

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

November 28, 2016

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



from *The Insomnia of Thomas Merton*

August 20, 1968: Today, among other things, I burned M's letters... I did not even glance at any one of them. High hot flames of the pine branches in the sun! —from Merton's journals

3.

Perhaps M. would remind me
if she were here, that being alone
and absurd are not things to fear.

Nor is freedom, stepping through
and abandoning selves, until there are no
more steps, I'm homeless, and there's only

the leaping left. *Freedom*, the teacher told me,
is the experience of this leap. I wrote: *I am*
the utter poverty of God. I am his emptiness,

littleness, nothingness, lostness. But M.
was everything, opened places in me, crushed
sweet grass in a hidden yard, shared oceans

with her mouth, made honey with her fingers
and the unclenched crocus of her self.
And she loved me. *You don't*

write poems about nothing.

Lisa Russ Spaar¹

✧ Reflections

I find Lisa Russ Spaar's poems to be wholly original, imaginative, and wondrous. Her work is like no one else's. This poem comes from her collection *Blue Venus*, which includes several poems in the voices of the world's historic insomniacs. From what I know, Thomas

¹ "The Insomnia of Thomas Merton" by Lisa Russ Spaar from *Blue Venus*, Persea Books, Inc. Used by permission.

Merton—one of the most famous 20th century Catholic writers and Trappist monks—suffered from not only insomnia but also debilitating back pain, depression and feelings of self-doubt and failure. He was a prolific and articulate writer, as evidenced by his journals, poems, letters, and his wildly popular autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

But what this poem draws attention to is not Merton's contemplative hermitage or his days in the Abbey of our Lady of Gethsamani, but his human struggle to reconcile a love affair he had with a young nurse named Margie, whom he met while recuperating in a hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. Margie, or M., was 19 years old and Merton was 53 and the two fell in love, provoking in Merton an acute inner crisis. Merton broke off their relationship and recommitted himself to his monastic vows but, so suggest his journals, he never really recovered from loving her deeply. The epigraph for this poem is from Merton's journals and it is true he burned her letters, true he did not reread them before they were destroyed.

But the poem does not simply recount the context of the affair. The poem, in the voice of Merton, moves beyond what we can find of Merton's biography and even what we can read for ourselves in his journals. The poem moves us outward and upward by assuming the body and mind of Merton himself, by questioning freedom as a leap away from each version of our selves, all our selves. This is called a persona poem, as "persona" comes from the Latin for mask. (What's offered here is only one part of a four-part poem.)

The poem remarks on Merton's real, documented fears and anxieties, his desire for solitude, for freedom from earthly noise. Just after we read what Merton says about being "the utter poverty of God" we read that M. was a counter to everything Merton struggled against: "emptiness, littleness, nothingness, lostness." What M. does for Merton—to open him, to love him, to know him—is what love does for all of us.

The beautiful last four lines are not only an erotic description of intimacy, but they get to the heart of what Merton's (and the poem's) real tension is all about: the desire to feel what we all want to feel—to be loved—versus the desire to behave. Which self is our real self and which self must be abandoned? When Merton writes "you don't / write poems about nothing" he reminds us that life is made of everything, not nothing, and that poems are often borne of suffering, when the heart is in conflict with itself. Remembering, too, the title of the poem, not lost on me is the insomniac lens through which the poem is understood. When I think of sleeplessness, I think of that in-between time, that blue hour between night and dawn, I think of restlessness and solitude, and the kind of stark attention to breathing, to the night-noises, to the house settling. Perhaps it is true that everything feels more alive when you alone are the witness. That is the stuff—the not nothing—of which poetry is made.

✂ Other questions to consider

1. In one review of *Blue Venus*, a critic writes that "[Spaar's] nocturnal poems weave themselves into the very fabric of private fervor—lyric, sexual, spiritual..." How do you respond to this poem as one of intimacy or of "private fervor"? How do you reconcile Merton's private anxieties with his published writing? Why do you think he—or anyone,

for that matter—chooses to write about the inner life in an outward fashion? What do you think that says about our own human tendencies to blur the boundary between our private and public worlds? What need is it we are addressing?

2. A lot of poetry, to my ear, sounds very much like a prayer. If you were to consider this as Merton's prayer to God, what might be his true desire? For what might he actually be praying? For Margie? For forgiveness? After Merton's death, some scholars argued that Merton's remaining life was eaten up with regret and remorse and that if he had it to do over, he would have married Margie. In that sense, perhaps it is a prayer not for forgiveness, but for a second chance. What other tensions might be at the root of this story that the poem is trying to illuminate? Sorrow? Guilt? Freedom? The desire to be two different selves at one time?

✂ Writing in response

1. Try writing in persona. It doesn't have to be a poem; maybe you write a letter in the voice of someone you know well, your mother or your sister. Or you may wish to choose an historic or literary figure that you'd like to inhabit. To write in the voice of someone else can be an especially liberating exercise, especially if you assume the mask of someone exceedingly different from you. You might also consider the persona of something voiceless, an object, or an abstraction, for example.
2. The line in the poem that reads, "stepping through /and abandoning selves, until there are no / more steps..." seems especially poignant to consider in light of Merton's possible regret. It is also quite possible he did *not* regret falling in love. Merton was criticized for his affair as it was "unbecoming of a monk" but it also brought him great joy and as this poem further suggests, "M. was everything." We all do things that are unbecoming. Free write about an example of something you have done that might have been unbecoming of a mother or father, or unbecoming of a Christian. Give your writing a title, call it "Prayer," and determine what is at the heart of your desire. For what is it you are most deeply praying?

✂ About the poet

Lisa Russ Spaar is the author or editor of numerous books of poetry and criticism, including *Monticello in Mind: 50 Contemporary Poems on Jefferson* and the forthcoming *Orexia: Poems*, her fifth poetry collection. Her honors are many and she is a professor in the Creative Writing Program of the Department of English at the University of Virginia. She will read at St. Stephen's on December 1 at 7 p.m. and will address, in part, insomnia and "keeping watch" as part of the Advent period of waiting. The reading is free and open to the public and will be followed by a question and answer session, reception, and book signing.



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