

## Four Early Unpublished Poems

By Thomas Merton

*This Summer issue of The Merton Seasonal continues the publication of a group of early poems by Thomas Merton that have not previously appeared in print. (For the first three poems to appear, see The Merton Seasonal, 25.1 [Spring 2000] 6-8.) All of the following, part of a large packet sent to Merton's friend and former teacher Mark Van Doren in November 1945, were probably written before Merton's entrance into the monastery.*

### AFTERNOON

Somewhere, some door,  
 Hung on a rusty hinge,  
 Cries like a catbird;  
 And in the garden's iron grass, a cricket  
 Chirps like a key in a lock:  
 And the man in the room's made prisoner.

What if the roses and the marigolds  
 Still in the pale sun thinly sing?  
 The garden walks are hot as brass,  
 And dust is in his vagrant's voice.  
 He cannot see to speak.

But all the quiet walls are full  
 Of secret, weeping waterpipes.  
 They rust to death  
 As slowly as he comprehends their sighing:  
 Sighs for the man who died just now,  
 Shot by the crack of riflebat  
 Where in the papercolored dust,  
 Ballplayers work, as serious as murder. . . .

Columbia – Van Doren File (encl. in 11/7/45 letter): 3-ring paper, with authorial corrections  
 3 Cries] *interlined in ink above cancelled* Mews 8 thinly] *preceded by x'd out* shyly sing  
 10 is] *preceded by x'd out in* 17 riflebat] riflebats 19 Ballplayers . . . murder. . . ] *interlined in ink below cancelled* They're playing baseball.

## NOCTURNE: NEW YORK

The girls as thin as cranes  
 Wait for their friends, the wise, dishonest doctors,  
 Whispering in the concrete arbors of the subway  
 With a noise of springs.

The artificial moons are ripening  
 Tied to the summer skies of cafeterias,  
 Where soldiers and their partners  
 Shuffle around the dancefloors fast as brooms.

Signs fly, like flags, all night  
 In doors of theaters, where the lonely thief  
 Waits, and dices with his hunger.

All night, the mothers of child-prodigies,  
 Play cards for nickels, and burn out like globes,  
 When whips of dawn snap in the city's rigging.

At last the greying bellstones ring  
 Where comes the sauntering patrolman,  
 Gathering up the murdered bodies of musicians.

The girls and doctors, with a noise of laughter,  
 Tear the paper sky,  
 Make known the copper hoop, the freezing sun,  
 And run into the subway, where their steps  
 Go off like guns.

Columbia – Van Doren file (encl. in 11/7/45 letter): carbon; discolored cream paper; earlier copy, called “Poem” – 3-ring paper with authorial corrections

1 thin] light 2 friends] *interlined in pencil above cancelled* loves 2 wise, dishonest] cheating  
 3 Whispering . . . subway] ~, . . .~, 4 springs] *written in pencil after cancelled* waterfalls  
 5 ripening]~, 6 cafeterias,]~, 8 around] *interlined in pencil below cancelled* on  
 8 dancefloors] ~, {, *added in pencil*} 8 fast as] *interlined in pencil above cancelled* with a sound  
 of 12 child-prodigies,] ~ 13 globes,] ~ 15 last] ~, Gathering] *written in pencil in margin*  
*before cancelled* Picking

**VERSE FOR A GIRL IN A DINING CAR**

The six who serve you  
 People the mirrors of our shining train  
 Until, at length, the water glistens in your fingerbowl,  
 As modest as a compliment,  
 And all retire

And leave you in those mirrors, immobile,  
 Bored that the winter sun should light the landscape  
 With less light than a firework.

So, your indolent eye,  
 Attracted by a geometric axiom to the angles in the glass,  
 Turns from the outer wilderness  
 And falls upon the poet:  
 The happy poet, with his pockets full of money!

Columbia – Van Doren File (encl. in 11/7/45 letter): 3-ring paper, with authorial corrections  
 10 to . . . glass,] *added in pencil* in] *interlined above cancelled* of glass] *interlined above illegible*  
*cancellation*

**WATERGAP**

Leafy cliffs of coal and slate  
Drip with secret winter waters.  
Summer's a salmon in the deep capacity  
That slides across the spillways  
And the eely dams.

Indexed among these folded valleys,  
Forge and furnace, at the fall of night,  
Light matches and hunt for pantisocracy.  
The little crumbling towns,  
That painfully breathe the sulphurous air  
Are still expecting Coleridge.

The iron, miserfisted cliffs  
Wisely spend their winter wealth of water,  
So summer makes the rivers hop like trouts  
And dives across the spillways  
And the eely dams.

Columbia – Van Doren File (encl. in 11/7/45 letter): typing paper; double-folded