



Tiferet

LITERATURE, ART, & THE CREATIVE SPIRIT

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ART BY RICHARD STOCKER

AT THE MONASTERY *by Mary Allen*

Last summer at New Melleray Abbey I saw a monk who reminded me of my late fiancé, Jim Beaman. It was during Compline, the last canonical hour of the day.

During Compline at New Melleray, four black-and-white-robed monks come out and stand in the middle of the floor; one of them plays the guitar and all four of them sing, in harmony, the 90th psalm. It's always the same. All of the hours services are, although the psalms they sing at the other services vary according to the day of the week and whether it's an odd or an even week. But they always sing the 90th psalm during Compline, and it's always the same monks who sing it and the same monk who plays the guitar, and it always sounds the same although somehow it manages to be fresh and new and startlingly beautiful every single time, those four monks' voices rising and falling in a strange haunting harmony.

Up until that moment during Compline last summer, I'd never paid much attention to the guitar-playing monk. I've been going to New Melleray, a Trappist monastery in Northeast Iowa, once or twice a year since the summer of 1994, when I was struggling with a writing problem and somebody told me it was a good place to get away and think. Most recently I spent two days there with my friend Mary Montanye, who'd come to Iowa City from Ft. Collins, Colorado, to attend a weeklong writing class I taught at our local university.

When I was up there with Mary, I noticed that the monk who plays the guitar during Compline was short and young and cute – at least I imagined he was cute, looking at the back of him from a fairly good distance -- and he had close-cropped brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses, all of which Jim Beaman had or was. Even more than his appearance, there was something boyish and maybe a little rebellious about him which made me think of Beaman. And even more than that, I remembered as I was sitting there at the back of the chapel, there was something about Jim Beaman that reminded me of that monk, something about Beaman that made you think he could have, if he had managed to live an entirely different life, ended up in some monastery playing the guitar and singing the 90th psalm.

During Compline, after the guitar-playing and the singing, the four monks walk humbly with their heads down back to their seats – the monks sit in two rows of stalls that face each other across the chapel floor; the guests sit on wooden benches at the back, cordoned off

behind a black wrought-iron fence -- and there's a period of silence. Compline takes place at 7:30 p.m. If it's summertime and the days are long, as it was the last time I was at the monastery, you can hear birds singing and an occasional truck downshifting on the road at the bottom of the lawn, you can hear the tired dusty hum of the world still going on outside that silent space; there are wide bands of yellow late-day sunlight along the edges of the benches in the guest section, swatches of sunlight on the floor on one side of the chapel where the monks sit. But if it's wintertime the entire place is dark, except for the little wavering sanctuary light all the way at the front of the chapel. Whether it's dark and silent or light and full of birds and airiness and silent you sit there in the silence, unbroken except for an occasional cough or sound of someone shifting in his chair, for seven minutes or so. And then the enormous bell in the bell tower outside the chapel rings slowly nine times in three sets of three – dong dong dong, dong dong dong, dong dong dong – and then it rings three much longer rings: doooooong, doooooonggg, doooooongggggg.

And then after a little while they turn the lights back on and two monks get up and stand in the middle of floor. The other monks line up in front of them in two parallel lines and one of the monks at the front waves an instrument containing holy water and each monk bows his head when he gets to the head of the line and receives a drop or two of holy water to keep him safe from the forces of darkness during the night. When those monks are almost finished filing up, the monk who's the guest master comes and opens a gate in the wrought-iron fence that separates the guests from the chapel and says, in a quiet peaceful voice, the same thing night after night: "If you'd like to come up front for a blessing you're welcome." And then all of us in the back file forward and get in one of the two parallel lines to receive our drop of holy water. You don't always get some: The monk with the water waves the instrument back and forth so that the water hits first the person in one line and then the person in the other. I've determined through trial and error that if you're in the line on the right you have a better chance of getting holy water than if you're on the left. Even so, and even though I try to stand still at just the right distance from the monk with the holy water, I still occasionally come away dry or with only a drop on my shirt sleeve where I can't feel it. I like to get a good splat right on the face or the head. I don't know exactly what holy water is supposed to do, I don't even know how to make the sign of the cross, but somehow I always feel a little bit safer, a little bit cleaner and purer and happier, walking away with that water on me.

