

WEEK OF A VISITOR

IN A STRANGER'S HOUSE:

A Man without a Season From Merton's Hermitage

by **David Kocka**

SUNDAY, Merton's Hermitage, Abbey of Gethsemani

This is a house — a warm house with cool concrete walls. I'm too old, too gone by myself to play hermit. Those desires have faded into the romantics of my youth. I live on new romantics though I'm not quite sure of their characteristics. (My first ritual). My first action here, once I unpacked, was to create a ritual. I believe in the need and purpose of rituals, though in these days they seem odd and obsolete. Dogs sniff out their turf — poets sniff out poems. And I feel a need for a ritual.

I got a bowl, filled it with water, blessed it and walked through the house reconsecrating old memories, past events and thoughts, and the pains and joys that dwell here. I prayed that the sadness might become creative energy and the insights might re-abound. Then outside, once the square house was blessed, I walked a large circle around it and blessed the earth. I feel more at home now and ready to settle in.

† †

The bumble bees are mating in their bumbling sort of way just off the porch in mid-air. Maybe that is the ecstasy one has to learn in a place like

this: all this takes place in the blue haze — green sun-filled thick avenue of woods. I see the hills in the spring distance and wonder who and how many have gazed out from this window.

Such thoughtful seeds feel good in this solitude. They simply scamper in my skull like the mouse patters scrambling above my head in the ceiling. The monk steel cup is half-filled with water — here on the old prophet's desk. A lizard steadily guards the wood box and butterflies burst wild from the tall grass.

The old wagon wheel looks at me from the foot of the cross. Twenty years it has been there near the crowded lilies. Like an ancient cyclops eye — with two spokes missing tooth-gaped — it stares at me. The old thing is rusty and worn out, rim tottered, tilted, decaying, exhausted from too many fiery ascensions. Elijah doesn't live here any more.

However, his ravens do (we call them crows). They can be heard in the distance. They it must be who leave me bread and cheese at the doorstep.

The cheese stench lingers on my fingers with no one here to comment. A fox, a beautiful grey fox, strutted by this evening as the sun was going down. It stopped and looked at me like a monk upon whose solitude one has intruded.

This is a good place to come back to like an old familiar home — not a hermitage. It's my first visit. Here no one will stone your poems and make you famous. You can read them to the trees and they'll applaud when they're ready — if aided by a drifting wind. But that might be weeks away when I'm in another home.

Perhaps good poems need to be mulled over and after for a long time by a metabolism that is as natural as they are.

RITUALS:

For a fledgling hermit mind, someone need define the rituals of living here. For this reason the only book I brought of Merton's was for this purpose. (*Day of a Stranger*).

The outhouse is inside now — (development comes to those who wait). The king snake near the outhouse is to be addressed such-wise upon entry: "Are you in here, you bastard?"

Reply: "Why are you?"

The bees have gone to bed. It's 9:00 p. m. Sounds change to wood night songs. Bugs are attracted to my night light — kamikaze-ing the window screen. Light can do astounding things to creatures, but so can darkness. I shut off the light and wait for dreams to come — sleeping in Merton's hard simple bed.

Dream

- (1) I saw myself reaching to touch the night reading light — then pulled my hand back quickly — too hot (then I woke up).
- (2) In a green wooded forest a deer appears before me (then I woke up).

MONDAY

At six o'clock a slip of grey white light snuck through the corner of the blinds and hit me in the face. I heard a bird or two. I slept much too well for a fake hermit.

† †



THE HERMITAGE

Photo by Thomas Merton

I put on my ritual garb (shorts and a sweater) and marched to the indoor outhouse. It's funny how these rituals become so easy with time. Boiled water for tea — sat on the porch and I knew that a hermit day had begun; the bumble bees were beginning to mate and work, fight and buzz under the wide eaves as a streak of red sunlight crashed into the green wood onto the grass — an early point of light.

In the simple quiet chapel I prepared for Eucharist. Icons on the wall supported my prayer. Elijah attended and so did the Virgin Mother.

Thick, brown and moist Trappist bread about the size of a silver dollar was placed on the patten. The sweet wine could be smelled as it mingled with the aroma of candle wax. I prayed the Mass of the Holy Spirit — prayed for peace from this place of peace — prayed for the healing of my genetic line on back as far as God would go.

Then I prayed the rosary. Simple prayer forms are best for me now. Unconditional love cannot be conjured.

