River

Dreaming the sea that lies beyond me
I have enough depth to know I am shallow.

I have my pools, my bowls of rock I flow
into and fill, but I must brim my own banks, persist,
vanish at last in greater flood yet still within it
follow my task, dreaming towards
the calling sea.

– Denise Levertov
Poetry and Prayer: Living at the Edge of the Mystery
Deborah Smith Douglas, Oblate OSB Cam

Poetry and prayer have been profoundly connected human enterprises for millennia, possibly since the earliest beginnings of both language and religion.

But how is it that their roots entwine? Can exploring poetry enrich our praying, deepen our silence, enlarge our awareness of the world around us?

This issue of our newsletter is an invitation to ponder those questions.

Poems, the African-American poet Jericho Brown has said, “pierce the self, lay us flat before powers unseen.”

So of course does honest and courageous prayer.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and himself an accomplished poet, has said that both poetry and prayer “are about what happens when you've run out of ordinary language—both are about coming to the edge of something greater, something much more mysterious. Both are about the world being more than you can imagine it to be.”

It is striking to hear how many poets speak of their craft in terms that make it sound like praying. Jericho Brown, for instance, suggests that both writing and reading poetry can put us in a place where we are “more real and honest and vulnerable” than at any other point in our lives, making us at once both “whole and permeable.”

“Wholeness” and “permeability” are not just the effect or aim of poetry, but of prayer.

To become more whole—more fully alive, more at one with “the Oneness that is God” as the Benedictine monk John Main put it—has long been a goal of contemplative prayer. To become at the same time more permeable—to risk being more open to God and to our neighbor, more vulnerable and available to the pain and beauty of the world—is to hope to approach the radical self-emptying kenosis of Jesus in Gethsemane, where he prayed to be filled with nothing but God.

Prior Cyprian’s essay on “singing poetry” explores these mysteries, reflecting on his experience composing music of moments when the prayer and the song are “not two” but one. He has learned, in composing as well as praying Scripture, to “listen to the text until it reveals its song.”

This kind of listening, of attentive reverent waiting for something to reveal itself, is at the heart of David Whyte’s poem, “The Lightest Touch.” Good poetry begins with the lightest touch, he observes: a whisper, a breeze, a hand in the dark. And in the silence that follows that touch, what has died in us (“even the laziest, most deathly afraid part” of us) can, like Lazarus,
lift up its hands and walk toward the light.

Aaron Maniam's poem cycle “Song I Have Made” on the liturgy of the hours both describes and effects the same sort of waking up to hidden reality, the same kind of listening. He salutes the way prayer “can sing the unsayable,” can “make space for broken voices,” can lead us to “hear the music in the silence.”

Chris Lorenc’s memories of accompanying poet Denise Levertov on retreat traces the Hermitage's own particular history in the confluence of poetry and prayer, and its ability to foster deep spiritual friendship.

What Father Robert calls “authentic poems” can be found in all languages and shapes and faith traditions, and can give voice to much that is otherwise unsayable.

Across nearly a millennium, Yehuda Halevi speaks of what a fearful, holy thing it is “to love what death can touch;” Emily Dickinson touches on love’s paradox of presence and absence, noticing even in parting from the beloved that there is the “Door ajar that Oceans are—and Prayer.”

Denise Levertov reminds us of the gift and call of “deeper waters” and the opportunity of “dreaming towards the calling sea.”

Ziggy Rendler-Bregman in “Falling Away” finds “hope for something more” in a wintry season, aware even in the midst of loss of a kind of lightness, “the weight of so much falling away.”

Thomas Smith in his deceptively simple poem “Trust” lightly touches the way we live by tiny acts of faith every day: taking a car to a new mechanic, mailing a letter, all the ways our very lives seem to be “delivered, even when we can’t read the address.”

We hope the small handful of poems we have been able to include in this issue will invite you to explore that liminal space where poems and prayers both live, and listen to your own life till it reveals its song to you.

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‘Tis a Fearful Thing
Yehuda Halevi, 12th c. Spanish Jewish poet, physician, and philosopher.

‘Tis a fearful thing
to love what death can touch.
A fearful thing
to love, to hope, to dream, to be –
to be,
And oh, to lose.
A thing for fools, this,
And a holy thing,
a holy thing
to love.
For your life has lived in me,
your laugh once lifted me,
your word was gift to me.
To remember this brings painful joy.
‘Tis a human thing, love,
a holy thing, to love
what death has touched.

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The Lightest Touch
David Whyte

Good poetry begins with the lightest touch, a breeze arriving from nowhere, a whispered healing arrival, a word in your ear, a settling into things, then, like a hand in the dark, it arrests the whole body, steering you for revelation. In the silence that follows a great line, you can feel Lazarus, deep inside even the laziest, most deathly afraid part of you, lift up his hands and walk toward the light.

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What makes someone give their whole life to writing poems? I think it is because words are able, if you treat them right, to catch the bird in flight—without stopping it, killing it. Rather flying with it for a second. What bird? The golden crested Yes, the Affirmation, the Breath of Life. (p.7)

— Bruno Barnhart, OSB Cam

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2 Both of these quotations are from Jericho Brown’s essay, “The Possibility of God” in A God in the House: Poets Talk about Faith (Tupelo Press 2012)

3 See Paul Dafydd Jones’ “The Riddle of Gethsemane: Barth on Jesus’ Agony in the Garden” in Reading the Gospels with Karl Barth, edited by Daniel Migliore (Eerdmans 2017) p. 149
Quiet
Billy Collins

It occurred to me around dusk
after I had lit three candles
and was pouring myself a glass of wine
that I had not uttered a word to a soul all day.

