

## Burning, Sinking, Disappearing, Rising: A Poetic Reflection

By Susan McCaslin

Recently I mentioned to a former colleague that I had been working on a book on Thomas Merton. “Oh yeah,” he commented, “I read his *Seven Storey Mountain* when I was in my twenties and was briefly inspired to think about going into a monastery but gave all that up. Too much of an escape from the world.” When I asked if he had read Merton’s works from the sixties, his *Asian Journal*, or heard about Merton’s positions on racism, the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons, or knew of his posthumously published journals, he didn’t have a clue. I’m not assuming everyone should be expected to have read Merton in depth or to be aware of his unfolding to maturity. Yet I suspect my colleague’s story is similar to that of many readers outside Merton circles. Unfortunately, this kind of response by a number of my friends suggests their idea of Merton’s legacy is the story of a young man who fled the world and subsequently wrote a number of popular books about monastic life and contemplation, but who doesn’t have a great deal of relevance now.

In the context of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Merton’s death, I’d like to focus on his emergence as a global spiritual writer, poet and teacher who struggled with crucial issues facing us at this time: the need for a union of contemplation and action, social justice, peace-making, inter-spiritual dialogue. He also addressed the impact of human technological development on the environment, racism, western colonialism and the colonization of the mind by corporate capitalism. What keeps me and many others returning to Merton is his astonishingly dynamic process of continual growth, the spurts, regressions and forward leaps. When reflecting on his writing over the decades, I discern four vital metaphors for his life and death: burning, sinking, disappearing and rising.

### Burning

At the end of Merton’s bestselling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), the divine voice responds to Merton’s prayer:

*“But you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani:*

*“That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.”<sup>1</sup>*

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**Susan McCaslin** is a poet and Thomas Merton scholar who has published fifteen volumes of poetry, most recently *Into the Open: Poems New and Selected* (Inanna, 2017). She resides in Fort Langley, British Columbia, where she initiated the Han Shan Poetry Project as part of a successful campaign to protect an endangered rainforest along the Fraser River. Her new book is a multi-genre monograph, co-written with fellow Canadian poet J. S. Porter: *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton’s Dance with the Feminine*. For more information see: [www.susanmccaslin.ca](http://www.susanmccaslin.ca).



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This passage uncannily prefigures the burn marks found on Merton's body at the time of his death by apparent electrocution in a conference center in Thailand outside Bangkok in 1968.<sup>2</sup> It employs the metaphor of fire, burning, conflagration that recurs throughout his work and characterizes the quality of his energy, his superabundant aliveness. Whether representing infernal, purgatorial or paradisaic flames, the creative and destructive connotations of the word "fire" blaze throughout his writings and life. Here's how he puts it in his poem "In Silence" (1957):

The whole  
World is secretly on fire. The stones  
Burn, even the stones  
They burn me. How can a man be still or  
Listen to all things burning? How can he dare  
To sit with them when  
All their silence  
Is on fire?<sup>3</sup>

### Sinking

Merton opens *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) with this epigraph:

The sign Jesus promised to the generation that did not understand Him was the "sign of Jonas the prophet" – that is, the sign of His own resurrection. . . . But I feel that my own life is especially sealed with this great sign . . . because like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.<sup>4</sup>

*The Sign of Jonas* is a transitional book, a bridge between his earlier contemplative writings and apologetics and his more politically engaged writing of the sixties. Merton was at first a reluctant prophet, a reluctant acclaimed writer, one who felt trapped in the persona created by his early memoir; yet he was obsessed with writing, communicating and following his muse into ever new modes of expression. The sign of descent and resurrection is Jewish, Christian and universal, grounded in the cycles of the natural world. He is caught in a cauldron of conflict with his abbot at his monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky, as well as in the roiling contradictions he discovered within himself. Like Jonas (Jonah), he sinks into the sea, into the "whale's belly" of paradox, then is spewed up into the world to prophesy through his writing. When he is silenced for his positions on Vietnam, civil rights, nuclear weapons and other social issues by the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order, he continues to publish through mimeographed underground correspondence (1961-1962), now available as *Cold War Letters*.<sup>5</sup>

The final section of *The Sign of Jonas*, "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952," though based on the sign of descent, also takes up the metaphor of ordeal by fire: "The fire watch is an examination of conscience in which your task as watchmen suddenly appears in its true light: a pretext devised by God to isolate you, and to search your soul with lamps and questions, in the heart of darkness" (*SJ* 352). After a long night keeping vigil over the monastery in darkness and silence, the "Voice of God . . . heard in Paradise" speaks of mercy and love:

*Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy. I have forgiven the universe without end, because I have never known sin. . . . What was fragile has become powerful. I loved what was most frail. I looked upon what was nothing. I touched what was without substance, and within what was not, I am. (SJ 362)*