† †

Well, here I am, Merton. What does a hermit do now? I've prayed. I know your answer, Merton, and yes, the wind has come through the trees and I had no choice but to breathe it. I'll put on my pants now and try to live with this day.

† †

How many wish they could be here in my stead this week? Many, I'm sure. Some retreatants sneak up here to get a glimpse of the house. They have great reverence for this bit of concrete on a hill stuck in the pines. But it was you whom they really sought. No, it is something much more than you. You just contained that which we all contain and seek to gain, looking in strange places to find. I really didn't care to come here now. Ten years ago — maybe even five — would have sparked me more. But here I am, without even trying, I've come to visit. You invited me and must have thought me ready. Years ago when I would have thought I needed to come, I would simply have been an intruder. Glad to meet you, Mr. Stranger.

† †

As a matter of fact I'm looking for my own home. A place in which I

can put on, without fear and in freedom, the primal mind in order to make apparitions. Solitude is dangerous.

And the danger makes it holy — can't get too comfortable or you'll run the risk of being a hermit or a monk, an artist or a poet or a seer, soothsayer or shaman. No, when solitude becomes too comfortable — shoot it — because you are in the wrong place.

† †

Primal minds possess no word for art. They have a concept for living, which the western mind might interpret as art. Their immersion in the vast life of tribal experience and its expressions through art and ritual the West calls culture. Their art and their life is only visible, not tangible. They use mystery to celebrate mystery, not to explain it. Perhaps this is my hermit's week task.

† †

Our tribes have hidden themselves in the woods somewhere. And the keepers of the symbols have gone with them. Up here no one knows my name and, if they do, they don't care and if they care, I don't know it. Perhaps this is a house for strangers to visit. Estranged egos looking for a place to strip off their shells and be, without trying, all that they can be, because there is no way to be anything else.

† †

There is nothing here but the apparition of life. Nothing or at least not too much to distract you from your state of not being with that of which you are a part.

Breakthrough is at our fingertips daily if we are willing to take off Perceval's homespun or break Perseus' shield and turn around to discover that the one who spoke to us out there in a mirror darkly was living in the back of our brain.

Such thoughts strike me gently in your house, Mr. Stranger, but this is not the place for too many thoughts — I'll just pick up my Nikon-icon-maker and contemplate with a third eye.

† †

Returning from a long walk in the mid-day sun, sweating well and feeling the cool breeze as I ascended toward the house, I was struck, almost halted, by the pattern of the road. About two years ago I had a dream of ascending a mountain. The road was paved for a while, then it turned into gravel — then dirt — then a simple worn path with grass untrampled.

Two ducks waddled by in front of me. At the top of the mountain was a shelter. From the heights I saw a house in the valley under clear water. Then upon entering the shelter I saw Merton in a pool. He invited me in and together we played with a girl about three years old, splashing and almost dancing in the clear water.

Then a woman figure handed me a bronze sculpture. It was very primitive, like a deer head, the kind primal minds of Africa might make (I awoke).

The road conjured up that dream. It brought it back as clear as day and I recognized that this was the road.

Is this why you invited me up here, Merton? To play in some fresh spring pool with a little child and with you?

If you did, what does it mean — or is meaning out of the question here? Primal people celebrate mystery with mystery itself. I'd like to learn the lesson of living where meaning and life are not distinguished and given private categories.

I'd like to think you've invited me here to unmask what little is left of my illusions of you. Maybe it will just simply drain and dribble out of me so as to allow me the freedom of not having ever to identify with you again.

This is my home right now, Merton, and the one who gave it to me is the same one who gave it to you in the first place.

† †

Merton, I imagine many wish to come here to play a game that they thought you played. I would have been one of them a few years back. But the funny thing is you didn't even know the game you were playing. There were no rules or rites and no wrongs. You just simply tried to play and at times got caught in the thought of thinking. That same game needed to emerge. Useless undefinable uselessness — no scheme no context no pretext for living. All the good works have gone home to hell — all the self-made puppets who try and prop up a dying culture are busy about many things. The ecclesiastical marionettes do their stringed dance, program after program. Hoping something will save our desperate diaspora.

A crucified "corpus christi" of which our best efforts are no more than nails being pulled from the palms.

It is sadness that built this house, not pessimistic retreat. Sadness because this house wants to be everywhere. Not a novelty, but a norm, not fringe, but requisite like breathing is to the lungs.