Alone in the house,
I was busy pushing the wheel in a mill of paper
or staring down a dark well of ink—
no callers at the door, no ring of the telephone.

But as the path lights came on,
I did recall having words with a turtle
on my morning walk, a sudden greeting
that sent him off his log splashing into the lake.

I had also spoken to the goldfish
as I tossed a handful of pellets into their pond,
and I had a short chat with the dog,
who cocked her head this way and that

as I explained that the dinner was hours away
and that she should lie down by the door.

I also talked to myself as I was typing
and later on while I looked around for my boots.

So I had barely set foot on the path
that leads to the great villa of silence
where men and women pace while counting beads.
In fact, I had only a single afternoon
of total silence to show for myself,
a spring day in a cell in Big Sur,
twenty or so monks also silent in their nearby cells—
a community of Camaldolese,
an order so stringent, my guide told me,
that they make the Benedictines,
whom they had broken away from in the 11th century,
look like a bunch of Hells Angels.

Out of a lifetime of running my mouth
and leaning on the horn of the ego,
only a single afternoon of being truly quiet
on a high cliff with the Pacific spread out below,

but as I listened to the birdsong
by the window that day, I could feel my droplet
of silence swelling on the faucet
then dropping into the zinc basin of their serenity.

Yet since then—
nothing but the racket of self-advertisement,
the clamor of noisy restaurants,
the classroom of proclaimers,

the little king of the voice having its say,
and today the pride of writing this down,
which must be the reason my pen
has turned its back on me to hide its face in its hands.

from BALLISTICS. Reprinted by permission of Random House 2008.
The Golden Crested Yes

Isaiah Teichert, OSB Cam

When I was a pup, my mom used to recite poetry all the time. She seemed to have a poem for every occasion: “Barbara Frietchie” for the 4th of July, a Phyllis McGinley poem for many a saint, “Western Star” for Thanksgiving, and so on. She knew a million of them.

Alas, at the time I moaned when I saw a poem coming. Mostly they went soaring over my head. But eventually I came to treasure this habit of my mom’s, and the delight of poetry, the wisdom of it, began to seep in a little. I began to love poetry myself. It was no longer a “magnet of scorn.”

Here at the Hermitage a small band of brothers have been conducting a poetry seminar for more than thirty years now. We’re a bit irregular about it. Fr. Bruno once said we have our monthly poetry session twice a year. We’ve explored the work of any number of poets including Billy Collins, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Mary Oliver, Christian Wiman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Herbert, Mary Karr, Edith Sitwell.

We follow a fairly standard format. One brother chooses about 12 poems, copies them off, and puts together a little introduction to the poet. Then we announce a date and invite guests and monks to join the fun. Typically we’ll read a poem, ponder it in silence a bit, then open up for discussion. What do you see here? What’s speaking to you? Is the poem transparent? What’s the poet getting at then?

If one person is puzzled by a phrase, someone else might have a light on it. After we’ve bounced the poem around a while, we’ll read it again, finding new pleasure in the second reading because of the discussion. We try not to fall into the temptation of Billy Collins’ students, the ones who want to “tie the poem to a chair with rope, and torture a confession out of it. They begin to beat it with a hose to find out what it really means.”

We come out of these afternoon poetry discussions energized, hearts uplifted, all the more eager to plunge into the deep poetry of the psalms at Vespers.

Fr. Bruno wrote often about the power and beauty of poetry, and I will conclude with a passage from one of his homilies.

“Poetry is a strange thing, a Queer Bird. From a common sense point of view it is a matter of blowing soap bubbles in the sun, glistening bubbles. From another angle it is an act of desperation, a gasping for air; it regards the only thing that matters. It is a matter of life and death...William Carlos Williams wrote that ‘It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.’”

Bruno goes on, “Are those words just a bunch of sentimentality, or do they declare a profound truth? Why? What makes someone give their whole life to writing poems? I think it is because words are able, if you treat them right, to catch the bird in flight—without stopping it, killing it. Rather flying with it for a second. What bird? The golden crested Yes, the Affirmation, the Breath of Life.”

Prologue: Sounding the Seasons

Malcolm Guite

Tangled in time, we go by hints and guesses,
Turning the wheel of each returning year.
But in the midst of failures and successes
We sometimes glimpse the Love that casts out fear.
Sometimes the heart remembers its own reasons
And beats a Sanctus as we sing our story,
Tracing the threads of grace, sounding the seasons
That lead at last through time to timeless glory.
From the first yearning for a Saviour’s birth
To the full joy of knowing sins forgiven
We start our journey here on God’s good earth
To catch an echo of the choirs of heaven.
I send these out, returning what was lent,
Turning to praise each ‘moment’s monument.’

from Sounding the Seasons Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year

Trust

Thomas R. Smith

It’s like so many other things in life
to which you must say no or yes.
So you take your car to the new mechanic.
Sometimes the best thing to do is trust.

The package left with the disreputable-looking clerk, the check gulped by the night deposit, the envelope passed by dozens of strangers—all show up at their intended destinations.

The theft that could have happened doesn’t.
Wind finally gets where it was going
through the snowy trees, and the river, even
when frozen, arrives at the right place.

And sometimes you sense how faithfully your life
is delivered, even though you can’t read the address.

Reprinted by permission.
Denise Levertov at the Hermitage
Christopher Lorenc

Often we can’t complete a friendship until after and often long after a friend has died. We think it unfinished business and so it might partly be, but it’s also likely that we haven’t yet grown up enough to see our friend’s life whole in all its longing and possibility and true achievement. Not that it’s given us to judge. Judgment would violate the friendship all over again.