Jim Beaman would have known all about holy water. Once, when he was a kid of nine or ten, serving as an altar boy in Rock Island, Illinois, he and a friend drank some of the communion wine in the sacristy, then found out it had already been blessed. It seemed like a terrible sin – later he had to confess and receive a penance – but I always thought there

was an aura of something a little bit holy about him, some lingering purity or innocence or magic, and it pleased me to entertain the idea that it had something to do with that wine. I never thought it could have acted as a curse – that was Beaman’s joke about it – although it is true without a doubt that wine, beer, and other kinds of alcohol contributed heavily to the ruining his life. So maybe it was somehow symbolic of what was to come, that moment in the sacristy when he and his boyhood buddy took that fateful swig out of the chalice.

“Jim Beaman was a Catholic,” I told my friend Mary at the monastery, as we were climbing the stairs after lunch, going to the third floor where our rooms were, the day after I noticed the monk who reminded me of Beaman during Compline.

“Oh really?” said Mary, looking interested like the good friend she is. “I didn’t know that.” Like most of my friends, she’s never met Jim Beaman, has just heard me talk about him occasionally over the years.

“Yes,” I said. “He even mentioned it in his suicide note. I always thought it had something to do with why he killed himself.”

Mary looked at me as if she was about to say something, then another retreatant, an elderly woman we had gotten friendly with during our stay, came down the stairs and started talking to us and Mary and I lost the thread of that conversation and never picked it up again. But I thought about it as I was lying on my bed staring at the recessed light fixture in the ceiling of my room that afternoon.

When you stay at the monastery you get your own little room and your own bathroom. The room has a single bed with clean white sheets, a wool blanket, and a tan polyester bedspread; the room also contains a wooden desk and chair, another more comfortable chair in the corner, and a little wooden footstool. Some of the rooms face inside onto the courtyard and some of them face out onto the parked cars and the lawn. There’s a scattering of leafy trees on the lawn and a few picnic tables and white-painted wooden lawn chairs; there are flowerbeds as well, and in the middle of the lawn is a marble statue of the virgin Mary which glows at night; I could see it – her – out my window the last time I stayed at the monastery. There are also white wooden boxes on pedestals, sort of like bird houses or possibly small doll houses, set at intervals around the periphery of the lawn. Riveted onto each is a laminated black-and-white picture depicting one of the stations of the cross: Jesus taking up the cross, falling three times under the burden of the cross, being stripped, being nailed to the cross, dying on the cross.

I don’t understand the appeal, the mystique, of all that. When I was thirteen years old I joined the Congregational church in Westhampton, Massachusetts, and I’ve barely gone to church since. It makes my stomach queasy to look at the pictures on those boxes. But I do like the statue of the blessed virgin, staring mildly and with great compassion at the

leaves and grass at her feet out there in the middle of the abbey's lawn.

Mostly what you do when you're at the monastery is stay in your room alone and lie on your bed and look at the ceiling or sit in the chair by the window and stare out at the lawn or the courtyard or read or go for little walks by yourself. Time goes slowly at the monastery, at least twice as slowly as it goes anywhere else. The afternoons are endless, they last from 12:30 when lunch is over to 5:30 when Vespers and then supper take place – there's None at 1:45 but I never go to that. And when you're lying on your bed staring up at the ceiling, no email, no phone calls, no errands, no money worries, no chores or pets or needs and wants of other people to distract and annoy and make you anxious, time stretches out before you vast and empty, like an enormous snowy field. You have all the time you could ever need and then some to nap and read, to think and not think. And as I was lying on my bed the day after the evening I noticed that monk during Compline, I remembered a Sunday morning when I was lying next to Jim Beaman in his room on his single bed, the sheets dirty and rumpled, both of us for different reasons dirty and rumpled, tired, stretched to the limit of our endurance from the last few days, and he looked over at me and said with great pain and bitterness, "It's Sunday morning and we're going to go to church."

He had never said anything like that, had never even said the word church to me unless it figured in a story or two about growing up Catholic, until that day.

It's hard for me to go back to the place he and I were in that Sunday morning about eighteen years ago. I'm not talking about the physical place so much as the spiritual circumstances of where we were then, far, far away from the spiritual aura of a monastery or a church, which of course was the source of Beaman's bitterness, the irony, the admission of fault and guilt. I remember looking over at him and noticing that he wasn't looking at me, noticing the way his hair stuck up, the miserable, stubborn, hell-bent look on his face. Shortly after that he got up and sat at the desk and started messing around with the needles, the spoon, the cigarette lighter, going back to what he'd been doing pretty much steadily for about 48 hours, and at that point I said, "I can't take any more of this," and left, walked the short block to my own apartment, sat in the pink chair in my living room and started making phone calls. Calling his friend John Gray to see if there was anything he could do to help him – "Absolutely not," he said. "He's been pulling this shit for years and I've given up trying to help him" -- calling my friend Kathy to try to get help for myself.