† †

Transformation — a term that western minds find hard to understand. This is America, Merton. The myth in this land is what transformed you. The natives of this earth have taught you the secret of the grandfathers. They live in the trees outside your cabin. Transformation can be done only with a primal mind. Metamorphosis of one thing into another for the sake of knowing and relating with the other. Did Kafka follow me up here?

† †

Sitting on the porch today gazing southward in the blue-green horizon I felt myself transformed:

My eye lashes felt like the wide eaves. My feet felt like a concrete porch. The trunk of my body was built of living blocks and at the center was the hearth. What is it like to be a house on a hill in the woods of Kentucky?

Cords of wood lean against my left side, little lizards play in the cracks. The sun bakes the top of my head and I take it without a sound until the cool night air allows me a crack of relief.

My porch is surrounded by tall green plants. It is a cool moist earth under those footings. I am a shelter for more than men. A spider lives in the sink. Cobwebs are suspended like bridges in secret corners. The branches of big trees scrape me on all sides while hordes of ants tickle my bricks in their rummaging work. The pump of the cistern begins when the toilet is flushed — it seems as though I have gas. My ceiling is soot-soiled from old fires — they are the only remarks I will make of what has gone on here in prayer or in play. No need to tell my secrets. I'm a hermitage. Silence is my final word.

I am maturing in my old age. There are cracks in my facade which make me a little more distinguished than before. I imagine that someday I'll be even more honored than now, not unlike the caves of St. Francis. Yes, that day may well come, being unwelcome, when they make me a sanctuary.

People will gawk at my nakedness then. Pilgrims in need of a touch from their center. And they will go home being disappointed that I am so simple. O yes, the future may be like that but I hope they realize by then that what they obscurely seek in me is not here and never was. Go build your own house. This one is filled, like a widow, with beautiful memories.

† †

When one chooses to come to a wilderness such as this, one sees how routine the days are. Even the animals, most often unnoticed, retrace their paths and replay their rituals. One just never knows with them when they play and when they work.

We make our lives all too important, just too commodious for a sacrament. Then the time comes in convalescence, in nursing homes or on the death bed, when we wrestle and begin to deal with the face of solitude. Sitting in a rocker looking out at the beautiful landscape reminds me of the old men and women who stare out of their windows, nothing to live for and too healthy to die. They are like fisher kings, but aren't we all? The difference between the hermit — fake or true — and these folks is choice, or is that even valid? Perhaps some attend to the inner choice of spirit earlier than others.

† †

The life of unconditional love is a life of humility and transparency. If we could only learn somehow to become human spores, letting life in, its sounds and colors, charm, and aroma, letting it all pass through us and out from us without blocking or clinging. This place is a place for mad men, wild men, who know they have bodies and balls, hands and feet, nostrils and hearts, ready to be engaged and ruffled a bit in their encounter with life.

Dare I roll in the grass up here — hug a tree — stand naked in the Kentucky forest at dawn or at midnight — sure I want to — don't we all deep down and secretly. But if we did, could we still make a distinction between the dancer and the dance?

It is dangerous for our western minds to do that free and honest a thing. Maybe if we're drunk enough we'd do it. But then our egos have dissolved in solution and become numb. The freedom of choice is gone and only freedom can spawn that contemplation. No wonder places like this are filled with mysterious wonder and great dread. You're on the edge

of being what you always were and unsure if you want to be what you've always longed for and sought in the oddest of places. The funny thing about daring to touch that wild uncontrollable side is not that someone might see (although there is a collective voice that rings in the back of the brain) . . . what is worse is if I'm not wholeheartedly involved in it, then I might have to watch myself be a fool. If I take the plunge this week into my wild sanity, I won't tell you. Only my shaman knows for sure.

TUESDAY

This place is built for aboriginal "dreamtime." That is what our culture refers to as poetry. People all over the world join me here when the question "where are we when we think?" is asked.

Dreamtime is sacred time — the realm of myth and inspiration. It is a time when someone speaks to me with my own voice. A marvelous familiar stranger appears. William Blake suggested "if the doors of perception were cleaned, man would see everything as it is, infinite." To cultivate the imagination is to attend to the sacrament of the psyche (soul).

Perhaps the real need of places like this is to fulfill the need that our culture has lost so long ago. When western culture stepped out of its primal mind, we set our course on a journey which is difficult to retrieve. We've become perpetual spectators of the world vicariously living (or thinking to live), outside the nature that governs us by "natural law." But the physicists (specialists), to whom we have given away our power, are only now discovering from their objective spectator sport that they are unsure of what the "natural law" is.