The poet Denise Levertov learned of the Hermitage from a mutual friend, the poet Lynn Martin who lives in Puget Sound and whose poem “Remembering Rain” (p.7) evokes a prayerful, attentive regard in nature—one of the qualities that becomes increasingly more keen and alert, and at the same time more subtle, in Denise’s poetry as well.

Denise was born in London and had established herself as a poet there before moving to America in 1948 where for forty years she’d been a central voice in contemporary American poetry while living on the east coast. But in 1989, out of the deliberate intention to live on the wilder Pacific coast, she moved to Seattle. And since she didn’t drive, she chose as her home Seward Park where she could walk down to ancient Douglas fir and spruce and cedars and stand on the shore of Lake Washington and look out across the water towards Mt. Rainier. This is the view, standing in the very spot, that Debi’s photograph on the back cover depicts. And the poem “Mid-December,” one of the last poems Denise wrote, is now the memorial plaque on the wall at the foot of the stairs to her last home.

Lynn and I had studied Dante’s Commedia in Tuscany, and she’d visited Camaldoli and knew Dante’s and Merton’s connections with the Camaldolese, and so from Lynn’s introduction, Denise was eager to make a retreat at the Hermitage herself. She was teaching a poetry class one quarter each year at Stanford then, and so would be the Hermitage herself. She was teaching a poetry class one quarter each year at Stanford then, and so would be

But then one day during her office hours I showed up unannounced in her doorway and introduced myself. She looked up dumbfounded. She’d just been wondering again how she’d make her way to the Hermitage.

“You showed up on my doorstep like an angel that day,” she told me later.

She was so grateful for her time at the Hermitage that she offered and gave a reading for the monastic community. She always chose and arranged poems, especially for a book, with a careful regard for thematic rhythms. There’s a cassette recording of that March 1993 reading somewhere at the Hermitage and I have a copy myself. I also have a small sheaf of Denise’s own typescript copies of certain poems, a few with her handwritten notes on them, which she sent me much later when I asked her what poems she’d either written at the Hermitage or considered directly or indirectly influenced by her time there. We’d sit in the sunlight on her doorstep at Scholastica and sometimes she’d read to me. I remember quite distinctly her reading “Meeting the Ferret” one afternoon and both of us laughing delightedly. And we talked about our mothers. I was born in London, too, even though I emigrated with my parents when I was quite young. My mother and Denise were exactly the same age, and both had been nurses, or in Denise’s case a nurse’s aide, in wartime London. Denise’s mother was Welsh and mine Welsh and Cockney, and though my mother wasn’t a poet, I’d learned my own love of literature from her.

Denise’s collection of poems Evening Train was published after she moved to Seattle, and one way it can be fairly read is from the new/old and present/past perspective she’d gained between childhood and now and between Europe and this wilder shore that had become her new home. The poem “The Two Magnets” in Evening Train (p.7), which is also the title of one section of the book, means a very great deal to me, and so much so that it feels like part of my own answer. Once I’d written Lynn that I felt as if I was trying to work out the deep connection I felt “between the hermitage there (in the Apennines) and the hermitage here (in the Santa Lucia mountains),” and Lynn underlined that sentence and sent it back to me with “Remember this!” written in the margin.

Denise also met Br. David Steindl-Rast at the Hermitage who after Denise’s reading introduced himself and invited us to come with him to Esalen the next day. Denise was charmed by Br. David’s grace and politics and wit and his own poetic sense, and it was sweet to watch the two of them who lived with such attention and felt so keenly the draw of home and home between these “two magnets” as they walked together through the Esalen gardens and along the wild creek and looked out together upon so blue an immensity and then looked down from the edge of the cliff to the surf breaking all along the coast. Once during a full moon Br. David and I were standing side by side at the same railing looking down into a milk-sea of spume and surf breaking at our feet.

“I could look at that forever,” Br. David said quietly.

I don’t think Br. David and Denise ever met again in person, but I know he remained important to her.

These associations are a small but important thread in Denise’s late poetry and in her spiritual thinking at the time. The poems she wrote after Evening Train, including the small sheaf of typescript poems she sent me, became Sands of the Well (1996), the last new collection of her poetry to be published in her lifetime. And Denise’s experience at the Hermitage, though brief on the face of it, is also an important element in the tradition of “poetry and prayer” here.

(This is an extract from a more complete reflection in progress.)
A New Flower
Denise Levertov

Most of the sunflower’s bright petals had fallen, so I stripped the few poised to go, and found myself with a new flower: the center, that round cushion of dark-roast coffee brown, tipped with uncountable minute florets of gold, more noticeable now that the clear, shiny yellow was gone, and around it a ring of green, the petals from behind the petals, there all the time, each having the form of sacred flame or bo-tree leaf, a playful, jubilant form (taken for granted in Paisley patterns) and the light coming through them, so that where, in double or triple rank, like a bevy of Renaissance angels, they overlapped, there was a shadow, a darker shade of the same spring green—a new flower on this fall day, revealed within the autumn of its own brief bloom.

