

THE RAVISHING of TOM O MERTON

Roger Connah© December 2023

Once it has been expressed, the most savage thought,
civilizes itself a hundred times faster than one can imagine.

Witold Gombrowicz

“the High tradition, with its wondrous cathedrals, icons,
and ‘smells and bells’, and the Low Tradition, with its
thoroughly (and beautifully) human Jesus, concern for
social justice, and intimate house church aesthetic.
Were Merton alive today, I believe he would still say that
the best way forward, the way of wisdom, will allow ample
room for both theological trajectories and worship styles
in the mosaic body of faith.”

Christopher Pamuk Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton

Looking back on my work, I wish I had never
bothered to write about one-third of it – the books
that tend to be (one way or another) ‘popular’ religion.
Or inspirational.

Thomas Merton (July 1968)¹

THE RAVISHING of TOM O MERTON

Note 1

With an extraordinary energy, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote well over 60 books in a life that can be divided into a confused and experimental period in England (Cambridge) and New York (Columbia) before he entered Our Lady of Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky 1941 at the age of 27 years. This period of monastic jousting, excess and brilliance, captured in so many books, also lasted 27 years. Merton wrote out his life obsessively and, in an extraordinary set of journals, 'nakedly' confesses to an alarmist tendency to get onto writing the next book even before finishing the one he was on. Literally he confesses – echoing his friend the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra - to wishing to take back everything written.

Thomas Merton is said to have died by accident, electrocuted in a Bangkok hotel room after delivering his latest and lingering 'obsession'; the connections between Marxism and Monasticism. This is fitting. Some have suggested had he lived, it was likely he would have left the monastery and continued his life in the Eastern world. Others have continued to worry out Merton's ending, some even going so far as to imagine an assassination.

The Ravishing of Tom O Merton, a play in 2 acts, relies on the other obituary of Thomas Merton, the one that can only now be written. It is a narrative that may not only shock but might go some way towards altering the perception, the course and whole cult around this Trappist monk and the 'Catholicism' he struggled to expose since taking his vow in 1941. In 1966 against the advice of most of his fellow monks, theological friends and colleagues, and many other 'religious', Father M. Louis, once more became Thomas Merton and fell in love with the nurse known as 'M'.

Though his death is accounted for in 1968 in Bangkok, it can be no surprize that Merton had in fact disappeared. No one suspected that a suicide or murder could have been planned to such a degree and with such measure as to release the soul for another life. We now know this other Merton went to live his life in full partnership and unconditional companionship with his beloved 'amour' Margie Smith

Margie had been the nurse sent to look after the monk during and after an operation in 1966 in a hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. Later, after returning to the Abbey, after a series of rather comical, even carnival events where the monk made all sorts of ruses and gave alibis to meet the nurse he had fallen in love with, he finally decided to do what his friend the poet Nicanor Parra had suggested. After a decisive day spent with James Loughlin, Merton and his beloved, Ms Smith, 'followed the ecstasy'. Parra's cryptic advice to *follow the ecstasy* turned into a theatrical plan that very few except those sworn to secrecy - to this day - realised was carried out. The monk had to become ordinary once again to become extraordinary. They disappeared.

Ecstasy was the sensuality that both Tom and Margie continued to explore. They both agreed their lives were greater than all the Godly excuses not to be together. The Church and Abbey demanded Merton abandon this woman and re-take a vow of obedience. Tom was more interested whether God would abandon his own laughter or abyss. More likely he suspected Father Abbot, or the Abbot General, would excommunicate him. According to the vow he made, Merton was hastened to empty himself, leave this woman and become one with God again.

To Merton there was only one authentic step; he could not imagine abandoning the beloved of any 'true' self and returning to the 'false' self in the monastery. It was a paradox and his disappearance re-stated that position. These two people were to empty themselves in front of God; to go beyond the God and seek the rebel bliss of the abyss they would discover in the East.

The spiritual world would only know of this 'disappearance' when the final death of Thomas Merton took place in the Royal City of Laos, Luang Prabang on the River Nam Khan where Thomas and Marguerite lived since 1968. Though little is known of this period, what is referred to as the *Fourth Stage of Life*, this other person we know as Merton entered deeply into the Buddhism of this part of the world. We now know he lived into his ninth decade, like his friend the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz.

Was Merton finally correcting the 'megalomaniac' charge made by the psychotherapist Gregory Zillborg in 1955. In a therapy session, Zillborg had rattled Merton to the core when he told him that he needed a big hermit sign in Times Square announcing: "I am a Hermit". Thomas Merton wept and then began to arrange his death, life and being. No one would read the writing to come. A series of documents worked on in secret by both Merton and Marguerite did nothing to alter the amount of books published and the Merton industry after 1968.

The insatiability of this monk known by all as *Merton* defied all attempts by others to bring him back within their own life. More Kerouac than Tim Leary, more Yves Klein than Piet Mondrian, Thomas Merton once again surprised. Anyone viewing the filmed version of his funeral cortège carried out by the River Walkers in Luang Prabang in Laos cannot fail to be touched by this event. In the world of literature, theology, apophatic spirituality, philosophy and cognitive science, this just may rank as one of the world's greatest reversals.

No longer the rogue monk to be redeemed by astute editing, arranged sentences about denial and kenosis or wanton clichés about proverb and God's femininity, this drama is the theatricalization of two selves: Thomas Merton and Marguerite Smith. They participated in the greatest hoax ever carried out. But it wasn't a hoax; it was the most generous act of love two people could have ever given each other.

I BECOME SERPENT

Act 1 Prologue

Production note: though there are different numbered scenes the play flows from one to the other with either fading light changes or slight modifications on stage to indicate the continuity within the pause.

Dark, crepuscular light. Tom, a man early 70s dressed in denim, a plaid shirt, a woodcutter's jacket sits on a simple rocking chair. He has an uncanny similarity to the Trappist monk Thomas Merton if he had not died in 1968. The space resembles a simple study. A plain table nearby, a tea pot, a kettle, some looseleaf tea (Lapsang Souchong,) a cup and saucer or two. He starts preparing his tea. He then sits and begins to read from a book in his hand. It is actually from page 351 of The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton, called Night-flowering Cactus.

Tom:

I know my time, which is obscure, silent and brief
For I am present without warning one night only
When the sun rises on the brass valley I become serpent....

Could I take those lines back?
Am I the extreme purity of virginal thirst?

I neither show my truth nor conceal it
My innocence is described dimly
Only by divine gift
As a white cavern without explanation
Words torn by love unending.

This is the white cavern, seriously.

He pours his tea

He who sees my purity
Dares not speak of it
When I open once for all my impeccable bell
No one questions my silence.

pause

Everyone must question my silence if as I say,
the all-knowing bird of night flies out of my mouth

He puts the book down. He goes to a small turntable and
takes a record from its sleeve: Joan Baez – *Silver Dagger*

I always thought ahead of myself. I always wrote ahead of myself and in reverse.
You want to know why. You want to know who I am? To my New York friends
I was always known as the cake and eat it monk. It doesn't scorch me like
perhaps it should...I was the jester they couldn't catch. I was the reveller of
words abandoned before they arrived.

Slowly - intently to the audience

But no one quite came too close to the usefulness of my own ambiguities. Only
Margie. She knew it. It didn't matter how much doctrine, how much attention
was given to anything I thought, she knew. (*Almost whispering*) I was always
provisional. She knew that. That was the nature of my freedom. Our freedom.
To be allowed to say something yet always leave words with more thinking to
do...always

He begins to play the Joan Baez record:
He listens to the song all the way through...

Don't sing love songs, you'll wake my mother

She's sleeping here right by my side

And in her right hand a silver dagger

She says that I can't be your bride.

He moves slowly, the hint of a monk-dance-trance

– he mouths the song as it proceeds.

All men are false, says my mother

They'll tell you wicked, lovin' lies.

The very next evening, they'll court another

Leave you alone to pine and sigh.

He pours another cup of tea....

The actor Tom O Merton takes over at this point.

My daddy is a handsome devil

he's got a chain five miles long,

And on every link a heart does dangle

Of another maid he's loved and wronged.

He listens. He talks over the final lines:

Go court another tender maiden,

And hope that she will be your wife,

For I've been warned, and I've decided,

To sleep alone all of my life.

The darkness is changed, light emerges, the stage slowly transforms to an 'Asian' large veranda, with bamboo blinds, a hammock, fans, light calico flowing shrouds, not without jungle menace and darkness nearby...

Tom

(addressing the audience) We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone – we find it in another. We do not discover the secret of our lives merely by study and calculation in our own isolated mediations.

(pause)

The meaning of life is a secret that has to be revealed to us in love, by the one we love. If God is wedged in there then so be it. And if this love is unreal, the secret will not be found...

Meaning will never reveal itself, the message will never be decoded... ..

Wise words (smiles) if my own.

Walks around the veranda - there is the hammock – he goes to sit in it

Seriously, I am supposed to have lived in wisdom. Books have been written about it. I have written about it. Endlessly. As if something entered my head. As if anything entered this empty head. (laughter) I used to call the things I wrote 'thin ice' statements. I could skate over them. All over them.

Then disappear.

Underwater.

He swings on the hammock, slowly, hypnotically

He puts on a voice.

The love affair that humanized Thomas Merton. Seriously?

I was to be the ground of love and truth for this man previously known as Father Louis? Even more, I was apparently the one to expose the inevitable imperfections of his humanity. And all for the love of God... for us...