I wonder if that doesn't also happen in ecclesiastical circles. We've locked up our mystics. Joseph Cupertino flew around when he celebrated Mass — lock him away ... kill the medicine men, censor the shaman . . . why? Because death is a universal threat to the existence of the physical body — but "heresy" is a threat to "existence" itself. (At least one perspective of existence).



View from within THE HERMITAGE

Photo by Thomas Merton

I think that Christ came and grew here as a cult figure because the west needed him more than most. He didn't appear in China or in the Americas. He came to the center of the "civilized world," even the physical center of that time. Why? To show us how to become God. Or rather to return to us our lost humanity, that is, "to open the doors of perception — to cleanse it so that we could see things as they are": "infinite."

† †

What did you go out into the desert to see? Someone dressed in fine clothes or one naked rolling in the grass and hugging trees — speaking with birds and dreaming dreams?

Isn't that why the desert Mothers and Fathers went out to the solitary places? The primal peoples made a life of such an adventure. They could not be whole if they hadn't attempted a vision quest. The quests would rely on sacred songs and hardships, fasting, sleeplessness, nakedness, cold, living for days in the wilderness as a means of stimulating visions.

We seem to laud the saints and revel in their glory as opposed to celebrating their substance by similar practice. Jung is correct when he states that we are living in a mythless society. Our rites, rituals, symbols and art are so banalized that those who feel the great call are either victims of the collective unconscious or make great strides to create their own myths.

The spectators among us will then critique their life and work as *avant garde* and laudable or as trash that upsets our taste. Van Gogh and Gauguin are good examples.

Our religious deserts seem to suffer the same onslaught. Even the most vigorous of them can too often get caught up in the comfortable and familiar. When the desert becomes an oasis the suburbs will move in. Then the church and even its potential bright stars will become gypsies and tourists, no longer pilgrims and strangers.

† †

Yes, this place, Merton, is still primitive enough to scare you to death and rebirth. Dare I tell you what I saw from your old porch last evening when the sun was almost set and darkness crept in? Did you know there was a shrine to a virgin about seventy yards from the cabin? There is. She is only three feet tall and low to the ground under a canopy of trees, very simple. I was watching the night descend when I looked her way.

As I stared I'm sure I saw her move. I remembered how as a child waiting to go to confession in the dark church halls, I would gaze in a similar way at the Sacred Heart statue. It would move for me then, too. I'm sure that has happened to many of us when we were children. Well, I looked again and looked dimly at what was dim. For fifteen minutes I looked that way and the more I looked the more she moved, that is she danced, really danced with soft curves and gentle motions. It was as if I was being invited to dance with her. Did I tell you that Kafka followed me up here? I won't tell you what I did. That is too personal.

† †

It rained early this morning and was rather cool. I built a fire and prayed in the rocking chair. The tea kettle brought me to the kitchen for breakfast, oatmeal and toast. When the sun came out I spread some blankets on the grass to burn out the musty smell. It's noon and time to pray again.

† †

On my third day as a part-time hermit, it has come to my attention that a schedule must be created. Though hermits must be wild and free that does not mean they can be lazy and indulgent.

What should a hermit's day be like?

- get up and out of bed when you wake up. the sun helps you out that way.
- first ritual leads you to the indoor outhouse . . .
- sit down and wake up — listen to the day begin. what can you expect from the day — the sun helps or the lack thereof.
- boil water for tea.
- pray for awhile — while the water is boiling.
- eat breakfast.
- celebrate Eucharist and pray for awhile.
- work time — find something that will move your blood. Make you sweat — stretch your ligaments and loose your mind from the thought that you're playing hermit. Now don't overdo it — there is nothing to be gained in working to get too much done quickly. If you do that there will be too much time for thinking of things to do. No rush, take

- it easy and enjoy splitting wood, or cutting grass, or cleaning the cabin.
- take some nourishment — take a nap — the Lord gives to his beloved in sleep.
 - now sit on the porch and feel free to think how being here makes no sense at all. Think, too, how dull you are and how dull you were before you came here.
 - take a walk someplace without direction — just walk 'cause it's good to walk while you can. Enjoy walking and breathing. Walk till you think of something to do, then keep walking and don't do that good thing you thought of doing.
 - read for awhile. Pick something out to read by your intuition. Read on the porch till a bee distracts you or a thought spins you off into a blank stare . . . let the thought walk on by and read . . .
 - write if you feel it and then write when you feel that you don't feel it.
 - be attentive to the little things — like the rotation of the fan — the overhead mouse — the bird chirp — squirrel rattle — dog bark and bee buzz — feel your butt on the bench — feet on the flour — heart beat — breath — hand scratch — itch on the face.
 - eat when you are hungry and sleep when you are tired.
 - go pray — BREATHE.
 - take some time to think on how bad you are at being a hermit . . .