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Song I Have Made
Aaron Maniam
For James and Cyprian, OSB Cam

“My heart overflows with noble words,
To the king I must speak the song I have made…”
– Psalm 44 (45), Camaldolese Lauds and Vespers

i – Vigil
From you, and from this place,
I learn what gentleness means.
The hermitage bell wakes me without clang
Or clamour, sidling into early morning dreams
On eyelid-flutter, like a favourite memory
Of an insufficiently remembered friend.

ii – Lauds
We arrived late last evening, fumbled into
Our cells with all the finesse of urban life,
Leaf-crackle piercing the night.
Now I hear the silence of everything:
Bird-song, bluejay caw and call,
Ocean swash and backwash like genderless
Rhymes above the echo of distant cars.
Outside the chapel, the tinnitus of crickets,
Yielding to warming day.

iii – Prime
You tell me that contemplation means
More than just ruminations in extended time.
I suspect this truth will take a while to tame,
But I am starting towards the beginning of
Understanding when a spider trapezes
My line of sight while I shower;
Its web soft on my cheek after just hours
Away from my cell. I watch the chalkswirl in
The water I boil for tea; listen to tea-splash
And the poetry I always knew vaguely.
Now, finally, there is time to wait, to witness.

iv – Terce
On earlier visits, I found myself drawn to the sky, sea
And mountains – the familiar canvases God chooses
For His ever-renewing story. This time, I am shown
The miracles in the minuscule: bees on daisies,
Bluebell droop, pines perpendicular to unlikely slopes,
Solitary dandelions whispering stories to the sun,
Raindrops on spiderwebs and water-resistant leaves,
Proof that stars need neither sky nor dark to shine,
Benches overlooking the edge of the world,
Lone stalks of grass and grain holding firm
Against all the wind and weathering we can know.
I feel like the first to see the scale of the small,
Blessed inheritors of both the earth
And the divinity there can be in details.

v – Sext
I notice the simple ache of your singing:
Single notes, uncluttered rhythms, few
Multiple harmonies or music in the round.
These may well have their own beauty—
On other days I have wondered if anything
Lesser can sing the unsayable—
Yet somehow, your melodies seem built
For Pacific sturdiness and Redwood sentinels.
This liturgy has space for broken voices—
Notes and moments when our choir falters
At the edge of an unstressed syllable
And somehow, someone pulls us back by staying true.
Perhaps this was how Elijah felt: feeling God arrive
Not in storm, structure or perfect symphony
But still, small, insistent songs.

vi – None
I was delighted to learn that icons are written, not drawn—
For a poet, this means the blue of Madonna robes, profound
As the ocean and her eyes, their life of tears, are not images
But the Psalmist’s noble words: word-images, image-words,
Treasures of invisible grace. In times, the names will fade,
Leaving
Only our experience; their example; those long gazes into
eternity.

vii – Vespers
The canticles for the completed day have been sung.
When we meditate together afterwards, my palms finally
Unfurl like lotus petals on my knees. On previous visits,
For whatever reasons the mind makes up, it seemed wrong
To open my hands to even a fraction of this place’s love
And largeness. I cannot name what now has changed—
Perhaps the simple knowing that some gifts we can only
Hold a while: stewards, not owners of preciousness
Magnified and multiplied for being shared.

viii – Compline
There were many songs to speak after my first visit.
Yet overflowing hearts sometimes compel a slowing
Of words; we savour more, dig deeper,
Ponder just that much longer what is revealed
Between the words. Spaces pulse with meaning.
We start to hear the music in the silence.
Three visits, two years, one poem later,
I have faith in new melodies, hope for new time,
Love for the future. But for today, gratefully,
Still I must speak – this song, not so much
That I have made, but made through me.

from SECOND PERSONS. Reprinted by permission of Firstfruits Publications.
Thoughts on Singing Poetry

Cyprian Consiglio, OSB Cam

For most of my life I have felt as if I had two separate vocations—professional musician and professed religious. (I assume this to be true for many other people as well, in their own vocational configurations.) At times those two vocations have been in conflict; at times they have run parallel to each other; and at times it feels as though they are not two at all, but one.

The relationship between words and music can seem like that as well: at times they seem to be two different media; at times they run a parallel course; and at times they are “not two.” I once said to a fellow liturgical musician that Gregorian chant is the “perfect marriage of text and music,” to which he responded, “No, chant is when text and music are not two.”

Somewhere in my late twenties, having already been a professional musician for years, I had a sort of double conversion: I wanted to be more serious about my faith, and I also wanted to be more serious about my craft, specifically the craft of songwriting. Perhaps it is even better to say that I wanted to evolve from being a “songwriter” to being a “composer.” I immersed myself in a deeper study of liturgical spirituality, which led me to explore Gregorian chant as well as Renaissance polyphony and Baroque choral music. At the same time I was studying composition and theory, and choral and instrumental arranging, in addition to continuing to write and perform in more popular styles such as rock, gospel, and reggae.

All that is background to say that I remember the moment, sitting in my apartment, when everything I was studying for one brief shining moment came together and was not two—and I began to chant poetry.

I had been studying 20th century 12-tone music, which can sound discordant to the uninitiated ear but struck me as music that was breaking the shell of conventional melody and harmony. This was a time when I was also searching for new words to convey the depth of my own spiritual longing, words that were not the same old hackneyed phrases, not cloyingly sentimental, nor mere triumphant “propaganda” for the faith.

I had run across a poem by Richard Wilbur called “The Sirens” which I kept returning to over and over again, carrying it around with me. The first lines sang themselves to me—“I never knew a road / From which the whole earth didn’t call away...”—as did the final one, which I end in kind of a cry—“the richer for regret.” It was obviously about the spiritual journey, but without ever using a typically “religious” word. And one evening I simply started chanting it, with no accompaniment, no sense of harmony or rhythm, just delivering the text as if it were my own words and I was proclaiming them to the world exactly as I felt them.