Back to Tom

We will never be fully real until we let ourselves fall in love – either with another human person (pause, as if seeking something in the space) ... Or with God... What is grace without the grace of Christ? It was obvious, the same rules I applied to myself applied to others. It was possible to interpret anything I said or wrote and make any sort of worthy statements out of them. They could write things about me always with more thinking to do. The theological imagination ensured that.

Did anyone ever imagine what I was thinking? Why was it always his love and pain, his struggle to be real, impossibly male? Vulnerable and honourable, when did his friends know that they had got it wrong, the Church had got it wrong, the Abbey had got it wrong?

Oh, I know what you are thinking. Is there anyone else dead? I mean who else has died in your imagination that you want to bring back? Surely that goes with all words, all language. There ... you have what you wanted. I've died and been resurrected!

He gets out of the hammock – walks to the front of the stage

The thing is, I loved it all. All the reversals I could make were made back on me. I had no option to play along with it. I know monkhood had turned me into a surreal recluse. I'd become this Dada monk in Louisville, Kentucky. I was flying out of a first-floor window as Yves Klein had pictured it. I was spinning to a world way out of control....

And now this.... I knew the time would come when I could read nothing written about me. I would have to take all my words back... I would have to die again and again....

Exits

Sc 1

DELIRIOUS

Margie (M), A woman in her late 40s slowly enters the veranda. She has been tending to plants. She wears an Asian straw hat, heavily brimmed. Her face is concealed. She is elegant, under the hat her hair is tied back, only later cut short. It has already greyed. She is ravishing. Age has increased the beauty she had as a 25-year-old. Look a little like Joan Baez. She goes to a table, puts away the trowel and other things; then the cups and the teapot. She generally tidies up.

Margie:

Tom, Tom you mean. There. Yes, the monk. This utopian hermit? The Dada Monk he liked to call himself. He constantly dissolved his self-image and found love. He'll tell you he was flying out of Yves Klein's window. Always (laughs) Isn't that what you want to hear? Here in Asia, in the Royal City, we acted all that out. Nothing was ever prophetic. We didn't need instruction. We didn't need life guidance. We didn't need charity or tradition. We had each other. We touched each other. We loved each other. Unconditionally. And we lived in constant challenge.

Bells off

There was no long tradition, no ideal form. Nothing to hold onto. But he knew all about that. Only low wisdom could be extracted from his loneliness?

She goes to a book on the table, begins to read.

“As the monk began to improve, he remained outwardly a good and cooperative patient, but privately he began to devise means of avoiding the constant medical attention he received from nurses.”

Softly

Was it really like that? Does it matter which book we read? Is that how we met?
“Most of all, he loathed the bed baths and the hot compresses applied to his hip
twice a day.” Ah the Biographer. Let me tell you. Attempts to evade or postpone
these bed baths were completely unsuccessful, so Merton ...

She looks around, starts to walk a little, as if thinking whether to continue...

“so Merton brought his sedated powers of concentration into focus and plunged
into a study of Eckhart.” (laughs). The mighty monk’s sedated powers. Plunging
into Eckhart. I mean come on!

She goes to the hammock

...oh my word and oh how he plunged into the study of Eckhart!

The book close to her body, she takes off her large hat and gloves.

Oh Biographer, the licence that you took with your saint, the licence all you
biographers take with the lives you never know. Saint Merton, Saint Thomas.
You take but the merest line and spin the world you wish to see. You write the
world the Church wanted. And it is a world you already know. This world of
bed baths!

She pauses, looks around. She is very calm and very beautiful.

More thoughtful, Interior...

Tom, oh poor Tom, was it really like this? Was this how it was, how we met?
“Wednesday morning in Passion Week found the monk lying on his back in pain,
reading Eckhart, dreading the morning interruptions.” As far as I know, you
loved interruptions. You loved distractions, Tom. You loved the unpredictable.
You lived contradictions. You’d always told me it was the way a life was lived.
Without interruptions, you said, nothing could ever be written down.

Faux-dramatic

“The door opened. A young student nurse entered. The monk had not seen her before. Instead of silently inserting a thermometer and taking his blood pressure and writing on a chart...

Pause

Wonder of wonders, holy of holies, this young woman spoke...

She has a most attractive laugh.

...Why would I silently insert a thermometer and take your blood pressure and not even greet you? But Tom, this is your biographer's big moment. Ah this young woman actually spoke. Human communication took place. Hallelujah... Yes, (*triumphantly*) human communication took place. Imagine that Tom, between you the monk and me the student nurse, human communication took place. How is that possible? Seriously!

Mischief in her voice

Here was the beginning. Hallelujah! The ravishing of Tom O Merton, aka Thomas Merton, famed Trappist monk from the Gethsemani Abbey outside Louisville in Kentucky. You really want to know how it happened?

Lifts out of the hammock - walks...

Apparently, I introduced myself as Margie Smith. I made a little speech that I had been assigned to him. Well that much is true, there was a little speech. And I was respectful, I knew who he was. But it had already begun. The monk did not groan inwardly, the monk couldn't take his eyes off me, and I - couldn't take my eyes of him. It was delirious, from the very first moment. Delirious....

She pauses

And all the biographer could say was: “here was a talker. Here was a beautiful young lady who was going to talk. Get back to Eckhart, forget her Thomas.” But you didn’t forget her Tom, did you? Instead, you showed no further interest in Eckhart the moment I stepped through the door. We were smitten. It was fated. That was it. The ravishing had not only begun. it was already out of our control. We both plunged out of that window.

Sc. 2

THE NAMELESS BEGINNING

The light fades in this part of the stage and comes up elsewhere. A man, mid 70s enters. There’s something familiar about him. Once again he looks like Thomas Merton. Or he could be a version of Thomas Merton as the biographers and photographers would have it. But this Merton has lost weight. He is thinner, greyer, bald, but has enormous presence. He carries a bright coloured hat, a Mong hat made by the mountain people of Laos. He has a very light jacket, white cotton and wide pants. He wears sandals. He is not shuffling but he is slow. Measured.

Tom:

In the Nameless Beginning, this was her. The woman. The dream. The temptress. The vision. God in a shroud. The nurse. The light. Someone called Proverb. Someone called Sophia. Someone called Marguerite. Someone called Margie...

Without beginning, we were together. Without beginning this was another beginning. I did now know who I was. I did not know who she was. This was the beginning...

But I do not speak of her as a beginning. She has always been there. A manifestation, a word that wipes out other words. More than the dream. I was ravished. She was wisdom.

Pause

In the cool hand of the nurse there is the touch of all life, the touch of Spirit. No present was more present. No lived experience could be lived more than this love. Who is more trusting than he who must entrust himself each night to sleep? What is the reward of his trust?

This woman is all wise, all-prudent, all-loving, all-pure. She is not the Creator. She is not the redeemer. She is the perfect creature, perfectly redeemed. She is the ravishing.

He stands up. The space is richly sparse. Evening lights. In the corner there is a bright red espresso machine. He goes toward it and takes the cradle and cleans it.

This nurse was inseparable from God. She was the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy. She was sadness and joy. She set upon the Second Person. Her consent opened the door to my time, my love. My history. Together we become the Word of God. I had written it all out 3 years before we met. And I would write it out again before our disappearance. This was the ravishment. She is right. We were smitten. We were inseparable.

He puts some fine coffee in the cradle. He tamps it down. He swings the cradle into place. He talks as he waits.

Did I say before our disappearance? You are intrigued surely. You're probably wondering why and where. This cannot be true. Didn't I step out of that shower in Bangkok, reach out for the electric fan? Wasn't that the end of my life as far as the biographer thought? I'd just given a presentation on Monasticism and Marxism. Went down well I think - if I remember. It's such a long time ago...

My remains were flown back in a military plane, and put out there on the grassy knoll near the bell tower in Gethsemani. But it wasn't quite like that. The biographer wasn't there. Oh yes, it was the monk known as Thomas Merton alright, but it wasn't me. It definitely wasn't me. It was another Merton...

He checks the espresso machine, puts his hands around it to feel the warmth.

I love this machine. Like a miniature steam machine. Like those fire engines in England. Lots of bells and whistles there too...(pause). But how did it happen? How could my death happen without me, so to speak? And if there was a disappearance, was a new existence born? You want to know this too.

Warms the cups on top of the espresso machine

I was in Bangkok true. 1968. We decided to leave it all behind. Sounds crazy now, but I'd arranged to meet Margie sometime later in the Royal City in 1969. Margie was beautiful. It was instant. It was unstoppable. I was unstoppable. We could not have done anything else. We have lived here ever since.

Sc. 3

THAT BIOGRAPHY

Light fades on Tom and comes up on M as she continues
to read from the biography in her hand

Margie:

“Even the anonymity he craved was to be denied. She (*she looks up*) would be handling not just another middle-aged patient with a room number, but Thomas Merton and whatever individual image she might have made of him.”

Just another middle-aged patient with a room number? Hah, hardly. Oh, I know this biographer, Big John as Tom called him was doing his best. For him here was Saint Thomas doing everything to ignore just about everyone in the hospital and plead for anonymity. Ah what nonsense. Big John was writing this as if he was a chartered accountant. This was only ever a version of what might have happened. He wished this monk's image be changed forever. He wished me gone...

...

It was not what I thought of Tom Merton at that moment but what everyone else was doing around him. We were falling in love...and no one could control that, not the Church, not the Abbot, not his colleagues, not the world, not the espresso machine ... Big John wrote out Tom's alibi to abandon our love from the moment it happened. But he failed.

