

A VISIT TO HOLY SPIRIT MONASTERY:

Excerpts from *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*

by **William Least Heat Moon**

Down on [the road] near Conyers, Georgia . . . I noticed an old-style water tower — the kind on stilts with a conical lid — topped by a cross. Even in the Bible Belt, this was out of place. Then I saw the tank stood on the grounds of the Monastery of the Holy Spirit. I turned up the drive of magnolias.

Built into a high wall, off the arched gateway, was a small bookshop. And there were books inside, but also jams and jellies, bread, sand castings, window hangings, religious pictures, rosaries, and placques saying “Have you not seen Him in the things He has made?”

A monk, about sixty, in the white tunic and black scapular of the Trappist, watched me open *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the autobiography of the Trappist father, Thomas Merton. Years ago I had started it only to put it down. “That’s one you should read,” he said in a voice like a truck in low gear.

“Did you ever meet Merton?”

“Meet Merton?” The tone was both raw and humorous, rough and inviting. “I knew Merton. I started out at the monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky, where Merton wrote that book. I came from there in nineteen forty-seven to help build this place out of pasture and woods. We put up everything you see except the old barn. That was here. We built as we could. Did the work ourselves with only a little help in architecture and circuitry.”

“Were you a carpenter or a tradesman of some kind?”

“Tradesman. That’s it. I traded stock on Wall Street for twenty years.”

That meant he had to be nearly eighty. He seemed a character out of *Lost Horizon*. “Why did you give up Wall Street to become a monk?”

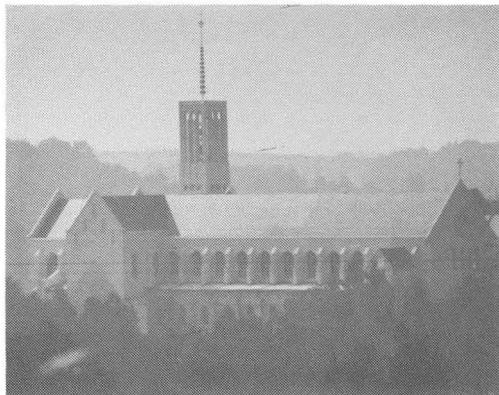
He cleared his throat and shifted down.

“Look — talking about the spiritual life is a lot of crap. You just live it.”

Idling tourists must have pestered him

□ **William Least Heat Moon** (or William Trogon) is a mixed blood American. His father, descended from native Americans, called himself “Heat Moon,” a translation from the Siouan of the tribal name. William’s older brother was called “Little Heat Moon,” and he as the younger “Least Heat Moon.” When he lost his job at a college in Missouri, he set out to follow the tracks of various ancestors and write a book about America — *Blue Highways*, a reference to old maps where main routes were in red and back roads in blue.

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THE CONCRETE MONASTERY

December 1960

with that question for thirty years. I felt simple and abashed.

“Why don’t you go inside to the Retreat House and tell the Guestmaster to invite you to lunch? You can ask your question in there.”

“Lunch?” I had thought the gates demarked a forbidden ground where the secret and medieval life went on.

“Go tell him. He’s Father Francis. Through the gate, follow the walk.”

“Lunch?”

“What’s your name, lad?” I almost said Lunch, but I got it right. He said, “My name used to be Bill.” Used to be. It sounded strange, as if he’d said, “I used to be a Bill too.” Later, I learned that was just what he did mean. All the monks used to be someone else. “I’m Brother Pius now.”

So I went through to the other side of the stone walls. Pius! What was wrong with Brother Bill. I felt guilty. I was here out of curiosity, a spiritual voyeur, an ecclesiastical window peeper. What’s more, such cloistered spirituality made me suspicious. Dubious about men who sought changelessness to release them from uncertainty and turmoil, I questioned a faith that has to be protected by illusory immutability. Intimidated by ignorance of Trappist beliefs, I was uneasy about what I imagined went on in a monastery. I mean, I’ve read Chaucer. Monasteries, I knew, were remnants from the Dark Ages — dying vestiges of medievalism — and monks were religious atavisms Why would they let me in?

I found the Retreat Lodge. A man, small and gray, moving up and down the halls, disappeared in one door, hurried out another, popped up here, then vanished again like Alice’s Wonderland rabbit. Somehow he came up behind me. He spoke the way he moved: dartingly. “Are you here for lunch?”