That was the moment when I started singing poetry and the moment when my own approach to composing began to evolve as well.

The late great French Jesuit musician and liturgist Joseph Gelineau, whose chanting tones for the Grail Psalms became an immediate standard, as if they had always been part of Catholic liturgy, taught about an arc that stretches between words and music that looks almost as if it were an evolutionary timeline. I have my own version of that continuum that goes like this: The line begins with ordinary speech, and then moves on to public proclamation. If you have ever heard a wonderful reader, a polished public speaker, or an effective preacher, you will agree that elevated speech is already inherently musical. And that basically is the beginning of chanting—simply elevating speech so that it can be heard over a crowd in public proclamation, or ordering it so that a group can recite it together in the unified voice.

Then comes group recitation, akin to choral reading, more ordered yet, especially in terms of rhythm and pace. Then comes the recitative, which one might recognize from the world of oratorio and opera. This is closely akin to the liturgical practice called recto tono, when a group will chants sacred texts, often the Psalms, on one single unchanging note. (I have been in both Buddhist and Hindu “liturgies” that do very much the same thing.) After this come through-written, composed melodies, and then hymns and songs as we normally know them.

This “place” I am referring to—singing poetry—is in that moment just before a song is born.

At some point does elevated or ordered speech become music?
Dozens of compositions later (probably hundreds, if you count the plainsong antiphons I have either composed or on which I have collaborated), the line between proclamation and music—just like the line between the sacred and the secular—becomes a permeable membrane, and I swim back and forth in the estuarial waters of sung poetry.

This is something delicate, as difficult to articulate as rubbing dust from a butterfly's wings, but I would say it like this: there is a melody in texts, a melody that is as much the deep sound of the vowels and consonants as it is the deep meaning the phrases are trying to convey.

Much songwriting imposes a melody on a text, or finds words that fit the meter of the music, the chord changes, and the “hook.” The approach I am describing begins instead with listening—respectfully, humbly approaching a text (a poem, a beautiful translation of a sacred text) with no other agenda than letting it reveal itself to you.

Is not this the musical equivalent of *lectio divina*, listening patiently and reverently for what a sacred text has to say? And is it not like what happens in our liturgies when we sing antiphonally back and forth—two but not two?

With all this in mind I have been the servant of myriad texts and poems—psalms and other Judeo-Christian biblical texts, translations of sacred texts from other religious traditions from the Qur'an to the Tao Te Ching, the poems of Kabir and Hafez, as well as the poetry of Federico García Lorca, Maya Angelou, and Wendell Berry, among several others.

One of my favorite experiences of this approach to composing was with a poem by Jessica Powers—the secular pen name of Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit, a cloistered Carmelite nun and poet, called “The Kingdom of God.” I carried a copy of the poem around with me for weeks and used it in retreat conferences I was giving at the time.

At one point I began chanting it on a tone as if it were a psalm, and one day, driving in the car on a rainy night in Portland, Oregon, it turned into a full-fledged song, which I later recorded, called “Beautiful Naked Runner.”

These days when I give a workshop on music, one of the exercises into which I invite the participants involves handing them a sacred text or poem, and asking them to carry it around with them all day, to read it over and over, to listen to it, and let it reveal its melody to them.

I would like to extend the same invitation to you, kind reader: next time you fall in love with a sacred text or a poem, even just a single line or two, carry it around with you, read it over and over again throughout your day, and listen to it until it reveals its song to you.

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**The Kingdom of God**

Jessica Powers

Not towards the stars, O beautiful naked runner,
not on the hills of the moon after a wild white deer,
seek not to discover afar the unspeakable wisdom,—
the quarry is here.

Beauty holds court within,—
a slim young virgin in a dim shadowy place.
Music is only the echo of her voice,
and earth is only a mirror for her face.

Not in the quiet arms, O sorrowful lover;
O fugitive, not in the dark on a pillow of breast;
hunt not under the lighted leaves for God,—
here is the sacred Guest.

There is a Tenant here.
Come home, roamer of earth, to this room and find
a timeless Heart under your own heart beating,
a Bird of beauty singing under your mind.

(1939)


**Falling Away**

Ziggy Rendler-Bregman

In these woods, winter has its way with you.
At sixty, facing Half Dome
you know what has been lost.
Birch splits, falls to the valley floor.
Cottonwood and Alder,
Oak branches give way.
You remember the dead
cross another frozen stream
hope for something more.

Today, you watch white-flaked crystals
burst into mirrors of perfect sunlight.
listen for the ruby-crowned kinglet
feel the weight of so much falling away.

(1993)

from *THE GATE OF OUR COMING AND GOING*. Reprinted by permission.
Poems of Prayer
Fr. Robert Hale, OSB Cam

This issue of our Newsletter is dedicated to the theme of “Poetry and Prayer”—a linking of enterprises that we have long saluted here at the Hermitage.

We have had many poetry seminars here over the years, monks and guests spending enjoyable afternoons reading and discussing the works of famous poets (such as George Herbert, John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, etc.) as well as some lesser-known poets.

An authentic poem expands our consciousness and can enable us to pray more profoundly and fully. Some poets write poems that immediately inspire prayer, often are prayers.

Such a poet is Malcolm Guite, and such a collection is his recent *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*. He is an English Anglican priest, with degrees from Cambridge and Durham Universities; he is currently a chaplain at Cambridge. As the title of his collection suggests, each sonnet explores deeply one significant moment of the liturgical year, such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, etc. Each is rich in liturgical and biblical connections, and so personal as to evoke in ourselves our own reverence and prayer.

