

**Tom Houlton**

## **Bearded Thoughts**

Beards seem to be out of fashion nowadays—  
The domain of eccentric professors or men with knitted jumpers  
(big ideas on rocks and bones in the ground),  
Or even vicars, touched by God, nothing to hide?  
Or the classicist, that type of beard that looks like that of Hercules  
On plaster casts.

No longer when walking down the street can one compare each specimen,  
Like one might have done sitting in an omnibus or hackney cab:  
'That one is too large, too small, cut close or not at all;  
This one here too ginger for the colour hair, or too straight, too curly.'  
In days gone by it was the fashion, Sweeney did bad business.

You can tell a lot about a man from his beard, so I'm told;  
His pedigree and personal grooming, how he values himself.  
But nowadays it's stubble or baby-faced gangster chic,  
How many Walts do we see in Market Square on a Friday night?

We distrust this facial hair perhaps, or what it means.  
Perhaps it seems archaic, rather like a caveman or some troglodyte.  
We are too sophisticated now,  
Roman, concerned with an honesty which we think the skin provides,  
But we are not honest.

The only thing a beard hides is a chin.

Perhaps we're scared to look history in the face,  
The bearded wonders from a bygone age  
Of yellow Victorian tobacco-stains upon the creamy-white  
Bernard Shaw, the voluptuous Darwin, the natty Disraeli.

Youth wins,  
Confines the noble beard to a  
Woolly-jumpered existence in out-of-the-way places,  
Lounging on a bench or pew, some character in a play  
With Brian Blessed  
Squeezed into the frame, the dusty sepia.

We are terrified of what the beard might hide,  
What it might mean if all we saw were beards upon the face,  
A Mr. Twit complex, the psychologists (clean-shaven and in black) might say.

The beard is living history, we are too close to the past,  
The razor might not last, the bomb might fall,  
Then all we'd have left would be beards to compare,  
Men, women, and children all.