† †

Two of Elijah's ravens came today, one on foot, the other on a bike. The foot raven brought me some eggs, corn and margarine. He must have been a Mayan in a former life. The bike raven brought beer, poetry and conversation. We shared a beer, read a poem about the "Luxuriant Apocalypse" and talked about *pointe vierge* and the Immaculate Conception.

† †

There are holy men in this place — sensitive men who struggle like the rest of us — more intensely at times perhaps — with the terrors of Paradise. If we could only clean the doors of perception and see things as they are.

WEDNESDAY

Overslept and missed the sunrise — then I completed my usual rituals and went to the desk to finish reading the poems Paul [Quenon] gave me. They are good poems — honest and straightforward — humorous — deep when depth is called for. Irony must be a Trappist trait or rather, in attempting seriously to live out a solitary life (an impossible ideal), irony becomes a tool — a vantage point whose message is simply: “Your ego’s been nudged — now laugh at it creatively and stop taking yourself and your ideas so seriously.”

I read a poem on the porch which was my response to his poetry — got choked up a bit and made him read my awful writing. Then I tried again with great ease —

Paul brought the graveling lawn cutter up to let me get some exercise and tidy up the tall grass. I felt like one of the horsemen of the apocalypse behind that bright red and white machine — uphill — near the lilies — into a tree round the building — nicked the fence post — into mole ruts — over an anthill — into a ditch and parked.

The exercise felt good — sweat, dirt in my face, stretched body and mostly losing myself in the process. Modern man on the whole is sick because of a sick outlook on leisure and labor. Sure, some get exercise but that’s different somehow. An old Indian shaman said: “It doesn’t matter too much what you eat or drink, etc . . . but somewhere somehow you’ve got to sweat.” What’s that commercial that is ringing in my ear? Never let ’em see you sweat? — In other words never let them see you vulnerable or human — keep up the image, the persona mask — you might die young and frustrated — but you sure as hell will look and smell good.

Sweat — that’s the only message I have received here — sweat and do what you will.

This is a catholic hermitage — with a small “c.” And I find it most amusing that in every hermitage I’ve been to from the Franciscan hermitage of Monte Casale — LeCelle — LaCarceri — St. Anthony’s in Egypt and an isolated home in the Arizona desert — certain animals are required. Most of them contain the same creatures. Lizards are a must, so too are crows, butterflies, wasps, bees, moths and mice. Here I’ve got them all and they are important. They are the only ones who give you a sense of life that is at least familiar. I missed the bumble bees today for about an hour. They must have been napping.

For lunch: I took the ravioli left from Sunday which Brother Anthony kindly gave me and added some ginger — hot sauce — peppers — altar wine — cheese and tomatoes, onions and a few other odds and ends and ate well and in peace. The turmoil will come later but I brought some Maalox. Yes, I believe even hermits can't digest everything. Especially after having to deal with all the beasts —(i.e., as mentioned above). Those creatures are more than empirical data on the paper from *National Geographic* — they live in the psyche —

Or at least so I'm told as I sit here with a glass of Yellowstone reading Jung. Yes, I forgot to tell you, he and an American Indian name Jameke Highwater followed me up here too.

Before my discussion with them, however, I needed to get air in my pickup's tire. So I got gas as well and, while I was at it, some beer and bourbon. Well, you have to help out the local economy and this is bourbon country — you wouldn't want to offend them.

Besides if some monk is inspired to visit this time I can offer him a beer. Actually it is wise to have no booze if you are attempting to get in touch with the divine. However, wine and bread do help in an unbloody sort of way. But I've come to appreciate that, like solitude: if you are too routinely comfortable with it, the possibility of breakthrough is impossible. You might just as well have a drink. With the danger of overindulgence at hand, I find inebriation a possibility every step of the way. Drink — solitude-monastic life-art-mysticism and the lot — compulsion comes in many forms. That's why you see snakes — beetles — bats, birds and virgins dancing — well, not the only reason.