“This authentic poem expands our consciousness and can enable us to pray more profoundly and fully.”

The former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams wrote, “These pieces have the economy and pungency of all good sonnets and offer deep resources for prayer and meditation.”

We at the Hermitage have dedicated our most recent three poetry seminars to Guite’s sonnets, and have just barely entered into their depths.

We highly recommend the full cycle of these liturgical poems to help us—as Guite invites us in his Prologue (reprinted in this issue)—trace “the threads of grace,” sound “the seasons” of our own lives of prayer.

From the Pages of *Vita Monastica*
Fr. Cipriano Vagaggini, OSB Cam

Translation and introduction by Fr. Thomas Matus, OSB Cam

Fr. Cipriano Vagaggini, OSB Cam, has been leading us toward the understanding of how we can attain an intimate knowledge of God—the mystical experience. This knowledge is a gift of divine grace, but it is also rooted in our nature as sentient beings. In the last newsletter, Fr. Vagaggini explained: “The sentient creature knows the ‘something other’ by being naturally in tune with it—this ‘tuning’ is what we call ‘connaturality.’” Below he explains what part love plays in knowing by connaturality.

There are many factors in our “knowing by connaturality”; among these factors are what we call “passions,” both good and bad, both the natural passions we are born with and those we acquire by habit (we call them “second nature”). The most important passion is love. Love can be an emotion, but our emotion can also become something more. It can turn into a total dedication of ourselves that demands commitment, action and sacrifice for the good of the beloved. Real love makes us go beyond ourselves and drives us toward the other. Love is ecstatic: it unites us to the one we love, makes us like them, puts us in tune with them and gives us a deep, mutual understanding.

The mystics have an important saying: “Love is knowledge itself”; you can find it in the writings of St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, and the medieval Cistercian monk William of St. Thierry. These writers did not confuse loving and knowing, but they realized the vital unity between them that is attained through connaturality, when we know by an intuitive experience.

Knowing by connaturality, by being in tune with the one known, is not analytical, even when it involves the intellect. Like every experience it is a synthesis of mind and heart, it is all-embracing, like a simple vision of total reality. Here is an even better comparison: it is like tasting and touching.

The love that is knowledge itself is extremely personal and concrete. It is conditioned by our personal and collective history, but it is always the act of a concrete individual who totally commits his or her own personality on the level of body, mind and spirit. This individual commitment carries within it the present and past, all subjective and social realities. In the one vital and concrete act, all the dimensions of loving and knowing work together.

Knowledge by connaturality generates a tenacious adhesion. Sometimes it is experienced as a deep liking and sometimes as a deep disliking, or even liking and disliking at the same time. In any case, the total person of the knower is involved. As long as this total involvement is there, the knower finds it hard to detach from the one known, unless the knowing itself ceases.
The Hermitage in Exile

Paula Huston, Oblate OSB Cam

As one of the Hermitage-lovers who lives within driving distance of New Camaldoli, I usually make the two-hour trip up Hwy 1 every three months or so. Sometimes I just go for Mass, Confession, and a good long walk. Sometimes I stay for a couple nights. But thanks to the massive landslide at Mud Creek, my usual route up the coast has been blocked since April and will continue to be for many months to come. Yet somehow I’ve never felt cut off from the community, even during those many weeks when the phones were down and the storms kept hammering Big Sur and nobody was sure what would happen next.

Why? First, because I knew that even in the midst of their struggles, the monks were praying for me as I was for them. I was part of their prayer chain, that unending ribbon of light and love that includes as many strangers as it does friends. Second, I could sense the Hermitage all around me every time I read the day’s passages for Lauds and Eucharist and Vespers. And third, I kept sighting monks—actual monks, not imaginary ones—in the most unexpected places.

For example, shortly after the first major slide, I was in the frozen fish aisle of Costco in San Luis Obispo when I heard someone calling my name and turned to find Fr. Zach in jeans, sandals, and an impossibly old t-shirt. He told me he was there with Br. Benedict—they’d sneaked out over Nacimiento Road to get to the 101 Freeway—and they were stocking up on milk, bread, and produce for the long haul back.

A few weeks later I was in Salinas on my way to a relocated oblate peer mentor retreat and got an email from the Hermitage, telling me where I could visit Br. Emmanuel, who’d been emergency-airlifted out of Big Sur several days before. Within minutes I was standing by Emmanuel’s bedside in Monterey while he carried on a weak but cheerful FaceTime conversation—as far as I could tell, his first ever—with my husband Mike. Just as I was leaving, here came Fr. Cyprian. “How did you get out?” I asked him. “I have Super Powers,” he explained.

After a great retreat at Incarnation in Berkeley, our group of oblate peer mentors were sitting around a restaurant table eating Thai food when we got the word that CBS was about to air a brief interview with the monks. We used an iPhone to catch the satellite-patched-in Fr. Robert as he solemnly assured an audience of millions that while the cut-off community could certainly use some help, “We are not starving yet.” Beside him, lending weight to the belief that all would be well and all would be well and every manner of thing would be well, was the beatifically smiling Fr. Isaiah.

Then there was the monastic-escapee-who-shall-remain-nameless who showed up at our house one morning for breakfast, surprising everyone, including the dogs. We fed him eggs and potatoes and coffee and sat by the duck pond for a couple of hours catching up on the latest before reluctantly hugging him goodbye.