## Disappearing

At the end of Merton's life, during his final talk in a conference center outside Bangkok on Dec. 10, 1968, he states, "I will conclude on that note. I believe the plan is to have all the questions for this morning's lectures this evening at the panel. So I will disappear."<sup>6</sup> Then, as evidenced in a video of the proceedings, he adds: "So I will disappear from view and we can all have a coke or something."<sup>7</sup> Ironically, a few hours later, Merton literally disappears from the world of time, being found dead in his quarters. Merton's dramatic exit gives us pause in terms of his often-stated desire to "disappear" metaphorically, spiritually, through the vanishing of the egoic self. I am reminded of one of my favorite poems by Emily Dickinson about being Nobody:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – too?  
Then there's a pair of us?  
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog –  
To tell one's name – the livelong June –  
To an admiring Bog!<sup>8</sup>

And then there is Merton's own powerful translation of words from the Taoist poet Chuang Tzu about the power of becoming Nobody:

"The man of Tao  
Remains unknown  
Perfect virtue  
Produces nothing  
'No-Self'  
Is 'True-Self.'  
And the greatest man  
Is Nobody."<sup>9</sup>

Merton uses the disappearance motif in *The Sign of Jonas* where the prophet disappears into the belly of the whale, later to be cast up whole. In Islamic mysticism, which Merton studied in depth in the early sixties, the term *fana*, sometimes translated as "annihilation," suggests "dying before you die," indicating the death of the old self. This kind of "disappearance" requires a diminishment of ego, of who or what we think we are, and an entrance into the freedom of being nobody. Merton also speaks in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) on a point of disappearance in the soul, using the French term, *le point vierge*, or "pure center"<sup>10</sup> to represent the place where each of us opens to infinity and to the divine:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God . . . . This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody.<sup>11</sup>

To become nothing and nobody in this sense is to become one with everything and everybody. As Merton puts it at an informal talk delivered at Calcutta in October 1968, "My dear brothers, we are

already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are” (*AJ* 308).

### **Rising (A Poet’s Dream Revisited)**

Many have written or spoken about how Merton gets his hooks into you, won’t let you go, becomes a vital presence in your life. Shortly after experiencing a powerful dream about Merton in 2006, I wrote the following poem, entitled “A Dream of Thomas Merton.”<sup>12</sup> Now, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his death, further insights into the meaning of the dream occur to me.

How is it the monk (unhabited) is not surprised,  
sitting cross-legged on a patch of earth  
trading jokes and cold beer?

Talk of Martin Luther King, Osama, fallen towers,  
nothing new under the sun

(except his arch eyes, a high-energy discharge).

“Jesus was the kind of doctor  
who would heal anyone who asked –  
criminal, insane. No flinching or thinking of bounds.”

He pronounces his own new name –  
“Threshold dweller” –  
hopping like Raven across portals.

Waking, I think how straightaway  
I felt his mettle, knowing he had been fed fire –  
I, grain.

Re-entering the experience of the dream, I now perceive that Merton in my interior world is clearly a global wisdom teacher with what has been called a “universal embrace.”<sup>13</sup> He is still a seeker and a Zen-like beginner. He is not wearing the garb of a particular religious order, but a jean jacket. He is the fruit of his unique Christian formation, but fully inter-spiritual. He is in a natural setting connected to a cosmic academy with clear, transparent walls. He is a raven, a trickster, a threshold-dweller still living in liminal spaces. There is lots of light. He is a peripatetic, strolling in nature, conversing with others as equals. The dream points not simply to Merton himself, but to how to be a contemplative in the world.

### **Merton’s Last Words**

Merton for me transcends his ashes while shimmering in the fires that informed his life, remaining imperfect, paradoxical, yet a beacon. What remains are traces of an existential journey through which he evolved from a parochial seeker to a trans-cultural, trans-religious, awakened one. After his third and final intimate session with the current Dalai Lama during his Asian tour, Merton wrote of how the Dalai Lama commented that he saw Merton as “a Catholic geshe,” a kind of honorary fellow monk on the path to enlightenment or union.<sup>14</sup> Though Merton made light of this remark, it seems plausible to me.

In his final talk outside Bangkok, “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” Merton points out the limitations of political and religious systems when they become hindrances to spiritual growth. At the height of the Cold War, he acknowledges the totalitarian potential in both Soviet Communism and in western capitalism. Since he called out political and social dangers in his era that have developed much further today, he is a prophet in the Blakean sense of one who penetrates so deeply into the present that he seems to predict the future. Yet this “seeing” is not deterministic or merely predictive, but visionary. In his final talk, Merton indicates some of the positive commonalities between Marxism and monasticism. Both monks and communist thinkers like Marx and Marcuse recognize that “in one way or another . . . the claims of the world are fraudulent” (*AJ* 329). Both systems encourage people to care for each other in communities, share resources, value egalitarianism. Yet Merton also asserts that both monastic and communist systems can degenerate into corrupt or authoritarian social structures. Merton then quotes the words of a young Tibetan lama with whom he had recently become friends, Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche. The young monk’s abbot, in light of the urgent need to escape from Tibet where the monks were being persecuted by the communists, gave him this advice: “From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet” (*AJ* 338). Merton then reaffirms this theme to his audience: “You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared. They are good and they should help us, and we should do the best we can with them. But they may be taken away, and if everything is taken away, what do you do next?” (*AJ* 338).