In other words, life everywhere is dangerous, especially if you take yourself too seriously or not seriously enough. Monks, hermits and the rest of us should learn a lesson. Firstly, there are no monks nor hermits nor the rest of us. Just people stuck with a bundle of grace and love that twists and squirms in our bellies and bowels, sometimes making it to the head where dreadful disease gets worse like the curse that came from the garden. To each his or her own darkness and light. Let's allow justice and peace to kiss and make up and unfold into a compassionate new being. That sounds catholic to me.

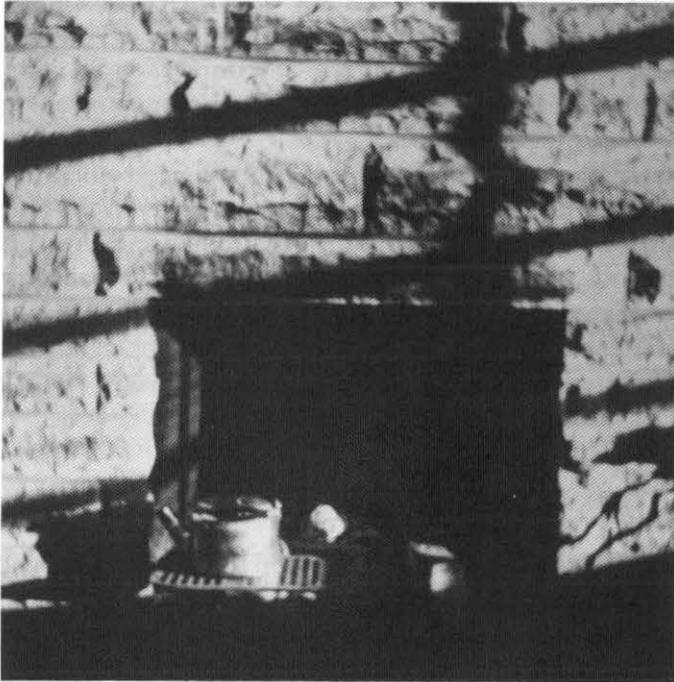
If there are any monks left over, any hermits or pretenders, there's beer left in the fridge: "Drink it and do what you will" — the cows have all gone home.

This place needs a woman's touch — but what masculine place doesn't. *Anima mea* please get out of here, this is not a place for women, at least as far as I know. Let's cut down the flowers — separate the bees — harvest the forests — kick out our souls — damn it, David, stop writing poetry — Sophia just jumped into the bedroom and Proverb slipped out of the lectionary — can't you see that we are overrun by that spirit called woman. Boy! — I mean — Girl! that bourbon does do strange things.

Anyway, whoever reads these lines probably thinks I'm a heretic — well, that might be so. I read in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that little minds undid Meister Eckhart in that fashion.

Merton didn't live long enough to see that they now call him a saint. So much for a defense. The cows still have gone home. Besides, I sing Kyrie and Sanctus in the liturgies I'm privileged to celebrate — how's your local pastor?

† †



THE HERMITAGE FIREPLACE

Photo by Thomas Merton

In a vision I saw a cope crucified to an apse wall — waiting for some symbol loving fable child to pull out the nails like the youth Arthur of the Round Table and Holy Grail, who pulled out the sword from the stone.

Then I saw the nostalgic saccharine souls with bodies beyond the sixties or stuck in the early part of the century who want to return to the old unconscious rites (familiar no longer) or make a return to that which they've never known. Sweet Jesus, I'm with you, come softly with your rouge and lipstick heart throbbing in your hand. Don't laugh — there's something to be learned — don't long for it — it's got you already —

When you take the icons out of churches, posters abound in the stores . . . read the signs of the times, that's a sacrament too.

Where have all the poets gone? — long time passing, where
have all the poets gone.

. . . long time ago — ?

Could it be and should it — that our mythless West — to say a society without a season or reason to live — which undoes every culture because we ourselves are undone — has as some ungodly vocation from God the call to do just that?

And if and when we've undone and done them in with our great western aggression imposing our principles, our norms and our mission (let no culture remained unturned).

Then, perhaps, all of us on the same fragile and vulnerable turf can look at one another in wonder and weep — saying: "Wasn't it good, that variety, those songs and those stories, that color and dress, those eyes terrorized by the plow of paradise lost, longing to gain their own garden."

Then it could be that we agree, being commonly common, that the old stories and songs, color and dress would return on their own to give us a grace unexpected, engaging us in a peace that is beyond our limited view.

Could it be and should it?