But the most memorable monk sighting of all came during a fund-raiser for the Hermitage held at the Chapel on the Hill east of Paso Robles. It was 107 that day and wildfires were raging across the state. We ticket holders were served wine and appetizers as we sweated companionably together on benches, waiting for the sun to set. Finally, as a life-saving breeze came wafting over the hilltop, the chapel doors were opened. Cyprian came in with his guitar and, with the help of a marvelous cellist, played and sang as the smoky-orange moon rose over the vineyards. During the last moments of the concert, somebody loudly pointed out that a large friendly snake had draped himself around a wooden sculpture on the chapel wall and was now weaving his way through the air, trying to get closer to the music without losing his perch. And I realized that Cyprian’s super powers also include snake charming.

For me, one of the real blessings that came out of the lengthy Hermitage closure is that people began to discover one of my favorite places on earth, New Camaldoli’s small daughter house, the Monastery of the Risen Christ in San Luis Obispo. A solitary, peaceful place on the side of a mountain aptly called “Cerro Romualdo,” MRC has three large guest rooms overlooking the Irish Hills, a beautiful labyrinth designed and constructed by oblates and other volunteers, and Stations of the Cross winding up the mountainside toward a large Celtic cross. The lovely Incarnation Monastery in Berkeley became another great option for those with cancelled reservations at the Hermitage. Just yesterday I got an email from an east coast oblate postulant who said she’s always been a fan of Fr. Arthur Poulin’s beautiful paintings so was thrilled to find them actually hanging on the walls when she checked in for her retreat.

I don't think I'm the only one who feels that the monks, oblates, and friends of all three monasteries have found—despite this combined crisis of wind, rain, and mountains sliding into the sea—an even deeper connection than ever. That the endless ribbon of light and love we all count on was never for a single moment in any kind of danger.
Bringing Children to the Hermitage: An Opening to a Possibility

Madeleine Gallagher

A recent newsletter invited memories from people who had shared the Hermitage with young children. I would like to share ours...

As a family, we often camped during the summers. One summer nearly thirty years ago, we were camping at Limekiln State Park, two miles south of the Hermitage, with some family friends from Southern California. (We live in Paso Robles.) The husband/dad of the other family had visited the Hermitage once and suggested to my husband that the two of them attend Mass in the morning. However, he said, it would not be a good idea to bring the children as it was a monastery and our little ones (five of them between the two families, all under the age of five) would probably not add to the contemplative atmosphere.

So the two dads went and enjoyed their time. The following summer, a large Marriage Encounter group of families from our church in Paso Robles also went camping at Limekiln. This time there was no discussion about not attending Mass and of course the kids would go! I don't remember how the slew of kids behaved (there were probably over twenty of them!), but what I do remember was a comment from one of the monks after Mass in the bookstore. He said, “Thank you for bringing the children! We hardly ever get to see children up here.”

From that point on, we always took the kids to Mass at the Hermitage whenever we were camping at Limekiln and the kids always loved it.

Fast-forward a good twenty years...our youngest daughter, age 24, was home for a weekend and we decided to go to the Hermitage for Mass. She did not remember the Hermitage as it had been many years since we'd been there. (Our favorite camping spot had changed.) As we drove up the long winding drive, she was quiet. But when we arrived at the door of the chapel, she suddenly said, “I remember this place!” Her face glowed with obviously happy memories.

So I would encourage families to experience Mass at the Hermitage. It always quiets my all-too-busy mind and heart. For a child, it offers an experience that one cannot easily find in our crazy world. It provides an opening to a possibility.

An interesting sidenote about that first trip: our daughter married the son of the other family. We are now grandparents to their daughter! Maybe she will visit the Hermitage someday too.

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Big Sur to Rome and Back Again

Ignatius Tully, OSB Cam

As I make my Solemn Vows with the monastic community at New Camaldoli Hermitage, I have been thinking a lot about my journey towards this moment.

For the past two years I have been living at San Gregorio al Celio, our Camaldolese monastery in Rome, and studying at the Pontifical Beda College. This time in Italy has been a particularly fruitful and wonderful part of my monastic journey. It has given me the opportunity to immerse myself in the living history of the Church and of our Camaldolese congregation and allowed me to get to know my Camaldolese brothers and sisters from our communities across the world.

Living in Rome has been a unique experience. It is one of the world's truly ancient cities and you experience that antiquity wherever you go. The constant flow of pilgrims and tourists reinforce the sense that this has been a special place that has drawn people to it for millennia.

However, Rome is not a museum. It is a living modern city. Every day as I walk to my classes at the Beda, I see the rhythm of ordinary life that is common in all cities—people hurrying to work; dropping children off at school; greeting acquaintances in the street, etc.

I also see the more hidden and painful side of the city. Hundreds of young men, mostly from Africa, have survived the perilous Mediterranean Sea crossing and have ended up homeless and penniless in Rome with no idea what life has in store for them next. These are the faces behind the statistics of Europe’s migrant crisis.

Soon after making my Solemn Vows, I will return to Rome for a further year of studies. I look forward to seeing what God’s providence will show me in this coming year in Italy and the eternal city.

Br. Ignatius sings the “Suscipe” after signing his vows: “Receive me, O Lord, as you have promised and I shall live; do not disappoint me of my hope!”
2017 Annual Camaldolese Retreat: To Love the World—Responsible Contemplation

Helena Chan, Oblate OSB Cam

Mary Oliver’s poem “My Work is Loving the World” inspired our sold-out retreat held August 18–20 at the Saint Francis Retreat Center, in San Juan Bautista.

The staff and friars extended their wonderful hospitality for the second year—we plan to return!