Later on, after it was all over and I was taking Beaman to the hospital with blood poisoning and he was sober, repentant, ready once again to try to turn his life around, he said to me, "Yesterday I thought I was going to go somewhere, somewhere really bad, but

I've changed my mind.”

I was just so relieved that he was getting sober – forever, once and for all, I stupidly thought, as if he could have done that – so relieved that he was sticking around instead of going somewhere I didn't ask him where it was he'd thought of going; it didn't occur to me to wonder what he'd meant by somewhere really bad because he was already somewhere really bad. I was only happy that at that moment we were going somewhere better, even if it was a hospital where he could recover. It was only much later that I understood what he was saying, understood where -- what -- that really bad place was, understood after he ended up going there after all about six months later, and knew that it was a place he had been preparing to go to since the early days of his Catholic childhood. Among the things he left behind was an autograph book from our Lady of Lourdes grammar school. There were the usual comments about girls who liked him and his good sense of humor, but I was struck by one, unsigned and written in a boy's messy fourth-grade hand-writing, that said, “To Jim, See you in hell.”

There was a monk among the students in the class I taught recently. Brother Francis is in his mid-thirties and lives in St. Meinrad's Abbey in Indiana. During my class he said that living in a monastery is a lot different from being a visitor in a monastery, that monastic living is sort of like being in a marriage compared to experiencing the first blush of romance. I wish I had gotten him to say more about that because I've always been deeply curious about what it would be like to live the monastic life, what it would be like to know you were going to do the same things over and over, day in and day out, to devote yourself to prayer and meditation, to doing the work you were given to do – the monks at New Melleray farm and build caskets, Brother Francis works at a press – and do it solely for the sake of itself and nothing else.

And in the same idle way, I've wondered what it would have been like if Jim Beaman had lived and we had actually gotten married. Somehow I knew all along that we never would; I knew it was just a fantasy even as I was collaborating in it, although I never thought it would all end the way it did and I couldn't imagine it ending any other way either. But still, I sometimes like to think about what it would have been like if he had gotten sober and we had both attended twelve-step programs and together made an ordinary life, engaging in the every-day struggles of living and growing together, trying to communicate and accept each other's shortcomings and do the other hard work of any marriage which, I guess, is similar to the hard work it takes, according to Brother Francis, to live with others in a monastery.

The monk who reminded me of Jim Beaman was wearing black shoes -- I noticed the shoes during Compline on the second day of last summer's stay at the monastery. I caught

a glimpse of his face then too and thought I saw nice lips, deep-set eyes, other features that resembled Beaman's, but the truth is all I really saw clearly were those shoes. That and his straight back in the robe, his way of holding the guitar out in front of him as he strums the simple tune that goes with the words of the 90th psalm, night after night during Compline, the way he sways a little when he plays. The other three monks who stand in the middle of the chapel floor, singing to his accompaniment, all wear simple ugly hemp sandals, the kind you associate with Jesus and other ascetic types; one of those monks is tall, narrow, and relatively young, with a longish beard and longish hair. It's not hard to imagine him having a checkered past -- you can see in his face the traces of a rebellious streak that hasn't quite gone into remission -- and I'm sure there are others at the monastery who had turbulent lives full of struggles and difficulties before becoming monks -- at the very least, I know, a few of them are sober alcoholics who attend AA meetings. I like to think that the monk who looks like Jim Beaman, the monk with the guitar and the black shoes -- shoes that look incongruous, overly formal, even inappropriate at the bottom of a pair of jeans showing at the bottom of a long black-and-white belted robe -- I like to think that he, like Jim Beaman, has had his share of struggles, that he might have fought with demons and unlike Beaman won.

After Jim Beaman died I read somewhere that you should pray for the dead, pray the words of the Hail Mary with a rosary, that this will help the dead in some powerful indefinable way. And so I did that. I didn't get a rosary but I asked someone I knew who was Catholic to tell me the words of the Hail Mary and I memorized them and said them over and over, mostly in bed at night before I went to sleep: *Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.* Every night, many nights in a row, I said those words over and over until I was almost asleep, until I was in and out of sleep and still saying those words, the image of Jim Beaman at the hour of his death at the edge of my consciousness like a dark, terrible dream.