THURSDAY

Well, I've got two new piles of wood to stack today as well as finish cutting the grass. My meeting with the Abbot and a small committee to interview for a possible sculpture commission will be held tomorrow evening at 6.45 p.m.

I'm not too sure the monks here are ready to "cannon-ize" Merton in bronze. I can understand and appreciate that. I'm sure they weren't too

hot on doing the same for Benedict either. But until people come to the awareness that they too contain that virginal point (*point vierge*), we will always have need to project our hidden inner goodness outward onto someone else — we'll make others live out or represent our un-lived call to holiness. Some sort of image of Merton will arrive here in a public way sometime, I'm sure of that, perhaps if not now, maybe in fifty years or so.

† †

I didn't sleep all that well last night. You know they don't have springs on the beds. That must be one of those techniques for subverting your sleep in order to induce visions. Do you really think so?

This is no place for hermit-asters. I'm sure many of us will come here to have a retreat with Merton, but don't you listen to them. Merton doesn't live here any more. *Resurexit — sicut — dixit*.

This is just a place where someone tried to live a simple life with all its mystery and struggle, who failed at times, was unsure of the code, caught some glimpses of the Kingdom — was smart enough to see beyond the hills, wanted to be everywhere where he wasn't and knew that being here was just as good a place as any, seeing that everywhere and nowhere were the same. That was his genius.

To catch the wave of that spirit authentically would mean to build your own house, in your own place, according to your own nature. But you have to have a nature first in order that "Grace's House" can be edified. When you ride on the shirttails of someone else's wake, it usually means you are uncertain of your nature and certainly out of touch with your creativity. We Catholics have always been good at capitalizing on the dead bones of our saints and mystics. As long as that saint or mystic is locked up in a flesh-eater sarcophagus — behind glass or in the gilded reliquary, in pieces all over the world, they're safe enough to have around. Let's all jump off the Merton bandwagon. Anyway, the wheel is broken and leans up against the cross decaying day by day.

Don't get me wrong, Mertonians — I think he should be honored and thanked, celebrated and remembered. More than that we should learn what he was in the process of learning.

Sanctuaries and images, candles and pilgrimages are good, right and wholesome to my mind. But they are a little less than conscious events (effective perhaps at one level) if we don't allow them to point back to ourselves. They are a little like gazing at the finger that points to the moon.

† †

Is that enough preaching, Kocka? Are you satisfied that you got it out for yourself and you are convinced? Go mow the grass, you Hermit-aster. You'd like to have people read this just as much as the next guy. Who do you think you're fooling — are you channeling Merton now?

† †

Perhaps the Metaphor of Paradox is not only Merton's but, in fact, is the image of our age. Maybe that's why we can connect with his experience.

† †

Brother Patrick' [Hart] is coming up for supper. I'd better get the cheese and bread ready — clean up the lawn and pray some. In his office is a watercolor of the hermitage (painted by Jim Cantrell), right on the wall and if you could see through it, you'd be looking right at this site. So, according to the time-space consciousness of the Hopi Indians, if I walk out the front door of this place, I should be in his office. Hello, Patrick!

This is a universal point, if you take the Hopi consciousness into consideration. The mud daubers build their houses out of mud (obviously) and they are reminiscent of the adobe pueblo cultures. Then the meat eaters (wasps) are excellent technicians . . . they build their units like cells in a monastery — but then I'm not sure if they are monks or not — I think each cell is a pentagon. Anyway, they are guarding the four corners of the great porch. You can see by the mud smears on the porch trim, somebody undid most of the pueblo — mud dauber homes. So much for the third world.

But the bumble bees are the fat cats. They're as big as half of your thumb. They live in the house like the rest of us — (dominant culture that we are). Oh well, so much for projection.

† †

God? I'm not going to talk about God here — that's in another notebook.

† †

I don't miss the TV except for Ted Koppel. Anyway the hearth with a fire in it serves a similar purpose. Perhaps a better one. To dream dreams or tell stories around that bundle of energy is better than most TV programs I've seen. Besides there are no commercials.

† †

Most people don't want to be monks or hermits but they want to be holy — maybe even most monks and hermits don't want to be monks and hermits, they just want to be holy, too. The possibility of holiness is all over the place.

FRIDAY

Brother Patrick came for supper last night. We had cheese, bread and beer — lots of good conversation and some good laughs as well. He stayed an hour and a half beyond his bed time. I'm sure it was 9.30. They get up early here, you know.

† †

Well, I've decided that after my meeting with the Abbot I'll be on my way. There is still a good part of the day ahead of me and I hope to get the wood up in stacks before I leave.

