

## Sonnets to a Silent Interlocutor

Review of

*Red as a Lotus: Letters to a Dead Trappist*

By Lisa Gill

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Reviewed by **Susan McCaslin**

Lisa Gill's *Red as a Lotus: Letters to a Dead Trappist* is more than a nod, a handshake, or even a dance of allusions to Merton the "mediator," "intercessor" (XI) and luminous companion. It is an epistolary rediscovery of the human condition at this time. The author's prefatory remarks provide a necessary context for the poems:

This is the kind of book that practically writes itself when you live alone in a little trailer next to an alfalfa field and are lucky enough to have a copy of Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* on hand. . . . So I found myself writing to a Catholic monk, political activist, hermit and poet who died two years before I was born. And for over two years I kept writing. Although I continued reading works by Merton throughout the process, my task was personal.

Throughout the unfolding of 100 "free-verse sonnets" constituting a single long letter to her mentor, Gill explores a broad range of struggles paralleling those of Merton. The poems allude to ideas and images from both Merton's life and his works. The subtitle of the volume establishes its paradoxical tone, for the Trappist she addresses is not "dead" in any but the literal sense. Merton is, rather, a living presence in the poems, both listener and silent interlocutor.

The title of the volume, *Red as a Lotus*, suggests that the traditional eastern flower symbolizing timeless beauty has entered the realm of "blood remembering" or vital experience. A "red lotus" is itself an oxymoron, a kind of zen koan exploding our usual associations of the flower with pure whiteness. Gill explains how Merton's ability to use the word "hogwash" with impunity, allows her to speak the sacred word "God." She adds, almost as an afterthought,

Personally

I suspect God would see everything in the spectrum as valuable.

(Perhaps a baboon's ass is in some way red as a lotus.) I hope so. (LI)

Gill's poetry, in other words, brings together the high and low, the secular and the sacred, and through metaphor, the base of the poetic, establishes connections, linking the comic, sexual and absurd image of a "baboon's ass" with the sacred icon of the lotus. The volume as a whole provides such bridges.

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Gill's choice of the "unsonnet" or 14-line prose-poem provides a structure for the apparent disarrangement of her poetic process, creating a sense of "ordered chaos" or "chaotic order." Occasionally, her long poem becomes self-referential, reflecting on its own use of form:

I wouldn't mind dying here, in this poem. If the rest of my life  
Consisted of simply fourteen lines, I believe I could do it well. (LXXIV)

In tone, Gill assumes a playful familiarity with Merton that mostly rings true, addressing him as "Thomas," confiding, cajoling, teasing, and confessing by turns. A sense of intimacy builds between the contemporary female poet living in a trailer in a south-western desert landscape and the monastic poet. Both are peripheral or "desert" people, living at the margins of society. Both are solitaries, hermits who need to reach out to a larger community through language. Both have a sense of "difference" ("At best I am a misfit," states Gill) and yet a longing to belong to a common humanity. Both are courted by Lady Poverty, though Gill's poverty is the literal kind tied to temporary unemployment due to an automobile injury.

Gill's spiritual progenitors are not only the likes of Merton and John of the Cross, but her personal ancestors, her grandmother and grandfather. She hints at possible aboriginal roots, stating that people called her maternal grandmother a "squaw." The letters sustain the urgency of locating oneself with a place, a lineage and a personal genealogy. Gill also shares with Merton what in a pre-feminist era were called "women's issues" such as menstruation, aging, housekeeping (albeit in a trailer), physical ailments, mood swings etc., giving us a sense of what it would have been like had Merton lived on and continued his conversations with creative, intellectual women like feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether. The poet does not hesitate to challenge her invisible companion and friend. Early on, she comments on his felicitous "fault" of not being able to exile the poet in his nature while cultivating the contemplative: "You were never able to kick the poet all the way out / onto the back stoop with the stray cats, were you?" (VI). In fact, her effort, like Merton's, is to reintegrate the poetic and contemplative elements of the self.

Considered whole, the book explores the struggle that most haunted Merton: how to "die before you die"; how to transcend the ego and open to the authentic interior self; how to enter the "*point vierge*" or invisible center in which the mysterious, unnameable Godhead conjoins our humanity. Therefore, the movement of these poems is essentially apophatic, as is the work and life of Merton – an effort to straddle the gap between words or language and the ineffable. Being in the world leads through a dark cloud of unknowing, unsaying, holding the world at best, lightly – letting go of the effort to circumscribe the general dance of life.

The volume's tone sustains the tension between grief (sorrow and loss) and gratitude or praise:

So my mind is divided between grief

and gratitude. I live in two hemispheres and the bridge seems icy. (LX)

Gill's self-questioning is as intense as Merton's in his journals. The poems emerge from the particulars of the poet's personal life (a car accident, days spent in a mental ward, occasional considerations of suicide, solitary hours growing a garden) to move toward the universal. She has a gift for finding the large in the small, narrating to Merton an anecdote about how the Virgin Mary once manifested to a bread truck driver in Iowa: "The extraordinary will manifest in the ordinary" (VIII).

To complete the moments of intense personal disclosure, Gill, like Merton, finds herself engaged with the public and political issues of her time. Topical references to the bombing of the twin towers in New York (9/11) lead her to explore the residual racism, violence and fear in the body

politic. Her own “dark night of the soul” stems not merely from her personal psychic condition but from a systemic self-alienation, a collective depression that permeates the culture. She confides to Thomas her apt assessment of our world in a passage that includes a final allusion to Ecclesiastes:

The world’s mean, Thomas. Little corpses, big corpses.  
 Some get marked graves, others buried alive. 250,000 die daily.  
 More get born. Into what? Super Bowls, Super Tuesday, Black Tuesday,  
 everyday black markets plus economic sanctioning of *us* against  
*them*. (Uprising kills 76). We all live at ground zero (*zero tolerance*).  
 Even cows are mad in England, vets pissed off in America. Sadness  
 is systemic (BC, AD, PTSD). There’s nothing new on the grapevine. (LXXI)

At a recent Merton conference, I found that most of the people attending were ordinary laypeople, not part of a monastic order, many of Protestant background like Gill, many non-denominational, many who would describe themselves as “not religious in a conventional sense, but deeply spiritual.” Gill’s work demonstrates to what extent Merton, by entering the depths of his Christian monastic roots, speaks to this larger community. There has been talk these days of “untensured” monks and urban hermits, ordinary people trying in their own way to clear a contemplative space in the midst of a culture that resists silence. Gill’s work demonstrates once again that a man or a woman can be a desert hermit in a trailer with a few books, a patch of earth, and a dog. Her poetic offering reminds us that the spirit that pursued and wed Merton is both ubiquitous and timeless:

You, Thomas, have never seen me or witnessed the ways I am torn.  
 Nonetheless, it is as if you thrust your pen into doubt and came out  
 writing for every reader. When I finish your books, then, I will  
 mourn your death and celebrate your presence at my table. (XXII)