She walks

A biography? What is a biography? Who is the biographer of someone writing out his life faster than anyone could imagine? What happened? You want to know?

And walks

Young nurse meets famed monk. Merton waited, the biographer said, cataloguing his reactions. The drier his language, the more opposition we faced, the more Thomas and I loved each other.

The more the Church outraged, the more outrageous our love. Tom was no more cataloguing his reactions as I was. We were in each other's arms from the moment I touched him and rubbed his back, caressed his skin, massaged his legs.

This was a man so longing for the caress as to be agonising. Whether he was a monk or not, whether we consummated now not later - or ever - didn't matter. We had entered each other. I was his Sophia, he was my Christ and we were all too human. This was ecstasy.

Front of stage

Were we really going to let this come in our way? Was the world going to be saved for this true monk to be truly monk again? The biographer prepared the way. That's what they all wanted. Tom to become Thomas, Tom to become Father Louis, Tom to become the monk, Tom to become the hermit. They forgot one step. Tom to become mine!

She finds the book and reads again

"Father Louis added that in many ways he had not been truly faithful to the solitary life. Yet who could say what were its real demands other than those who had to meet them? And who could know what were the failures and problems of those forgotten people who lived as solitaries in the past? How many of them were lonely and in love?"

There it was. The more Tom was written out of this affair the deeper our love. But everyone missed the clue. Oh Thomas, do you remember saying this?

From the darkness across the stage comes Tom's voice

"All I know is that here I am, and the valley is very quiet, the sun is going down, there is no human being around, and as darkness falls I could easily be a completely forgotten person...."

Light fades on Margie and comes up slowly on Tom

Tom:

"As if I did not exist for the world at all. The day could easily come when I would be just as invisible as if I never existed, and still be living here on this hill. And I would be perfectly content to be so." I was perfectly content. I have been perfectly content. Margie was right. We became invisible to the world, and as darkness fell, we became each other. We've been living here ever since we made that decision as long ago as 1966.

Sc 4

THE VIMTO KID

Tom is back at his desk, record player, books and tea service

Tom:

It wasn't so difficult to understand or to achieve. I'd been getting so much advice from everyone about my feelings for Margie. Many could not even give her a name, so embarrassed they were at this. - how did they put it - dalliance. How could a monk act so? What a jerk? What folly. And so on. It was in their eyes, even some of my closest friends and fellow monks dare not say it. But it was in their eyes. They were appalled. The flawed monk, the imperfect monk, the spoiled monk, the precious monk. How can he possibly throw it all away now and abandon God? What has his life all meant? What is his vow worth? Who is his God now?

He starts seriously playing around with his camera.

Dismantling. Unscrewing the lens. Looking, Cleaning. Concentrating.

Tom:

I was consistently told that I was sailing close to the wind. As if I didn't know that myself! I'd been cheating on the Abbot. What cad! I'd been trying to have illicit telephone calls with Margie ever since I got back into the monastery. True the biographer describes it all in his book, but not really. All biographers lie. Take a look. Rip out the lines. They can all be re-written...

The camera is dismantled

But I was in love with this woman. I was fighting the world's image of a monk. The image I had done so much to create. And I played along with it all. Until I was afraid for my sanity. I confess. I should have confessed then, I confess now.

He puts it down and walks around.

Tom:

...But nothing could stop me. I was that Vimto Kid in short trousers chasing after his first girlfriend. The very first one, the innocent one. I understood nothing. The girl who is never going to leave. The girl I would always come home to. She was the one who would never know my mother, just as I never knew my mother.

Margie became the first women and the last woman. God's Sophia and Mary's angel eyes. I'd get my friends to drive to visit me at the monastery. Ridiculous some said. What is he doing? Has he lost the head that had already been lost to God?

Friends came to the monastery. I'd dress in denim. I'd be a baseball player or film director. I'd have a bottle of beer in my hand. We'd drive from the monastery to meet her. I'd cheat the Abbott time and time again. Nothing stopped me. I was living the disaster called love.

His laughter is contagious, almost catastrophic.

He knows he has been living a disaster.

Tom:

I had a modest, hardly luxurious two-roomed shack in the forest. Behind the abbey. The prayer room was a little bigger than a cupboard but I could do my services there without going to the main abbey. And there I was, the celebrated Monk, the man in the hermitage. The sycamore tree had disappeared. I was entering a woman so completely that no words ever got close to it.

Goes to rock in the hammock

Margie (voice only):

Many thought he'd got it easy. It's all there in the biographies. It's all distorted. He was advised to follow the ecstasy. And he played along. He loved it. So did I! He was all in all, and in one Christ. And this woman in me became that unity. Of course, they all took more than a few liberties but Tom didn't mind. He liked having people around. He could have a cigar and drink a malt whisky whenever they managed to smuggle a bottle in.

Tom:

I'd been trying to work it all out in my head whether to leave the Abbey or not? Was it a realistic option? I was down in San Francisco. I can't remember how I got there and why. But I called in on Ferlinghetti. We had lunch in an Italian restaurant, one of my favourites. Then we went onto an espresso house on North Beach. It was there the idea came up...

.. I was telling Larry how I'd been grappling with multiple lives for many years. I told him about my love and desire for Margie and how she had reciprocated. It was unstoppable. I told him how we had gone through an incredible period of near madness to see each other. He was more than supportive. He understood completely. He had never seen me quite this way and needed no convincing. He suggested I just try and disappear for a while. I told him about the visit planned to the East.

Gets out of the rocking chair.

Tom:

Later in the year I was supposed to go out to Asia, to India, visit the Dalai Lama. Larry suggested I do that and then find a way of informing the Abbot that I would not be returning. Until he said it so simply, I hadn't quite considered it. "Just disappear Tom, disappear with Margie. Go to Indochine". He always called it Indochine. "We are animals without clothes," he said, "looking for a naked unity. We are divided into countries, Tibet on potato legs, strange clowns who cannot sleep because of the thunder ...she has turned it on," Tom he said, "she has turned you over to play your other side. Her breasts will bloom, figs will burst, the sun blindingly white. You'll never come back. You'll wear oriental clothing. Go, Tom, go."

Sc 5

INDOCHINE

A dialogue in light across the stage – when each speaks only the opposite side of the stage is lit: when M speaks, T is lit and vice versa

Margie (Tom in light):

Tom was after all only 53 and his life was far from over. I was in my mid 20s. We could have a life together. Of course, many thought the celebrated hermit should actually do what it says on the tin. And suck it in! Tom was fond of colourful language but at that moment it wasn't necessary. Ferlinghetti and Merton agreed. Figs would burst and we would disappear to live together.

Tom (Margie in light):

I am old now but I am not tired. Of course, I was always a beat monk as Larry said. But after 1968 I became another Thomas Merton, one yet to be written about, yet to be interpreted. What could that be, who could that be now that I have lived more than 30 years? 30 years since I was supposed to have died back in Bangkok?

Pause

Three or four decades on. Imagine it! All the dissertations, the new books, all the re-packaged volumes, all those biographers and writers re-interpreting my life story, saving me. Redeeming me, forgiving me, analysing everything, every line, every laundry list I ever wrote. What could it possibly be? Who could I possibly be? Who was Thomas Merton?

Margie (Tom in light):

It did though. It started off as a joke. Well not a joke so much as Larry said why don't you just fake your death. Organise your own - dada suicide, he called it. He went on to explain how some of the Dadaist poets had disappeared. One in particular, an English pugilist called Arthur Craven. It was that night Tom spent in the City Lights publication office in Frisco. That;' when the idea took hold. As Tom planned his trip to India and Asia, he couldn't get it out of his mind. He couldn't get me out of his mind. He would disappear. We would disappear. We laughed at the blasphemy of it all.

Tom (Margie in light):

What made it even more exciting was that I had to do everything to meet up with Margie in Asia. In secret. This would be a scandal. Death was the only way it could be retrieved. The myth of one Thomas Merton would be replaced by another. I couldn't tell even my closest friends. Larry was the only one who knew. "Later, he said, "Tom, you'll probably go off and write another best seller. Only you'll never be able to publish it under your own name. It will be as big as *The Seven Story Mountain*. You'll call it something like *The Phoney Island of the Mind*. There will not be a cynical line in it." Larry's own book had been a huge success, *The Coney Island of the Mind*. We laughed ourselves silly.

10,000 WHISPERS

There is a burst of *Silver Dagger* by Joan Baez. It then turns into a Bob Dylan song: *A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall*. A stagehand enters and begins to pack away the desk, the book and the study. This will continue through this scene. The song is turned down but keeps playing over the following...

Margie (in light):

I never meant to be hard on those that first wrote me into Tom's life. And then wrote me out of it. I tried to make sense of the biographer in 1981. We both did when his book arrived. He was after all appointed on Tom's death as his official biographer. I know he didn't complete the work. But he did leave us also with his own journal of those years. His notebooks, his visits to the Abbey. (Pause) But eventually I grew tired. Biographer after biographer wrote out the cult of Thomas Merton they were all so keen to unravel.

Music intervenes – whose tongues were all broken...

Margie:

Tom was always the irritant, the wayward one. He was the rebel with the cause everyone wanted but no one could sustain. He was the person who was not to be disturbed; he was the troubled one, the approachable one, the man who needed his space and time, the man who would stop and talk to a deer. He was all denim and indigo. All of them biographers and scholars, theologians and psychologists, all of them eventually became untouchable. I tired of the words just as I tired of so many others. Tom did too. The mania grew. We kept thinking we'd missed something. But as book after book emerged, the cult did not die down.