“I’d like to be.”

“Yes, yes. Fine. That’s fine. Yes.”

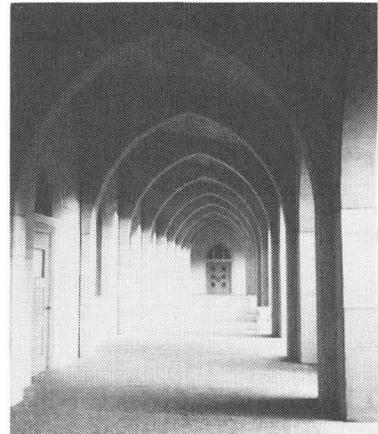
He scurried away a few steps, then scurried back. “There’s a reading room. Make yourself comfortable. I’ve got to tell the cook you’ll be with us. That’s fine.” He was through the door, down the hall.

On a desk I saw a flyer that said “Come aside for a while.” Aside. In the reading room there was only a single shelf of worn books, but I found the Merton and took it to a balcony overlooking a small enclosed, garden. Quiet and cool. No voices, no steps, nothing but a towhee in the bush whistling a one-note monotony. Aside.

I sat and stared into the trees, the book open across my legs. The monks had spoken as if they had met me long ago, as if I’d said years back, “I’ll be there someday. Don’t wait up.” I began reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* . . . [and it] brought something back, something from long ago: three times I had seen Heat Moon disappear when he sought the deepest union. Here was no Whitman celebrating himself, finding no sweeter fat than what sticks to his own bones.

An hour later, Brother Francis called me to lunch. The meal was a strange combination of monastic sparseness and a Little League picnic: on a plain white plate, boiled cabbage, a boiled potato, figs, rye bread, and hotdog: raspberry Kool-Aid to drink. No second helpings

On the balcony I read more Merton until Father Anthony Delisi, a man with a dark, Latin face,



THE CLOISTER



asked if I'd like to see the monastery. As we walked, he answered novice questions about the order The monastery grounds and buildings showed the Trappist desire for directness in the clarity of line, the openness, in the unclutter. It reminded me of the Shaker village. The buildings were concrete with touches of brick, stone, and unfinished wood, everything free of decoration except the geometry of stained glass in the chapel.

"Some find our place austere," Father Anthony said.

"Then I'll take austerity."

"The purpose is freedom — for body and mind. Simplicity is flexible. It endures well. Without so many things around, we have more time."

He showed me the subsistence industries: raising Black Angus, growing hay and vegetables and houseplants and bonsai, baking bread. Recently the brothers had started fabricating stained-glass windows for churches and synagogues after monks learned the craft while constructing windows for their own sanctuary

As we walked the grounds, Father Anthony introduced the monks. They were friendly in a plain and open manner, unsanctimonious, and not outwardly pious Yet the older one appeared a decade or more younger than men of their ages I was accustomed to seeing. Twisted or hanging faces were few. And, I must say, there was a life, a spirit, in the old who moved slowly. I realized I was trying to catch in their faces something I wouldn't see outside the walls — something hidden, transcendental, even mystical. But I noticed only a quietude, and I felt that more than saw it The evening meal was vegetable soup, peas, rice, bread, vanilla pudding. Again, just enough

Father Anthony asked me to join him at vespers. On the way to the chapel, we didn't talk. I think he was preparing. I remembered my denim and suspenders. "My clothes," I said.

He didn't break stride or turn his head. "How could that matter? But singing on key does. Can you?"

"Never could."

"Don't sing loud then. God doesn't mind. I do."

The monks filed noiselessly into the great, open sanctum and sat facing each other from both sides of the choir There was nothing but song and silence. No sermon, no promise of salvation, no threat of damnation, no exhortation to better conduct. I'm not an authority, God knows, but if there is a way to talk into the Great Primal Ears — if Ears there be — music and silence must be the best way

Amidst a clangor of bells in the middle of the night, the brothers began their day. I heard shuffling along the walks as they went to morning prayers. Admiring men who can give thanks for a day still two hours from first light. I again burrowed down into the bed in deep sloth.

After breakfast, I put my duffel together, left a contribution, and shook hands with a surprising number of people before going back through the big gate. When I stepped into my rig, I thought for a moment I was in the wrong truck. It seemed small and enclosed like a cell — not a monk's cell, but a prisoner's. Even simple and necessary gear looked foreign. Dross.