† †

The longer one stays here the more attached you become to the idea and experience of solitude. Something in the brain's mechanics changes. I'm not sure if it's the air or the water but whatever it is, I find my thoughts calmer and clearer. There is no rush to get things done because of a deadline. Things get done in due season even in a senseless place.

At this stage in our evolution, it seems we are a society of instant replay. It used to be certain individuals would do a work or live a life and sometime down the road they would either be theologized, philosophized or historically criticized.

With the instant replay capability and mind set — we attempt an assimilation in the middle of the game, whatever that might be. This place

has reinforced for me the need for contemplative pause, over and after the events of life. Otherwise we run the risk of a superficial interpretation to the happenings.

I think that I have to live a life which counters our cultural thrust. That seems to be in accord with the Christian ideal. I've met too many people in my work who in some way could be called successful — but what kind of life was it? What good was it if you've never done the thing you wanted to do in all your life? We must go where our body and soul want us to go. Follow your bliss —

That is a very different call from being successful — it's a call to fidelity, to a knowledge of oneself. It's normally called conscience. One may even end up challenging the orthodox community of which he is a part. That's what happened to Jesus — he died as a heretic. Why should we be so amazed that in the history of our tradition we've burned many mystics as heretics? Follow your bliss and burn at the stake.

It seems to me the function of any orthodox community is to give the mystic his desire and scope: which is union with God — through mortification and death. But then let him go there. Give him the Judas-called "friend" kiss.

† †

It's been suggested by Hugo Rahner that the Church must live out, as the body of Christ, the elemental stages of his life. These stages are movements of transformation. Then it sounds as though he is suggesting that the Church must die and resurrect. I wonder if we're not on one of those death edges now.

Could it be that the Spirit Jesus sent us after his ascension, received at Pentecost, was taken and compiled in a collective vessel "the Church." Then the individual tongues of fire were consolidated in one fire (together — together). A union of this sort is not community, but we live under that assumption. To each his or her own flaming tongue. It's the relation that makes community possible — but individuals need to stand on their own grace-filled two feet in order to relate.

If the collected — unconscious — grace-filled vessel is on the verge of breaking, then some individuals had better be prepared to lap up what spills out or it will be lost.

† †

Now seems the hour when the Spirit of the Lord and Her Holy operation is once again presented to individuals who are willing to allow the Word to become incarnate in their lives. That's a tremendous task because it infers that no longer will an institution or group or one individual live your holiness for you.

† †

That, it seems to me, was the underlying message of Thomas Merton as well as all the great mystics.

† †

On his death bed, St Francis said: "The Lord has taught me what to do. May he teach you what is yours to do."

† †



THE HERMITAGE CROSS

Photo by Thomas Merton

Doing their doing and trying to become their being means we have lost the possibility of becoming our unique Christified selves who in concert with other Christified selves could illumine the world.

† †

Merton wrote on Franciscan eremitical life. Perhaps there is something of a vision for the future in that little essay. If this place of his wants not to be eccentric but concentric in relation to the world, if it does not want to be a novelty but a norm of sorts, then there may be truth in that statement.

The Franciscan eremitical life is a neighborhood of hermits with mothers and children. It's a little clustering of "church" in relation to one another and the world. Personally I feel that this rule for hermits could be expanded and developed in such a way that without creating a ghetto church — lively *comunidades de base* — could emerge. Some people already have their mission and call and are not following their bliss. That is tragic for the church, our nation and our world. Those who are accomplishing this in the — God be praised — variety of expression, I pray may be blessed.

The rest of us will just have to reflect on the possibility and hope our time will come.

I didn't want to write about you, Merton, especially in your own home. I'm sure that after twenty long years in eternity you know pretty much about yourself anyway. Besides I just wanted to pick up where you left off — isn't that what you'd have us do, rather than simply spin our wheels over your grave?

† †

They told me that Elijah's cloak is neatly packed away in the closet of your bedroom — it's been said he left it after his last fiery ascension, you know when the wheel broke off in the front yard: do you think it would fit?

† †

I read Robert Lax's poetry to the trees this afternoon after I packed. His picture is great. When I grow up to be white-haired like that, I want to comb my hair like Lax's.

By the way the trees applauded and so did I.

† †

I have to go and hug the trees now and bid this place farewell. Perhaps I will return some day. If not, it is because I have found my own hill and built my own house. And if that happens, then here and there are not distinct for a man without a season.