The song of a poet that died in the gutter

Margie:

The ordinariness of our lives, the everydayness of Tom did not emerge. Yet it was this ordinariness that saved us. That saved Tom. The critical monk? I was present but not present. In fact, mostly, I was an embarrassment.

I met a young woman whose body was burning.

Tom (in light):

I sometimes wonder whether they missed the point of my writing. I know I have been accused of not knowing when to stop, of now knowing where the pen ends and the silence begins. I know it is exceedingly tiresome to go through it all. But it was therapy to me. Writing was as much prayer as silence. I once said "all theology is a kind of birthday." I said that. "Each one who is born comes into the world as a question for which old answers are not sufficient." Ah, but there's nothing more comic than reading from yourself. Nothing was sufficient. This was the dark before dawn but I had to look at it all myself. Again and again. And I could only do that by writing myself out.

I met a young girl who gave me the rainbow...music continues to play out...it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall....

Tom and Margie freeze as if in tableau. No movement.

Sc 7

DIRECTOR

And what do you do now my blue-eyed son? A woman dressed in black tie enters and begins to ruminate whilst walking around the two characters, in tableau on the stage. She brings on a folding table.

Director:

Of course, I have my idea of what it was like to become a saint. I liked the term. It suited the way Tom was. Conditioned by time and the moment, everything can shift as if expected to adapt. It helps the theatre. It helps the director. But for me there was nothing to adapt too. Reading others merely deflected silence into another perspective.

Walks, looks at Tom

The monk could roll with all writers and then roll off. The theatre allows us, or was it just me, to conform to myth. Theatre can penetrate the dismal doctrines that he had signed up for. I am to blame, look around: this theatre, this set, this blinding light, this pathetic attempt to avoid the inauthentic self. Whilst we are all constantly inventing new selves.

Walks towards Margie, begins to measure up with a tape.

Look how they stand, how they freeze. Look how they sit. Nothing is strange. The monk of course held back not me. Others, seduced by myth attract themselves to another world. They read the saint in the unsaintly. They redeem everything he wished to abandon. Forget the desert fathers, Zen, Lao Tzu, Buddhist, comparisons, the Orthodox against the Catholic. Sanctity only ever presented itself in the space between once person to another, one self to another.

Front of stage – Tom and Margie exit.

Cut-outs of Tom and Margie are brought onto the stage.

Director walks back and around.

Is this theatre? To leave priggish self-righteousness behind? We hold onto these characters. They convince us of our prejudices. Yet we offer up the devil in the alibi to excuse our impatience. Our intolerance has taken over. How did all this happen? Is this the poetry of survival? Thomas Merton is not dead. He's just turned into the fourth stage of life.

Music: The executioner's right is always well hidden. The director goes off stage to re-enter carrying two glasses and a bottle.

Director puts the glasses on the folding table. Opens up two chairs. Pours a drink for two. Sits. Tom comes to join her at the table.

Sc 8

DIRECTOR MEETS TOM

Director:

What do you mean by all this? I suggest we stop it all right now.

Tom:

What, right now?

D:

Yes.

T:

But I was on the way to a lesser soul, you know the idiot in me distancing myself from the unity of one.

D:

Tom, oh Tom

T:

Didn't I see the delusions reduced so cleverly? And they are my words.

D:

We agreed that you would take all your words back.

T

Ah come on. Not all of them. Give me some licence.

D:

Can't this theatre even convince you of a new life?

T:

Perhaps that's it, I didn't struggle enough to challenge anything I wrote.

D:

A search against method?

T:

What?

D:

You happened to go through monkhood, glossed any real self out of all existence.

T: (mischief) Except with God of course.

D:

Agreed. But you can't say that. Try to vary it a bit more. Imagine someone else saying those words.

T:

But they are my words.

D:

Come on Tom, this is the theatre, we've been through all that before.

It is uncertainty that is both friend and foe here.

T:

We fear the fugue in our lives.

D:

What? You mean the figure of a wayward monk never reaching sanctity.

T:

Christ, did I say that or you? It's outrageous.

They laugh and toast to the outrageous.

D

Think how you hated their prying. But could do so little against it. You were constantly ravished by conjecture.

T:

And change...and Margie!

D:

Margie, yes! Think about all those small self-punishments. Remember you were so pleased when the Abbot discovered your secret love for Margie.

Director starts clearing away the table. Folds it up.

D:

And theology...

T:

But that's what you are trying to do. Not me!

D:

Fiction, soul dust, all feathers on the breath of your God

T:

No, my fiction, my theologies, were always useful. They were prayers. But not for the church. Not for the critics. They were working betrayals.

D:

Survival in Christ?

T:

Yes, all necessary especially when written by others. All words were halted, arrested and tidied up.

D:

In Christ, through Christ?

T:

Yes, in Christ. (pause) It was painful to watch but I could do nothing about it anymore.

D:

So these are not lies, nor are they truths.

T:

They are lessons towards this lived wisdom. Come on, you should know better than that. This is theatre. Low wisdom at best!

They look at each other and then laugh. They finish their drinks.

The Director takes the folding table away and begins to form a small stone circle but with books. Merton books.

D:

Ah Tom, there you go again. Ask Margie. All this is preventable. You are the grand spoiler of spiritual contemplation. Tom, you have to try harder. Remember your school report in England: "Tom must take his homework more seriously". Tom, take your fiction seriously.

T:

Why should I do that? As if you want me to control my own imagination? Why should my story take that direction? Madame, try harder indeed. Take your theatre more seriously.

INDOCHINE II

Margie walks around adjusting the various layers of white garments covering her body. Sometime her face is shrouded, sometimes supported, sometimes clear. She is changing into the older Margie of Act 2. The cut outs lie at the side of the stage. Light shift reflecting the mist, mountains and river valley.

Margie:

It's low water at the end of the summer season in Luang Prabang. I watch one boy scoop out water from the boat, two others dive, fall face first into the water. They have goggles on. One of them collects fish they might get in the scattered net. It is as small scale as you can get. But there is an intimacy as I look down from this large veranda. No sooner do I see the boys disappear in the long narrow boat another passes. A lady for Savannah sits bolt upright in the boat. She has an umbrella up. I call Tom to take a look. I think of my French past then, my French grandmother, my Vietnamese mother. Smith is not my real name. The sun is fierce.

To one side of the veranda, an aged Tom Merton

Tom:

Not many people know this but I have followed it all. All the books, all the studies that came out on me. Just at the end of the century. I was in my late 70s then. A beat monk changing according to the current issues of the day. What would Thomas Merton have said about 9/11? What would he have said about the fall of the Berlin Wall? Or the Second Iraq War? What would he say about America that hasn't been written out and down so many times? And what of the greed of Wall Street, the cash cows? And what now...when there is no stable truth and the Orwellian nightmare returns? Who speaks of alternative facts? And there we were, Margie and me. She is looking after me as we age together. She's in her early 50s now. Me, close to the end.

Tom goes front stage looking into the audience – decidedly slower and frail.

Tom:

What were we to learn about our country that was so secret? Here we lived in a land bombed to nothing. When the CIA ran their secret war against the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. When my countrymen falsified the maps of the border to convince everyone that they were still bombing Vietnam. According to the rules of engagement? They were bombing relentlessly in the Plain of Jars.

Pause

What would the Thomas Merton they thought they knew say of that?

The sound of a Chinook helicopter is heard – slowly approaching, then deafening throughout the whole theatre. The audience is shrouded in smoke, fog and mist for the next part. The stage is clear. During this the Merton book stack is begun.

Sc 10

PILED HIGH

Piled high into small skyscrapers of books in the centre of the stage, these represent the, multiple copies, multiple volumes, the books of and on Thomas Merton. The books on Thomas Merton, the books that might have led to Thomas Merton and the books that are not Thomas Merton. A domino effect can also be created. Take one out and – Jenga like - a pile falls. Try and insert a volume and the piles topple.

Margie comes in, dressed in white, caught in the low light walks around and through this 'bookscape'. There is no hurry to speak. She locates a book' It could be called Heretic Blood (cf. Heretic Blood. The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton. M.W. Higgins 1998). It could be called something else. Even Merton Our Contemporary. She extracts it carefully, this time not allowing a pile to fall. She examines it a little by turning it over, leafing through it and finally turns to the back dust jacket page and begins to read slowly:

Margie:

“This brilliant new book is the first to use recently released diary entries and correspondence by Merton and includes new insights about the recently published diary of his episode of the heart... (*she pauses*) – Ah, Mr Merton’s episode of the heart.

She smiles ever more winningly and gracefully both to herself and the audience.
Really, she is touched by grace...

Margie:

The writer compares Merton with William Blake, the monk’s intellectual and spiritual hero, and comes to startling conclusions (*whispers*) – I cannot wait - about the emotional and intellectual passions that drove Thomas Merton, a man and thinker for all seasons. Oh dear, who writes these book cover texts if not the authors themselves?

She re-inserts the book.

Poor Tom, a man and thinker for all seasons. For one woman. Call me Sophia, call me Nature, call me the Universe, call me the goodness of all things pure, call me the woman to become the light for Tom. Call me the one who crowned Him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory. Call me the one who brought the one thing greater than glory, call me weakness, nothingness, poverty. Call me love.

She looks through a space in the bookscape

Call me the one who sent the infinitely rich and powerful monk forth as poor and helpless. Call me the one who made him realize this mission of the inexpressible. Call me what you will, I care no longer for this sophistry. I am, I was, that woman

Light closes on M and comes up on Tom who wanders in a fragile manner around the bookscape.