Another paradox. How can we be both communal and independent (free) at the same time? Yet this is the paradox of all being. We are all both interconnected and individualized, communal and solitary. How do we both nourish our commonalities and preserve our distinctiveness? What do we do when trusted systems become fraught with systemic violence and abuse? Merton then turns to what we can do in words that remain pertinent to our time: “What is essential in the monastic life is not embedded in buildings, is not embedded in clothing, is not necessarily embedded in a rule. It is somewhere along the line of something deeper than a rule. It is concerned with this business of total inner transformation” (*AJ* 340). Given the dire consequences of global warming now alarmingly upon us, the collapse of economic, social and religious structures we have relied on, we find ourselves on “the horns of a dilemma” similar to the one Merton experienced in the sixties. Merton’s final words suggest that, whether we find ourselves within or outside traditional religious structures or organized religion, everyone is called to stand on his or her own feet, but not as an act of simplistic individualism. We are also called to participate in community in more positive ways. Merton’s words suggest that the only way to be effective contemplatives and activists without burn-out, or the appropriation of our good intentions and social reform projects by the ego, is to build a base through spiritual practice. We require a transformation of consciousness, an awakening through mindfulness, contemplation, prayer or other spiritual practices, and then appropriate responses to what calls us at given times to act for the common good. Discernment about that to which we are called requires a delicate internal balance, a rhythm that allows us to move between the unity of the apparent polarities of contemplation and action. Additionally, such a movement beyond dualities requires transcending either/or dialectics and oppositions among religions by embracing our essential unity. As Merton says in his last talk, “We accept the division, we work with the division, and we go beyond the division” (*AJ* 341).

From Merton I have learned that we are all potentially effective nobodies, all called to live more deeply into the place where we stand. Yet we are also all potential activists called to serve from the core of our creative beings in a diversity of ways – whether through writing, cooking, singing,

arranging flowers, helping out with watershed reclamation projects, teaching, caring for the elderly or spreading loving-kindness. The ways of creative being in the world are infinite. In the wreckage of what human exploitation of the earth has wrought, new forms of “monastic” community may arise where people – married, single, committed to a particular religious tradition, “spiritual but not religious,” or simply seeking – may come for refuge, retreat, regeneration, as well as to discuss and perhaps engage in non-violent forms of political action. Merton’s message through his words and life as a citizen of the world is that the universe constantly invites us to participate, to “cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.”<sup>15</sup>

### Merton’s Global Legacy

Merton’s path was a flight from the world followed by re-entry and engagement. He transitioned from a parochial to a universal vision and consciousness. Therefore, his legacy is an invitation to each person to begin the process of integration and entrance into non-dual thinking and being. On the fiftieth anniversary of his death, we are summoned not merely to honor Merton as a premier mid-twentieth-century contemplative writer, but to step into the forge of death and rebirth of a new self, not only for ourselves, but for the planet, beginning from the place where we stand. I’ll end with an icon-shaped poem about how we, like Merton, are all holy fools, divine nobodies, saints in the making, works in progress.<sup>16</sup>

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948) 422-23.
2. There was been much critical discussion regarding the causes and circumstances surrounding Merton’s violent death, including accidental electrocution from a faulty fan and politically motivated murder by the CIA.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 281; Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005) 91.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) vii; subsequent references will be cited as “*SJ*” parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
6. “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” in Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 343; subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.
7. YouTube video (accessed 7 September 2018): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywE6bhApcSk>.
8. Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson’s Poems* (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1961) 47-48.
9. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 92.
10. See Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 278 [7/20/1960 letter to Louis Massignon].
11. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.
12. Susan McCaslin, “A Dream of Thomas Merton,” *Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction* 12.3 (Sept. 2006) 20 (Grand Prize winner of their annual poetry contest). It appeared subsequently in *The Merton Journal* 14.2 (Advent 2007) 28; *Presence* 21.2 (June 2015); Susan McCaslin, *Lifting the Stone* (Hamilton, ON: Seraphim Editions, 2007); and Susan McCaslin, *Into the Open: Poems New and Selected* (Toronto: Inanna, 2017).
13. The subtitle and theme of the Fourth General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, held at Oakham School in 2002, was “Thomas Merton’s Universal Embrace”; the papers from this conference were published in *Thomas Merton: The World in My Bloodstream*, ed. Angus Stuart (Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2004).
14. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 266; *AJ* 125.
15. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 297.
16. Susan McCaslin and J. S. Porter, *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton’s Dance with the Feminine* (Kelowna, BC: Wood Lake, 2018) 163.

Saint Alpha

St. Songster singing

St. Everywoman piecemeal

St. Everyman unemployed

St. Somebody exploited

**St. Alphabet broken**

**St. Somebody Nobody**

St. Not Knowing who we are

St. Jack of Diamonds shining

St. Broken-Open overhauled

**St. Failure in rehab**

**St. Poverty the Christ**

St. Hale and Shattered Shard

St. long-lingering Light

St. Omega