

Chapter & Verse

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POETRY READING IN A CISTERCIAN MONASTERY

It is a beautiful, sunlit morning in June and I carry my suitcase along the deep sand of the beach at Tenby in West Wales in order to board the small boat which will take me to Caldey Island. As the boat is tied up the island's pier, I disembark and walk along the wooded lane which leads to the monastery, hearing the surf fall back gently from the sanded shore. I gaze up at the life-size carved figure of Christ on the cross on a mound above the sea. As I turn the corner and enter the tiny village, my eyes are irresistibly drawn to the massive building of the monastery which looks down on the village from a seemingly great height. This Italianate building with its ochre roof would not look at all out of place in Verona or Florence but looks wonderfully exotic in an often rain-lashed Welsh island. To come across this imposing building quite unexpectedly is a memorable experience. The monastery is home to some eighteen, mostly elderly, Cistercian monks.

After lunch, Brother David and I head for the chapel where the first of our two lunchtime poetry readings are to take place. He leads me across the garden, as rain begins to fall, through the gate to the beautiful, stone chapel outside of which are placed rows of simple wooden crosses with the names and dates of former members of the community - in a deep sense, the dead are still part of the community" - and where Brother David will himself lie one day. To be a monk is to be continually in

sight of your own grave. Indeed, I recall reading in H.V. Morton's *In Search of Ireland*, that the first task of a Trappist monk was to physically dig his own grave.

With those reflections on death on my mind, I enter the doorway of the dark, chilly chapel and stand behind the marble altar and wait until a few members of the island community and a dozen or so day trippers enter not knowing quite what to expect from a poetry reading in an ancient monastic chapel. As I begin to read selections from the island anthology and from my own poems, I hear my voice echo against stone walls. Then it's Brother David's turn to read, many of his poems describing life and nature on the island. I read extracts from one of my favourite island poems, written by Iain Crichton Smith after his first visit to Islay.

*Let us lie here and sleep
in the noise of the
Atlantic,
our coats arranged below
us.*

*And, dozing, hear the
hum
of the sea in our bones.
We came from the oceans*

*to this place. Millions of
years
it took us. Isn't it
puzzling,
isn't it an enigma of the
sea,*

*to have come together as
salmon to salmon
imperfectly perfected for
our long meeting.*

After the reading, Brother David takes time to show me around the island of which he is justifiably proud. We enter the broken walls which surround a disused chapel with doves darting above our heads. The chapel itself remains intact and inside I read the various scrawled petitions for prayers on scraps of paper stuck on a board which many of the day trippers have left: *Please pray for me, my marriage is on the rocks due to my own stupidity. I can't bear the thought of my wife leaving me. Let her forgive me for what I have done.* A petition from a child reads: *Please make my hamster well again.* Another petition asks that the monks might hold in their prayers the name of a husband dying of cancer. It was difficult not to be moved by such pleas for solace and some mysterious kind of healing from life's many ills. I recall Thomas Merton saying that monks and hermits are essentially escaping from the shipwreck of the world:

They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them.



While I suspect many of the day trippers come to this island merely for a boat trip on the sunlit sea, many come out of a sense of some intangible good which might befall both themselves and their loved ones by stepping on to this *foothold on solid ground* and leaving a little of themselves behind in scraps of prayers nailed to wood.

Brother David returns to his duties in the abbey and I stroll around the island on my own. I follow the lane uphill to the lighthouse and gaze out over the Pembrokeshire coast, with its other green, enticing islands lying peacefully in the hazed distance. I see the town of Tenby stretched out before me and I'm surprised by how close it seems as this island seems so distant from the mainland. I climb a fence and walk along a grassy path past groups of fat cattle grazing in long grass. I walk past the perfumery - the monks and the few people they employ on the island make scent from gorse and other wild flowers. I pass the small chocolate factory where they make delicious chocolate using the milk from their own cows. However, despite all their enterprises, Brother David tells me that the community's finances barely break even.

On my way down to the village, I pass two or three wooden chalets which I'm told house hermit nuns who only break their solitude by attending mass at the abbey each Sunday morning. I don't catch a glimpse of a nun but see their few hens pecking and clucking in the small gardens where they grow vegetables.

Just above the village with its couple of shops and restaurant, I go into a kind of village hall where a notice informs me that a video about the island community plays continually until 5pm,

around the time the last boat leaves for Tenby. I sit alone in the darkened hall and listen to the Abbot explain why the monks rise at 3.30am each day. He states that it is important for them to remain vigilant and to bear witness and to accompany the many people all over the world who lie awake anxious at a time when the world can seem a much less solid and substantial place. I've experienced those times when even one's own identity seems to evaporate into the night's stillness. I've read that many people in hospitals die around 3am. I recall Walter Benjamin words on Kafka's assiduous students that the most important aspect of their studies is that it keeps them awake. There is a certain comfort in knowing that this handful of monks on a tiny Welsh island take part in an unsleeping communion with the lonely and the frightened each night.



After Vespers, I follow the monks into the refectory for an evening meal. As I walk slowly along the corridors, one of the monks beckons to me and in a low voice asks me to meet him in the garden after the meal. I wait by the lavender bed and watch the monk come towards me. He tells that his name is Brother Lucas and that he wants to ask my advice on gardening matters; Brother David had informed him that I had trained in horticulture after leaving school. A few months ago the monk who tended the large garden had left the community and Brother Lucas had been made responsible for the garden even

though he had not much knowledge or experience of gardening. As he shows me around the rather dilapidated greenhouses with their rows of over-watered plants, I feel drawn towards his enthusiasm and his keenness to learn. He leads me into greenhouses and potting sheds with their wonderfully earthy smells and out into the evening air lulled with bird song with weak sunlight resting on the mossed lawns. The day trippers have all gone and the island has returned to itself and I feel a rare sense of peace. Despite his lack of knowledge, I sense that the monastic garden is in safe hands.

I then join the rest of the monks for the last and most beautiful service of each day: *Compline*. I close my eyes and listen to chanting voices:

*Lighten my darkness, Lord.
Let the light of Your presence
dispel the shadows of night.*

I stay for a second day at the abbey and we have another lunchtime reading. I spend much of the day wandering around the island. The next morning I leave to return to the shipwreck of the world. I wheel my case, now empty of books, down to the jetty. I sit on a wall in the sunlight and watch as a massive bull in a wooden crate is lowered down to the boat by a winch. I wonder if there will be any room left for me. There is. I look back over the stern of the boat as the island moves away from me and hope that this fragile island community can survive for many more years to come to be spiritually beside those who lie awake in the uncertain hours of their separate nights. I know it is a place I shall return to again and again.