Tom:

Of course, I'm fair game. It was open season on Thomas Merton the moment I grabbed that electric fan in the Bangkok hotel room. The act took some invention. The fiction befits Conan Doyle. The only surprise is that no one really pursued it. I did begin to enjoy some of the volumes that started to appear after my death. I mean, enough to make a city weep. And it was obvious as we moved on, books appeared, my journals were found. Margie and I settled here in the Royal City.

Looks through hole in the bookscape at audience

Tom:

There were as many Mertons as there were realities. Multiple lives in one God, as one writer put it. But who needs a biographer to take us further away from ourselves? Where is the director when you need her

Picks a book out, flicks through it, re-inserts it.

Tom:

Let's be frank. My spiritual geography, after Blake or Eckhart, after Niebuhr or Tillich, was all over the place. It was meant to be, and it was like that from the very start. But scholar or theologian, abbot or scriptwriter, director or paramour would all pick at this lived experience. The chance wisdom would astound all. The rawness and speculation. Everyone, including God, wanted a structure, a hierarchy. They wanted all those wonderful good things than begin to control the phantom. Poor Tom!

Sc 11
POOR TOM

Tom:

Some come close. But it's sorcery, witchcraft, its writing of the demonic order.
All those angelic interruptions of pathos, all the errors of eros and wayward logic.
That sort of thing. Story telling where the story keeps running out of control. And
who would continue to put it out of control. Why, poor Tom of course....

Light shifts to M.

Margie:

Oh, don't get me wrong, we loved looking at those books, those things when they
eventually arrived. We'd go to at our little post office here in the Royal City. We
used to laugh a lot at this *man in the sycamore tree*. Tom was a tearaway, a cad of the
first order. He sniffed all sorts of skirt. He was reprehensible. Most of you who
have read the books know it. He was out of control.

He looks for the red espresso machine. It's nowhere to be found.
The piles of books begin to block all view.

Tom:

And now decades on here I am once more the man of all narratives and urgency.
The disaster monk for all catastrophe and crisis. The man to rescue Christology
and the Catholic Church. Heaven Forbid! The man to become a redemptive
strategy for the world. This man, look at me now, Buddha and the lord almighty
only know what it will be like on my anniversary. But thankfully I'll no longer be
around. (*smiles*) Poor Tom.

The books are head high, and only his head is now revealed.
He is completely surrounded by books.

Tom:

I've got news for all of you out there. The initial rush to embrace me, the beat monk, the world-denying sinner was catastrophic. My autobiography was a struggle. No other option now but to calm down. All of you out there, just calm down. Please, before you think of writing one more line about Thomas Merton just don't. Stop. Desist. Hold back. Go for a walk. Make an espresso. But don't, please don't, write that line down. Can we make an agreement on that?

The books have been closing in unbeknownst to M as he speaks.

They will eventually smother Tom and become his funeral pyre.

ACT 2

Did I read those words somewhere or do I want to read those words, then do those words remain? How much do werewolves remember of what they have done after they change back. Let us pray.

Frank Lentricchia The Edge of Night ²

Sc 1

TOM'S DREAM

Throughout Act 2 Tom becomes a ghost, a spectre, sometimes in view albeit shrouded, other times his words are heard as voice over or through the stage presence of Margie. Margie herself has aged and is looking back – still beautiful, she is now frail in white and grey. Resplendent. Enraptured. This is not so much her story as the story of all women.

Tom: (voice over)

Like being awakened by Eve. Awakened by the Blessed Virgin. Are these my words? Were they ever my words? Nothingness and plenitude, the clarity of paradise? Generosity arrives when we are most helpless. Made whole, I don't think so. Love takes me by the hand, and opens the doors of another life, another day. Stick to the text, Tom.

Margie tends the book pyre.

he appears to take another book and reads:

Margie:

Sophia, the feminine child, is playing in the world, obvious and unseen, playing at all times before the Creator. Her delights are to be with the children of men. She is their sister. The core of life that exists in all things is tenderness, mercy, virginity, the Light, the Life considered as passive, as received, as given, as taken, as inexhaustibly renewed by the Gift of God. Sophia is Gift. . . .

The pyre is being prepared.

Tom (over)

I became unreadable even to myself. It was part of the inevitable catastrophe. I had done it before. I had fallen in love with a woman's eyes. It's not superficial. I was drawn to the forbidden one. If, and this happened often, the look in the woman's eyes was returned, I was lost. Each time it happened it would take longer for me to get out of it.

Margie:

She is in all things like the air receiving the sunlight. In her they prosper. In her they glorify God. In her they rejoice to reflect Him. In her they are united with him. All words are hers. She is the union between them. She is the Love that unites all words. She is life as communion, life as thanksgiving, life as praise, life as festival, life as glory. Because she receives perfectly there is in her no stain. I am not stained. I am woman, I was all women. To Tom more than others.

Tom (over):

I had mythologized so much that I no longer knew where Thomas Merton ended and Father Louis began. But there is no guilt in being helplessly lost in this journey. Her love removed the words I was drowning in. A journey that, as a monk, can never be. I became one with all women. And all women were God. This woman who will now bury me.

I had a dream that I didn't write these words, didn't dream these words, that I could take all the words back. Everyone has had a dream. Our own being, or own nature. The language is never precise. Ambiguity is the Gift of our Creator's Thought. There is art within us. There is fiction we cannot control. It is not my life. It is everyone's life.

I am speaking to my sister. Hagia Sophia. Wisdom? Don't even go that far. I know I was awakened, born again at the voice of this woman sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity. The depths of divine fecundity. Did I dream those words? So I dream in language, in prayer?

Let us suppose I am a man lying asleep in a hospital. I was indeed this man lying asleep. What time was it? In the morning I was dreaming in a very quiet room when a soft voice awakens me from my dream. She is like all mankind awakening from all the dreams that ever were dreamed in all the nights of the world. Like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated. I was alone in all the lands of the earth until she arrived.

How did she show herself? She became my mind as it began its journey back, back to awareness from all distractions, cross-purposes and confusions. Such is the awakening of one man, one morning, at the voice of a nurse in the hospital. The unity of love. Awakening out of languor and darkness, out of helplessness, out of sleep, newly confronting reality and finding it to be gentleness.

But he who has defended himself, fought for himself in sickness, payer and conjecture. He who has planned for himself, guarded himself, loved himself alone and watched over his own life all night, is killed at last by exhaustion. For him there is no newness. Everything is stale and old.

Sc.2

THE ROYAL CITY

Margie:

She is love without blemish, and gratitude without self-complacency. I am words than cannot be taken back. All things praise her by being themselves and by sharing in the Wedding Feast. I am the Bride and the Feast and the Wedding. I became the inexhaustible source of creative realization; in all impossible glory. His manifestation in radiant splendour! But I will remain unseen, glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none who know me at all. He was lost when I looked into his eyes in the hospital. It didn't take much. We were moved to be forbidden, moved to be inseparable.

Tom (over):

There were times when other beautiful women were part of a group. Especially here in the Royal City. I was usually drawn to that beauty and trembled - I was forever caught in their gaze. I used to have words to describe this. Now no longer.

Margie:

The moment he knew it, we knew it. Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace. We could inhabit all words and take them for our love. I became the inexhaustible fountain of kindness, and would almost seem to be, at times, all mercy. (smiles) Usually he was lost. Nothing like a kiss, but in utter panic yet thrill. We can and will always speak of ravishment.

Tom

Naturally many of these rapid encounters led to nothing, the ritual of guest, visitor and monk took over. And I would busy myself with the next moment. But yes we can speak of the ravishing. I became her.

Margie approaches front of stage – behind her young monks in bright yellow and orange with shaven heads are preparing the pyre, and appear to be swathing a body in white. Margie walks around the pyre amongst the young monks.

Margie:

He calmed down a lot after he died. But that time in the hospital it was the eternal moment. A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. This is the Royal City...

.. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identifications, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.

...This is the temple. Those are Tom's words. (pause) The first gaze. The only gaze. To be human. To be woman. The church, the abbey, colleagues and friends. None would understand that. We loved.

Sc 3

DAWN

Very low lighting, intimate – we are in the section of the stage where the veranda was. But it is changing, the books are changing.

Margie:

It's dawn. Sitting on a hardwood bench. On a balcony overlooking the river. A panoramic view. From the elephant sanctuary at the bend in the river, to the shallow waters up to the waterfall. The view was always National Geographic. And we would laugh. Buffalos in the water with the sun glistening off their backs. A passing long boat. Misted layers of the mountain as far as the eye could see. I watch them come from the village to clean the rooms. I still do not have their names. They change so often. One cleans the kitchen, the next the floor, the third the bed, the fourth the bathroom.

Tom (over):

As she swabs the floor, she looks at me. An old man. Not even a monk to them. There is laughter. Slowly the others leave. She continues to wash down the floor. The others shout at her. Perhaps they make suggestion why she should hang around here. She is magnificently dressed, later in the day a Buddhist ritual at the temple. She leaves after the others. Moments later she returns with a kind of sheepish look. She makes what can only be a nervous intimate gesture towards me. As she takes her scarf left on the divan it catches me across the face.

Margie has begun to remove one or two the books from the front of the pyre to reveal Tom lying under the white sheets. On the book-bier. She approaches him and touches his cheek through the sheet.