We welcomed first-timers who have yet to visit Camaldolese houses in California as well as old friends of the communities, and we received Bill Osuna of San Francisco into the Camaldolese oblate family at Saturday’s Mass, with Fr. Robert celebrating and preaching.

Innisfree played Celtic instrumental and vocal music with Fr. Cyprian joining in.

Our keynote speaker, Sr. Donald Corcoran, a Camaldolese nun from Transfiguration Monastery in Windsor, New York, led two sessions full of rich reflections and resources focusing on “Sacred Humanitas” and reflecting on the wisdom of Fr. Bruno.

At the Monks’ Q&A, Fr. Steven (MRC) and Frs. Raniero, Robert, and Cyprian fielded questions on the meaning of privilegio, Prior Alessandro’s letter convoking general chapter, news from the communities, and the road status at New Camaldoli.

Brother Matteo baked his famous lemon and white chocolate cake for the reception—heavenly!

Meditation, gentle yoga, facilitated discussions on the talks, updates on the oblate peer mentoring and spiritual direction programs, a creative retreat capstone, and collatio on Sunday’s Gospel rounded out the weekend where retreatants were encouraged to participate as they felt led.

The time together was jovial, reverent, silent, joyful, and gifted by each person contributing to a palpable sense of mutual care, and attentiveness in liturgy, silence, and meals.

Join us next year as contemplatives loving the world and growing in the Camaldolese charism.

From the Development Office

Jill Gisselere

It has been quite a year at the Hermitage following last winter’s storms—a long season of shortages, isolation and difficulties of various kinds, as well as a priceless opportunity for the monks and staff to come together as a community at a new depth.

The staff who commute endured considerable obstacles just getting to work: hiking the bypass trail, up the side of a cliff on switchbacks, climbing thirteen flights of stairs. When Highway 1 became passable again, we would often encounter pedestrians walking in the middle of the road or curious tourists riding rented electric bicycles.

Since mid-July, the monks have been able to welcome retreatants again, glad to return to their ministries of hospitality and spiritual direction, grateful for the support of friends far and near and the tireless work of the courageous CalTrans teams who cleared and re-opened the roads.

The monks are especially grateful for and moved by the generosity beyond measure of all those whose donations kept the community afloat during this emergency.

Happily, Highway 1 once again open to the north, and winding Nacimiento-Fergusson Road currently remains the access from 101 to the east.

There is much work still to be done. Please consider a gift to the Hermitage if you are able to make one. Our GoFund-Me page has a new goal of $600,000 to cover the enormous cost to repair the road up from the highway.

Many thanks to the entire extended family who support and enrich the life of what Cyprian has called “a place apart.”
Activities and Visitors

JULY
Br. Ignatius returned to New Camaldoli for the summer from Rome where he has been studying theology. He has one more year to finish. Fr. Daniel organized a fund-raising concert featuring Fr. Cyprian and cellist Joseph Hebert at the Serra Chapel near Paso Robles, which was a great success in spite of the 106 degree temperature! We had a visit from former Abbot Primate Notker Wolf, whose retirement gift from the Benedictine Confederation was a round-the-world trip. The Financial Advisory Board met at Monastery of the Risen Christ. Fr. Thomas offered a seminar on film at the Pacifica Institute with Dr. Francis Liu, sponsored by the Esalen Institute.

AUGUST
Br. Bede celebrated 35 years of monastic vows. We welcomed a new member of our staff, Jeri Corgill, who will be serving as our Financial Manager. We held our 5th annual Camaldolese Retreat for Oblates and Friends at St. Francis Retreat Center in San Juan Bautista. Sr. Donald Corcoran offered two conferences on “Sacred Humanitas” centered around the thought of our beloved late Fr. Bruno. It was a great success and a full house, with Frs. Robert, Raniero, and Cyprian in attendance, as well as Fr. Stephen from Monastery of the Risen Christ. We monks were led in our own yearly retreat by Fr. Konrad Schaefer, OSB, who is the prior of Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles in Cuernavaca, Mexico. He preached on the Gospel of Matthew and the Rule of Benedict.

SEPTEMBER
Bros. Gabriel and Michael went to the Southern California Charismatic Conference, with Raniero along as main caregiver for Gabriel. We celebrated the Solemn Profession of Ignatius on the 15th, the Feast of Our Lady. Fr. Isaiah as well as Michael and Jim Marra, our claustral oblate, all took family visits this month. Frs. Thomas and Cyprian went to Camaldoli, our motherhouse in Italy, for the General Chapter, which was held until October 15th.

What the Monks Are Reading

Br. Ignatius: Roots of Christian Mysticism by Olivier Clement
Fr. Robert: Meeting Christ in His Mysteries: a Benedictine Vision of the Spiritual Life by Fr. Gregory Collins
Fr. Cyprian: Trump and a Post-Truth World by Ken Wilber
Fr. Isaiah: The Wolf Hunt by Gillian Bradshaw; Freedom and Forgiveness by Fr. Paul Farr
Br. Timothy: Heaven Begins Within You by Anselm Gruen; Where God Happens by Rowan Williams
Br. Bede: Lectio Divina: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness by Christine Valters Paintner and Lucy Wynkoop
Fr. Steven: The View from the Center of the Universe by Joel Primack and Nancy Abrams; Personal Transformation and a New Creation edited by Ilia Delio

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If you have comments or questions, please email newsletter@contemplation.com.
Mid-December

Westering sun a mist of gold between solemnities of crowded vertical poplar twigs. The mountain’s western slope is touched weightlessly with what will be, soon, the afterglow.

– Denise Levertov