

Merton in Alaska

By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

I.

*We took off an hour late, big plane full of children,
heading for Anchorage, Tokyo, & Seoul.
Flew up slowly out of the dark into the brilliant light,
this Bardo of pure sky.*

– Thomas Merton, Alaska Journal (September 17, 1968)

How full of hope you were, leaving home,
escaping earth to find an island of your own.
The hermit's life in tame Gethsemani
not at all what you imagined it would be.
Now you eye white mountains from the sky,
lakes that shimmer and shine like bits of broken glass,
mile after mile after mile of icy
tundra where no human foot cares to pass
beyond the borders of comfort and ease,
precisely the place you yearn to be,
its wilderness speaking to your wild heart.
Long years you pursued the difficult art
of loneliness done. Here you'll rest your head.
Not knowing in 3 months' time you will be dead.



Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

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II.

*No question that this is the place for solitude –
plus earthquakes, bears etc. – & long dark winters.*

– Thomas Merton, Letter from Alaska (September 24, 1968)

The purgatories that people run away from
are stations where you want to stop and stay.
The end of earth, the land of kingdom come
where you will plant your flag, far away
from those who would want a piece of your peace,
who show up at your door, demand a feast
of wisdom only you seem to provide.
The world is terrible. Who can abide
these wars, this daily slaughter, so much loss
without a prophet? King is dead. The cost
of discipleship infamously high.
Yet here you are, dreaming as you fly
over mountains, frozen rivers, endless ice,
this is where you'll find paradise.

III.

*Two volcanoes: Iliamna – graceful, mysterious, feminine,
akin to the great Mexican volcanoes. . . . Redoubt, . . . handsome & noble
in the distance, but ugly, sinister as you get near it.*

*A brute of a dirty busted mountain that has exploded too often.
A bear of a mountain. A dog mountain with steam curling up out of the snow crater.*
– Thomas Merton, Alaska Journal (September 30, 1968)

A land alive as your right hand
transcribing all you see.
Your poet's eye, your quick command
of words a gift you left us.
This place, remote, so wildly
unlike the world that we
safely navigate. We must
vicariously wonder
at your wonder, wish that we could be
as brave as you are brave, as fearlessly
you chase the dog, the snarling bear,
your passion for autonomy,
feel the beast's hot breath,
half in love with your own death.

IV.

*I have also to see the western part of Alaska
which is vast and empty without even mountains and forests,
and is a place where priests are sent when they are in disgrace as a punishment –
it is so lonely. This too might be just ideal.*

– Thomas Merton, Letter from Alaska (September 26, 1968)

A place of penance you somehow think will be
ideal. To choose to live as outcasts live,
what was the appeal? What did you see
in your own self that merited this fate?
Some sin that you could not forgive,
a shame that you could not outlive
would make you nature's lonely oblate.
The poverty of beauty, the lack
of what you love, a way to tame
desire, a way to get you back
on track to be a saint, your aim
for half your life. But half of you stays
sinner, despite the grace you'd claim.
You'll always love the sun more than the rain.

V.

*I can't say with certitude that I think I am called to be a hermit here,
but I do believe it is a very real possibility and that I must keep it in mind
and look into it further and perhaps make a decision
on my return from Asia.*

– Thomas Merton, Letter from Alaska (September 26, 1968)

One thing you were sure of – that you'd return,
though not in the box that they sent you in.
Despite your wisdom, so much to learn
about what we can count on. Nothing.
The bears, volcanoes, rickety planes,
none of these dangers would do you in.
Bad teeth, gangrene, the aches and pains
you suffered could not clip your wings.
Like some Trappist Icarus, you flew far
beyond the monastery walls,
surveyed the world and loved it for
its own poor sake. You heard the call
and followed where God's voice led you.
There was nothing, nothing you would not do.