Margie:

It was a gentle gesture. *(pause)* There is jungle time, village time out here. Royal City time. We usually left our villa for the Temple. I would put the lights on the veranda ready for our return in the evening. Jungle black. We have to step carefully now, both needing a stick. We were afraid to fall. Crossing the bamboo bridge in moonlight we take each other's hand. We teach each other. The villagers show interest but speak very little English. Our language has changed in this silence. They dress differently each day reminding us of the Chinese and Vietnamese markets in the Royal City. They giggle.

A young novice enters and puts flowers around the pyre.

Margie:

We love the giggling. One younger girl shows more alertness. Yesterday Tom gave her a small camera. She went around filming the baby, the toddlers running around the chickens, and the dog. The rescued monkey was screaming in the cage. Knife, fork, spoon, plate, bowl, cup, she kept filming and repeating the words. Ravishing...

.....

They will come to the Royal City. Girls on their backs floating the logs down to their village. Young boys passing in their long boats. The girls lie back against the wood. The perfect raft. They wave to us. One or two river walkers pass.

.....

Sunday fishing and the baby elephants working their way through the forest. You can hear them before you see them. The boys wear goggles to go under the boat to look for fish in the shallow water. We never really see them get the fish but we know they do. They bring some to us.

.....

The forest fires have stopped. Less smoke. The first layer of the forest and mountain is visible again. The girls change from shorts to their traditional skirt. The evening. Field notes for a life made out of a collage.

We started with some words. Hospital or temple. Simple gesture. Mouth. Eye. Nose. Hand. They found it hard to repeat them. Pronunciation was always cut short. Difficulties with the r and the l. Strange repetitions emerged. House always was *hou'*...

It made for slowing down this life. Someone else was often *someone el...* They would giggle a lot. They would tease. Parts of the body were subject to laughter. A breast was the most fun amongst the women. They would cup their breast and try and say 'breast' after me. They would recoil. They looked at each other, women called Moon, Red, Green, Boon and After.

...

Red had left her first husband, gone off with another villager who treated her roughly. Too roughly. We gave money to her. We did this time and time again only to hear that it had been passed on. Used for gambling and drinking. When the money was gone, he'd come back and beat her. She showed no interest in her own children. Which was why we ended up with a small orphanage in our villa. It took on the feel of a small plantation. We encouraged Madame Boon to set up a small hotel in the Royal City.

Sc 4

LESS MIST

The stage begins to clear from the mist – more novices come in and dress the (book) pyre with flowers.

The sounds of local music turn into 'party' music

Margie:

Less haze, less mist today. The burning of the mountain side is over for another season. An elephant passes. The trainer is in orange today. Bright orange.

Sabadee, he shouts over to me on the veranda, *Sabadeee Madame*.

I would make the first cup of tea for Tom. Lapsang Souchong, his favourite.
The cotton drill jacket is fresh on the side of the bed. Tom still under the
mosquito net. To wake with the sun, to hear the leaves still after the night.

Our villa is a long way down from the temple. It's off season and many of the
owners are out of station. Some already as far as Chiang Mai to pick up the
supplies. Necessary. This time solar panels, fruit trees, plastic furniture. Some
still go to Savannah.

...

Yesterday a party boat passed. They stopped downriver and put their music on.
There was dancing on the riverside for two hours. As they returned, they were
still dancing in the boat. Arms moving. 14 of them. No danger in the shallow
bedded river.

Party music

Margie:

A huge ring of red ants would suddenly appear all around the shower. Almost a
perfect circle. Washed away, they disappeared. Only to return in a week or
month. The swamp near the Japanese House. We had it drained. Was breeding
everything.

There are ladies of the plantation. They have no age, no history, no country.
Unhappiness with child. Children are the secrecies they are unsure of. The
patterns are refined. The rituals precise.

When Madame Butterfly (that's what they used to call me) used to take the
Honda into town, the cards would come out. They re-arrange all the chairs in
the temple. Cushions on the floor. Rice and bamboo leaves would be cooked.
One or two of the villagers would stretch out in the steam bath, doors open.
Tom would join in. At home one might say. At home in the jungle. At home in
the clearing.

Sc 5

MORE MIST

The pyre is dressed, complete

Margie:

What did the villager come for? Why did she visit? The massage is over. She plays some more. There is a feeling of wanting to be taught, as she wants to be touched. Instead, she laughs. This constant giggling of the world apart. Her name is Green not Red. She is back within five minutes asking for water. Now she is the Gardener. It is either a game or a careful flirtation with no rules...

Tom usually gave her water. Green wanders off with her son. Sometimes Green goes around his desk and touches all the books, the carefully folded newspapers, the writing instruments, and all other things on this large black Chinese desk. She looks inside a bag on which is written Royal City Night market.

Suddenly Green collapses on the floor near the hammock. Tom touches her head. A saintly gesture perhaps. Is she alright? She doesn't know how to respond. She gets up and walks to one of the hammocks. Her small child runs in and she kisses him. I too am a child to this woman. They all laugh again. We all throw kisses in fun. The small child runs away.

The Director wanders on, and approaches the pyre...walks around;
She brings out the cutouts.

Director:

We are always absolutely devastated at this or that. The theatre like the church offers fluency. Fluent in one obsession we lose another. There will be no feel for the cultivated. Au courant, we will make a good fight of it, this planned disaster.

Tom was as real as he could be. He was theatrical, cinematic and mystic. He could run with any heretical idea he chanced upon. But boy he paid for it. He worked at it, still does. And lived a life so utterly incomplete that even now, no narratives will pull it together.

No theatre will rescue this obscurity. Slowly the game is over. Another God peeps through the clouds, the mountain mist has risen. Margie will come out and smiles. Oh Tom, she says. They will always pause until you give them something. They sport with you Tom. You are their ATM.

They both laugh together.

Light goes down and comes up on Margie

Margie

If only they knew at what price. Would not they turn away in horror? They can talk of dim forebodings, even a devilish pact. In reality there has never been a moment when a pen, dipped in blood from a cut finger, hesitated before putting down a signature. It is still possible to say no. It is possible to take these words back.

Margie & Tom (voices over):

It is still possible to say no. As much as we turn the lives of others into fiction, we manage our prejudices. We edit difficulty in or out. Our interpretations of the world support our insecurity. We read and we appropriate another life. He was the best appropriator you'll ever find. That is until they announced he had found his voice. I still do not know what that means. He absorbed the god of writing just as he absorbed the obsession to be a writer. He absorbed all the narratives of the holy and unholy, of the Catholic and the Cistercian, of the Anchoritic and the Cenobitic.

Director:

Walks around the pyre

Tom became a literary device. He couldn't then turn it all back. The alibi was great, the obsession even greater. It was considered in the early years that Tom could be intemperate, indulgent, impulsive. Oh and of course even at times, distasteful. The hostile eye would emerge and he would rant.

Does his ordinariness excuse those actions? There are and were times when he was out of order. And he knew too well how the church worked and how religion structures dogma and discipline. Friends in the Vatican continually found ways to edit out his misdemeanours. The blindness was spectacular.

Addressing the pyre

The monk is the measurement of their solitude, their openness, their inadequacy, their insight, their foresight, their hindsight. Hindsight deflects the celebrity, the comic, the cartoonist and the charlatan. In the end they hallucinated a Merton and you, Poor Tom, became that hallucination...

Lights a torch

Like God, Tom knew, he was an accident waiting to happen. He was never the ideal monk. For that you don't have to think for yourself. Tom lived to remove that outrage which only ever damaged his own self.

Sc 6

WHITE MISTS

Margie is now seated in a large wicker chair near the pyre.

It envelops her, she has become one with the chair with her white layers of dressing and the white of the chair. Her legs are up inside her long dress giving her the feeling of youth, the un-aged woman.

She reads very slowly. She doesn't know where the words come from.

Studying the same doctrine
Under one master,
You and I are friends.
See yonder white mists
Floating n the air
On the way back to the peaks.
This parting may be our last meeting
In this life
Not just in a dream,
But in our deep thought,
Let us meet often
Hereafter.

Sounds of prayers and chanting in the distant.

Margie:

The woman will visit again. The child is never occupied, engaged with. Green lies in the hammock as the child continues to wander. No toy is used, no mask played with. No puzzle is offered, no world outside. She pushes herself from side to side, a hammock motion. Her hand on the floor of the veranda as if in water, trailing outside a boat. The occasional touch of the face brings a smile. There is no sign of the child's father. These villagers are in charge of God's children.

If someone says to you "You are more about death than I am" what do they mean? I began to follow the nothingness that lies within all of us. This has nothing to do with being more comfortable in our own skin. Or in the company of others. Tom began to die. And someone else is dying right now over there in the village. Of pancreatic cancer. Their body closing down by the hour.

Director:

Yes, I think it still works. Tom is dying, Tom has died but you must complete this part Marguerite.

Margie:

Children comfortable in their blindness will grow up and may also be happy. Our thinking closes down regularly just as our body begins to fade. We might not be as lucky as we think...

A new life with Tom had always been a temptation. I'd written him many letters about this. No one can trace those letters today. Can we separate sensuality so clearly?

Simply, we became one. And going East was not always the option for the Man in the sycamore tree, the man with the wounded heart. I loved the man with heretic blood, the seven-story mountain man. We were the follower of ecstasy. He was the guilty bystander. We are both saints now. No, going East was an inevitability.

Begins to fold up the cut outs

Director:

As Robert Bolt put it in *A Man for All Seasons*, we are 'to serve God wittily, in the tangle of our minds'. Right on both accounts. Tom could never suppress his wit, why would he? Nor could he escape the tangle of his mind. The perfect Christian, the perfect Catholic. Two lives together. Yet they use themselves for this Lord, and the Lord lost himself in them. Oh, how far we have fallen, but why and why every day?

