“Son of the Most-High, please do not send us away. Make our home with the swine over there instead.”

The man called Jesus squats down and lifts my trembling chin to meet his resinous breath, saying, “My friend, your mind is as tossed and unsettled as last night’s storm on the Sea. Just as I calmed the tempest on the water, so I desire to calm yours.” He reaches out and clasps my head firmly yet without discomfort in his hands, saying, “Voices begone, as you desire, so be it.”

One of the herdsmen suddenly slips on the wet grass and falls with a loud cry of pain. The pigs, abruptly disturbed from their grazing, and spooked by the shouts of the other men, begin to run. I watch the spectacle unfold, first with intrigue, then rising horror. The animals, initially running aimlessly, cannot stop themselves on the steep hillside, as their smooth hooves and the wet grass join forces to create a brawl of howling and shrieking animals, stumbling, tumbling then surging like a panicked river, unable to arrest its inevitable fall over the edge.

Jesus lifts my body, stunned and weak with the exhaustion of years and whatever has just left me, by placing his broad

hands under my elbows and standing to his tall, erect stature. With a voice resonant above the squealing of distress in the churning water below us, he speaks to me, the others with him, and the herdsmen, all of us stunned silent. “This man is healed, and he must be dressed, fed, and returned to his community.” He turns to look at his followers. “Come, amongst you there will be clothing to share with him.”

While some of the men bathe my body and bind my wounds, others bring a grey tunic and a length of cloth for a loin garment from their boat. Jesus approaches the herdsmen, now standing in confusion without their charges. I watch him hold his hands with palms upturned to the clear sky, nodding as he says something I do not hear. But the herdsmen immediately turn and run back towards Hippos, the city unaware of the disastrous miracle that has just occurred.

“Thank you, my Lord, thank you.” I have no more words or voices than this for my healer.

On our way back towards the city Jesus stops at a pomegranate tree, spiny limbs drooping under its sweet load. He reaches up and picks a glossy red fruit, peels it and hands the succulent jewel-like flesh to me. Sitting at his feet while he talks to his followers of kingdoms and power, I struggle to concentrate as the sweetness of his voice, the offering of food, and this precious moment in shaded company soothe me like a lullaby.

We are interrupted by a disturbance from up the road. The tavern owner and other city leaders, led by the herdsmen pointing with their sticks at us, approach, shouting with multiple voices.

“There they are, the magician and the madman!”

“But he is clothed, and clean with bandaged wounds – who did this?”

“The pigs, who will pay for my pigs?”

The Syrian is the only one who is willing to approach, and he pauses at the sight of me clothed and surrounded by friendly people.

At an indication from one of the pig herders, he says to Jesus, with trembling, “Leave us and our region, we have no argument with you!”

Jesus, takes my elbow and leads me to stand close to the tavern owner, whose eyes have become wide and brow furrowed with uncertainty. The healer says, “The torment of this man has left him, and I am sad that the distress of the swine led to their loss. This is not the first time flocks and herds have gone this way, down the steep slopes, but your gain is to have this man returned to you.”

I sputter to Jesus in a fit of new-found loyalty, “Take me with you Lord, for I will follow you!”

He replies with a gentle squeeze of my elbow and nod of his head, “Josiah, your place is here, to tell all in the Decapolis of the great things that have been done for you, of compassion and grace.” I think I catch a brief wink as he leans down to say, “You will be my first representative to the gentiles!”

Jesus then stands tall again, looking over the crowd of astonished faces towards a huddle of onlookers to the side of the leaders. “Come Josiah,” he calls out with a chuckle, “Your family are eager to see you again!”

I am lost in the unfamiliar sensations of being held and wept on by my family, my own tears mixing with theirs as we choke and laugh with voices unrestrained in love and delight.

Buried in this sea of joy, I almost miss the words of Jesus, called over his shoulder as they leave us. “I came to escape the crowds, found a storm of the Sea and then a torment of the spirit. I leave you in peace. Shalom and shalem!”



Back in my old house, surrounded by people I love, we prepare wooden platters bearing smoked fish, spiced eggs, cucumbers in sour milk, olives, dates and figs rolled in nuts, oat cakes and honey, goose liver, boiled calf heads, hard and soft cheeses, with vinegar and oil to dress it all. Small pewter bowls of fragrant water for hand washing are laid on the tables with goblets and bottles of sweet Judean wine. I sing out a blessing in a voice for all to hear.

“Join me, family and friends, come and share with my feast!”