Margie:

It began with a sponge bath. Of course, it did. In that hospital room. What more do you want? Intense disgruntlement with the Church. More or less a Catholic Tom wasn't. Where biographers rushed red squirrels followed. Despair was the font. Water was never quite the wine needed. Tom resisted sadomasochism. Five deer stood by the bush pile trying to understand his presence. A lonely dog howled in the distance. The joyful monk laughed uproariously. He was smitten.

The prayers and chants grow louder

Now the violins began to play. He enjoyed a simple breakfast and then a light supper. As the deer slept this was obviously a man desiring love and affection, catching the mind on the sprig of dogwood blossom. Was that the grey mood of an overcast sky which biographers love? Sleeping restlessly from bed to chair, what fear is this perfect love tottering aimlessly on this romance?

....

Kicking the grass cuttings, throwing leaves in the air. He began to love so deeply. The affair, this affair. This song of quiet insanity. As lovers do, the puff of clouds overhead noticed for the first time, the awful completeness. Write your name here, write the life, the biography and the date that all things fell apart to come together.

Marguerite continues speaking from the chair. She has put the book down and speaks very calmly; an unmistakable youthfulness in her voice

Margie:

When I first met Thomas, I slept badly for many, many weeks. I cannot blame this on him. I knew he was obsessed with following wherever his day and heart would take him. I was young. The sensuality he brought surpassed anything I had ever experienced. There were no boundaries between this man, the celebrated monk and myself. He had, though I didn't know then, locked himself open. The psychologists now understand this beautiful torment. There he was, always available, always wishing for that trip outside the monastery, for the bells and smells, for the beer and skittles.

THE IMPOSSIBLE

The Director sits at the folding table with a laptop open..

Director:

Whole lives edited out. These biographers. What cowards? If anyone knows the distance travelled is the extent of the illusions and deceptions practiced on ourselves, it is he, Tom Merton. When you are in that place and I am in that place in me, we are one.

A younger man, the playwright, comes in. Greets the director, sits down.

The director finds a set of papers.

Ah thanks for coming. (they greet). Have to say immediately. Not sure about this idea of a play. Monologues, dialogues, a monk speaks and all that. The Ravishment of Tom O Merton. The 'O' put in for special effect. Who's interested in this? What licence can we take?

Playwright:

Everything coincides with this. The villa, the hermitage games, the Buddhist turn, plenitude and nothingness. Indo-China and the Royal City, remnants of that Citroen world, restored, parked on main street. It's all there.

Director:

But who's interested? Would have been better as a musical. Or a film. Screen writers would understand this. How a monk disappears and continues a Buddhist existence with the woman he met in 1966. Have him wearing a Beer Lao T shirt and a cotton dress jacket. Give him one of those brightly coloured hats.

P:

You think the audience will recognise him as he goes about his business from 1968 to 1998 when, at the age of 83, he appears to have disappeared again.

Director:

Or died?

P:

Yes, he dies. Burnt on a pyre of books. His own books...

Director:

Not bad but you really can't do this. It's impossible. You should not have even written it. You should just take the words back.

P:

Why? Can't you imagine it? He steps out of a shower and boom, he was fired. I didn't write it, he did.

Director:

Or she did. But you just can't put it this way. I know we have all those metaphors about being fired, fired up, the fire of God, love and so on. He wrote pages and pages on it but that's no excuse. This is unpardonable.

P:

Reprehensible even?

Director:

Yes, I mean no. Don't be insolent. This is the theatre we are talking about. This is an authentic life we are speaking about. Not to be taken lightly. This is the delivery and passion, the obedience of the contemplative soul.

P:

Obedience?

Director:

Yes, obedience to both the form of a life lived this way, and the ecstasy that can only be challenged up to a certain degree.

P:

A life lived in truth...

Director:

Exactly, though I know you don't see it this way

P:

Merton would not have seen it this way either.

Director:

That's as maybe, but there are forms to obey.

P:

What? What forms?

Director:

You can pretend to go outside known and ready answers but never stray too far.

Long pause – pours a drink for the playwright.
As if they are still sizing each other up.

I really was contemplating staging this play but I have to say...after much thought
it, I add.....I have to say, I have decided against it.

P:

Oh, then why am I here?

Director:

You went too far in this garden of boundaries if I may call it that.

P:

What? A garden of boundaries? What are you talking about?

Director:

We need to respect the limits the church puts on its own tradition and any
dissolution of that tradition. Only some can speak for this, only some can address
this. You, my son, have eventually shown you can't. You may have lived
authentically as you think at the cost of betrayal, distrust and alienation. But the
monk Thomas Merton didn't.

P:

You think? Perhaps all this talk of an authentic life deflects us. For Merton it was so often invoked when he needed to return to the delicate obedience of his vow. He received God's will always ambiguously. This is what makes him interesting. He always struggled with that authenticity, and this increased in the last 5 years of his life.

Director:

Until his first death you mean, after his trip to India...

P:

Yes, precisely. Until he woke up to the fiction of his own life. He would never become the hermit others had in mind for him. Letter after letter, text after text he would not be doing God's will if he didn't speak out about war, racism, love and bigotry. Tom Merton is interesting precisely because he wrote without a full deck of cards. Without any full knowledge of what he was talking about.

Director:

You think? I agree there are some breath-taking sophistications here. Even some that might drag us into this century. But today we are over-thinking in order to survive.

P:

But this is his authenticity if you wish to use the word. He was his own man. He had his own death. His own love outside Christ.

Director:

You may well be right. And I really liked the ending.

P:

Then we cancel everything out. We have to. We abandon what we believed in. We reboot, re-start, re-align. Just in case the firing squad catches us.

Director:

Sorry. I still have to tell you. And I know you were kind of expecting this. I have made a decision. You see I cannot support this play. The ending was the reason I was going to put this on in the theatre. But I cannot stage this play. I am sorry....

She hands back the manuscript of the play to the playwright.

We get a slow dissolve. The Director leaves, the playwright sits at the table. The pyre begins to light up and turns into a book catafalque.

Sc 8

FAREWELL TOM, GENTLE FOOL!

Margie reads *Anti-Poem 1* by Thomas Merton – during this time the six orange and yellow robed youths walk round the stage with the body of Thomas Merton aloft. The piled books that were once a landscape are now a catafalque. Eventually Merton is laid onto the catafalque.

Margie:

Oh the gentle fool

He fell in love

With the electric light

Do you not know, fool,

That love is dynamite.

Keep to what is yours

Do not interfere

With the established law

See the dizzy victims of romance
Unhappy moths!
Please observe
This ill-wondered troth.

All the authorities
In silence anywhere
Swear you only love your mind
If you marry a hot wire

Obstinate fool
What a future we face
If one and all
Follow your theology

You owe the human race
An abject apology.

Sc 9

THE RIVER WALKERS

As M completes the reading of the poem, a white shroud is pulled over Tom's whole body. The catafalque is 'fired'. This is the ending; the 'funeral' of Tom O Merton on the Namkhan-Mekong Rivers where they meet in The Royal City. As the funeral takes place, the voice of Tom Merton is played over:

Tom: (voice over)

"When they read this poem of mine, they are translators. Every existence speaks a language of its own." As much as others wish to rush to contemplate my life, of course I had done just that. And I was doing just the same, exiled as we were here just outside in the jungle not far from the Royal City. ...

Opposite the elephant sanctuary, we have had our common mornings with the elephant trainers. Good morning, Monsieur Tom, Sabadee Madame Butterfly, the young mahouts shout. Across the river. Their young voices travel. I lift a somewhat tired arm now.

There are the river walkers. They pass in their yellow or orange robes. Some wear goggles and walk with the flow of the river towards the Mekong. They occasionally put their head underneath the water but they find no fish. They grow in numbers until there is the walking river day. Hundreds of young men and women, dressed in orange and yellow walk the river. They pass our veranda here. Many of them turn to lift a hand in greeting. The sight is spectacular.

Lifted high on the shoulders of six yellow and orange clad river walkers is the 'burning' body of Tom Merton. The stage is enshrouded in mist-smoke. It is laid on a simple bamboo stretcher. Around them other young monks in orange and many women following in white. They walk around the stage until it is a full display of yellow and orange. The procession stops and turns to the audience. All except those carrying the body lift their hands in greeting to the audience, to the world.

With all the knowledge of my mind that has now passed, with all the force in my heart that is now no longer wounded, I respect the soul in all. When I die, I have asked the monks from the nearby Buddhist monastery and the river walkers to carry me in the middle of this immense gathering. Along the river. Up aloft. Margie will arrange it and as they pass in front of this veranda, they will also turn to her and wave. She will be standing there, sovereign, beautiful, sensuous, *nature naturans*.

M stands there, arms raised high greeting the cortège.

She will also lift a hand to greet them as my body passes. Where the waters join, where the two rivers join, they will slowly release my body into the water. It will go with the faster current. All the river walkers further up will stop as my body floats quickly passed those at the front. It will then slowly fade out of sight. It will be the second ending of Thomas Merton. But it won't be the end. Instead, they will lay me out on the catafalque. Books piled high or strewn everywhere saluting me with indescribable humility.

The books all strewn on the floor. Some of the young scholars and monks dressed in bright yellow and bright orange walk slowly in a circle. They are chanting but as they chant, they change the words. Ever so slightly from any original.

... There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, you the dimmed light
... You the meek namelessness, me the hidden wholeness.
... This mysterious unity is a wisdom you cannot attain
.. .Your integrity is the journey towards that Wisdom,
.. You have become the Mother of all, of One....
... Oh Natura naturans.
...Where is that inexhaustible sweetness and purity?
...Muteness is no longer an option
...Silence tricks that fount of action and joy.
.. You will rise up in word-less gentleness
... The theatre of contemplation welcomes us tenderly,

Exit the young monks and scholars slowly walking off the stage
in fugue manner.

curtain

THE BEING IN THE BEING

Note 2

Hermits apparently wish to be buried in their hermitage and nowhere else. Would we argue against that? Apparently, also, neuro-scientists are now trying to isolate the gene of the recluse or hermit; recent studies into what is now known as the Reclusive Gene suggest ancestry, environment and contest can predict future solitude. Tom – Thomas (James) Merton – Father Louis – Merton: “I have to be a person that nobody knows. They have Thomas Merton. He’s dead. Father Louis, he’s half-dead too.” Thomas Merton could never kill off what he had created. A critical fiction can only be made of another when he or she is known, when the material becomes available. And for Merton, the material was all too available; in book after book, he’d made sure of that. But can someone be known too well, where nothing can be extracted from the fictions we make. Only time will erase the first layer and substitute another layer. Only new figures with other critical fictions will remove those we have of Thomas Merton. “But my true self is not one that has to be thought about and propped up with rationalisations,” Frank Lentricchia writes. “He only has to be lived, and he is lived, in Christ, under the surface of the unquiet sea in which the other one is busy drowning.”³ I wrote the *Ravishment of Tom O Merton* in a small Chinese hermitage called *Plenitude* on the side of the River Nam Khan outside Luang Prabang (Laos). Each morning a low boat passed, on it a bamboo house with thatched roof. The Laos flag was prominently displayed. Occasionally there was a wave.

Methodologically, I had a plan. Whichever play or hermitage one retreats to, in whichever country, whether 18 floors up overlooking a canal built by British engineers in Ottawa or in a 700year old converted Garrison Chapel in the unpronounceable Clwyd Valley, or in view of the meditation platform overhanging the Namkhan River just before it meets the Mekong, the void takes on a new form. Here the nameless is erased and a small library still exists. Yes, we still read books. The books, the few more to add to the existing 40 or so, these collected over the last 4 years from the most likely bookshop called AllBooks, are mostly stacked in the small metal shelves in the villa. Yes, we still use bookshelves. The volumes I took to Luang Prabang were as follows: *The Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (1959/1967); *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965); *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (1969); *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (trans. T. Merton 1965); *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1964); *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960); *Thomas Merton in Alaska* (1988). As these volumes on Merton increased it was necessary to leave one hermitage for the other. From now on it must be methodological, more rigorous than it has ever been. The hermitage itself must be tuned, life must be culled, the void must be re-found, the nameless must remain unsexed, nothingness and ecstasy must re-unite. The books will be destroyed.

Who then speaks through the fictions of the impossible, the unspeakable, who is it amongst us who make from others our own triumphant naivety and recklessness? There is nothing devastating about this solidarity with the interior being, it is only this nothingness entered down in endless journals which leaves God alone and finds – not Christ - but other names, other lives to inhabit in this unquiet sea. Perhaps only now we can say that such gaming of scholarship was probably no different from that in the Postmodern and Post-Deconstruction scene in universities in the last century. A time when the critical games were being applied to anyone, from Roland Barthes to Gilles Deleuze, from George Bataille to Fredric Jameson. Critical theory and cultural studies (two areas Merton would have devoured had he lived anew) provided a runaway world. It was a world that became so close to fiction that it would be no coincidence that one of the French cultural philosophers Roland Barthes' final courses in L'École Normale Supérieure in Paris in 1980 would be called *The Preparation of the Novel*.

No details became irrelevant to this life of reading through writing and writing through reading. Merton had long become the cypher for lost or renewed Christianity, a trusted vehicle for Catholic revivalism (going back to when Evelyn Waugh abridged *The Seven Storey Mountain* for publication in England), the writer-in-residence, and the reserved somewhat blustering and witty contrarian, that entertainingly fallible apologist for the spiritual life. He'd long become the Merton he was not. It didn't matter what more could be spun out of this monk's life, writing and confessional contemplation. More important -by cleverly ignoring or removing parts – this monk consistently became everyone's companion in the human condition. 'Someone' who would reveal the mystery of God installed in Jesus Christ even though the contrarian had struggled so much to become the one who would also fall short of the multiple selves he was. Not only involved in the radical anxiety of Christian spirituality Merton was used wilfully, and excitingly, as a process in the revision of identity for Christians in a postmodern world. Mostly in all this though Merton himself was left behind. Perhaps, then, a drama might be the only way to rescue Merton from this critical torrent. I had this dialogue of Merton in mind as I started the play in Laos.

“Even in my presence, I would open all the volumes that came after my death, and be startled at how fictional I had become. There in the post-colonial French café, enjoying my tarte citron, I was this witness to the modern mind. I was apparently one of the best, one of the very best in today’s conditions of banality, constant wars and market madness. It was even felt that I had so much to teach man how to become truly human. I would shudder. When I decided to leave the monastery and take Nico’s advice and follow the ecstasy, it was this step that finally began to make me truly human. And however much I grappled with the love of God, waited and prayed for divine intervention and liberation from obedience, however much I entered the mystic through prayer and contemplation, however much I toyed in all seriousness, since stepping off those New York streets and out of the pages of my journal about Cuba, and entered the monastery in Kentucky, with such a vague concept of the redemptive recluse, and however much I analysed back and forth the role of the contemplative in relation to God, the one witness to all our acts, I always did it in a recklessly, some would day rebellious, way. This was Thomas Merton as far as I, Thomas Merton, was concerned. Take me or leave me.”

In early bluster and irritation, there’s a drama in this that is neither a film, a television documentary, another biopic nor fiction. Sometimes in the café I would read the books written on Merton that arrived. Merton consistently stressed and steered his unsystematic but obedient thinking into a journalistic grasp on his own reading. The result of more and more dissertations and the gaming of scholarship would continue to dislocate Merton in almost every sentence. As Tom O Merton would say: “I’d generally close the book then and go for a walk to my favourite Buddhist monasteries in this city. Or then, I just got into the habit of opening any book about me at random and start again to shudder at what was being made of me in this world. Of what I Thomas Merton had become. After an hour or so, Marguerite would come and pick me up in the old white Citroen car that I had restored with the help of the monks.”

We select that which allows us to come to some understanding, whether a misreading or not, this suits our (grand and not so grand) narratives. We carry narratives with us at all times like rosaries, fingering them, moving the beads up and down. Merton was never dead he was projected onto ourselves and all those who wrote about him and read him. This is actually his magic; it’s a form of witchcraft though unpopular to say so. Rowan Williams is closest when he calls Merton out for being wearisomely familiar: “He’d ‘dead’ but ‘Thomas Merton’ is one of the most wearisomely familiar names in the canon of modern spiritual writing, and the whole industry of Merton studies has blossomed (if that is the word) and shows no sign of diminution. Indeed, I am busily contributing it as I write these words.”⁴

It will all diminish. The wearisome familiarity passes. The readings, the seduction, the industry will continue to diminish the man and narrative. ‘Thomas Merton’ will dissolve into multiple realities and none. The anarchist in Merton must have smiled; it is impossible to escape the fiction unless one disappears, attempts a dada-suicide. Death is only one option. The 8th life waits, and someone somewhere will believe it was neither an accident, nor an electrocution. But this is not the ravishment we are speaking about. We are speaking of A recent controversial play *The Ravishment of Tom O Merton*. The drama seems to have taken on the idea or rumour that Merton actually did not die but arranged his death in order to live the life he had promised to the woman he had met, Margie, in 1966. Of course, even downplaying a legend this might risk further distorting that legend, but signs are that this is not true. In main, and we can understand ‘ravishment’ here, because this alleged ‘living legend’ has been set in place as much by Merton’s creative contradictions and fallibilities as by the way any truth is now used to censor such creativity. As the ‘biographer’ put it (and for a couple of crucial years he got as close as anyone to Merton): “it is easy to give myself to his life but not easy to intrude myself into his life.”

Yet this intrusion into Merton’s life has been irrepressible. Sometimes deservedly irreverent and heretic it asks the more direct questions other literary forms cannot ask.: What is the future we face, if one and all follow his theology? The premise for this play is the dissonance played on and around by Merton himself. Detached, confused, brilliantly alert to ambiguity and love, life was a spiral, from the jazz swinger to the abbey poet, to the recluse. Merton steps out from one of Chung Tzu’s poems which he translated: “And in the Nameless was the one, without body, without form.”⁵ For the ravishment of Tom O Merton we attend his own postscript: *Please don’t stop bothering me and don’t apologize for it. For heaven’s sake I need it. And so do you, I guess.*⁶

Roger Connah, Plenitude, Wang Ban Lom, Laos (2015/2023)

¹ Thomas Merton writing to St Joan Marie, in *The School of Charity*, The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction, ed Patrick Hart, FSG (1990) also *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, Orbis, New York (2002), p385.

² Frank Lentricchia, *The Edge of Night, a Confession*, Random House p.119,1994

³Lentricchia p.69

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Silent Actions* p. 17

⁵ Reference to this poem can also be found in Griffin *Follow the Ecstasy*. (Journal) p.180.

⁶ Merton to Stone, *A Life in Letters*. p.69