In waking life I kept imagining him sitting at his desk during that hour, that moment, holding the gun in his lap and pointing it at his head. But then his roommate told me that he was lying on his bed when he did it and for some reason that really bothered me. I'm sure it was partly because of all the other associations I had with his bed, not the awful morning with the rumpled covers and the stuff laid out on the desk, which was just a precursor and therefore more or less interchangeable with the final act that took place on that bed, but good moments on other days when we were lying there together napping, talking, laughing, and, of course, although most often we did this at my house in a different bed -- having sex. It was troubling to have the image of the suicide, something so

evil and unimaginable it didn't even seem to belong to this world, superimposed forever on top of that other normal happy stuff. But it was also the specificity of the image I conjured up whenever I thought of him doing it on the bed – the fact that I could so easily see him there, doing that -- that made it so horrible.

He did leave that note, and when I first heard about it but before I had read it – the note was held by the police for a few days, along with Beaman's diary and a few other things -- I felt a momentary breath of relief, as if the note was going to explain everything and that would somehow make things better. But in the end the note was almost unreadable. There were just partial sentences, scribbled in the messy illegible handwriting of someone who was obviously far under the influence, you could almost hear his thoughts trailing off. One of the unfinished sentences was, *To my Catholic... I know I'm ...*

How would he have finished that sentence if he had been anywhere near his right mind, I've often wondered. Would he have mentioned sin, hell, grace, forgiveness?

May the souls of the faithful departed, in the mercy of God, rest in peace, one of the monks at New Melleray intones every day, in a deep sonorous slightly nasal voice, at the end of one of the offices. Whenever I hear that I think of Jim Beaman. I wonder whether the Catholic church would consider him one of the faithful departed and decide that they probably wouldn't, and then I wonder whether that matters at all, even on the deepest of spiritual levels, and decide it doesn't. I wonder whether Jim Beaman, faithful or unfaithful, peaceful or not, really *is* somewhere, or whether life just trails off into nothingness like his note's unfinished sentences.

May our hope remain with us always, the same monk says in his deep resonating voice, slightly earlier in the service. At least that's how I hear what he says. It's possible I could be misinterpreting, like a kid getting the words of a popular song wrong. He could be saying, *May your help remain with us always*, or maybe he's saying something else. But I like to think he's referring to our hope, cautioning us, asking for help for us, to hold onto our hope – through illnesses and hardships, losses and failures, old age, even death. Our hope for others, our hope for ourselves. Our hope that life is more than an accident, a tiny space of light between two infinite parentheses of darkness.

A few years back I had a bad night at the monastery. There's one monk who sleeps in the guesthouse and that night my room was next to his and in the middle of the night I was awakened by the soft sound of the monk's door closing. I sat up in bed with a start and was suddenly flooded by fear. At first the fear was nameless, but it quickly took the shape of fear of the monk next door. I imagined how I would feel if I looked over at the door knob of my room and saw it turning, how I would feel if then the door opened and the monk came into my room. And then I became convinced that that was going

to happen at any moment. I got out of bed, tiptoed to the door and locked it from the inside. Then I got back into bed but of course I couldn't go back to sleep, and I lay there filled with a nameless terror – a kind of horror, like what you might feel, say, watching the movie *The Exorcist*. I had never experienced anything like that at the monastery before, had always thought of it as a place where you left all your anxieties behind and felt mostly peaceful. I was surprised and abashed to find myself filled with sudden terror there in the middle of the night. But then I remembered my friend Brad, who goes to the monastery a lot, telling me a while back that occasionally he has bad nights there, when he's tormented by ugly thoughts and painful memories and it's extremely unpleasant. And then it came to me, like a thunderclap out of the blue, that I had read something somewhere about very holy places attracting demons as well as angels – that evil spirits are drawn to deeply religious places because they like to try to subvert the goodness there. Now the idea seems silly but at that moment, as I lay on my bed in the monastery, the reality of those demons became an absolute certainty to me – I thought I felt their presence much more strongly than I had ever felt the presence of anything holy there.

I picked up a biography of the famous Trappist monk Thomas Merton, lying on the desk in a pile of books I had borrowed earlier from the monastery library, and started reading it. I knew that Thomas Merton was electrocuted by a fan with a bad connection in Thailand in the 1960s. For some reason I really wanted to find out more about that. I could have easily opened the book at the end and searched until I found the details about the death, but instead I started the book at the beginning and then kept going, skimming some parts, perusing others carefully. I stayed awake all night reading that book.

I learned that Thomas Merton might've been part of a group of young men at Cambridge University who staged a mock crucifixion and that Merton himself was probably the one who played Christ, that he was almost killed in some accident when they "nailed" him to the cross – Merton himself never publicly confirmed this story but there's evidence to support it. I learned that at the age of fifty-one, when he was a well-known author, priest, and monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, Merton fell deeply in love with a young student nurse who returned his feelings. They carried on a passionate though celibate affair for several months, Merton sneaking phone calls from the abbey and slipping out for clandestine meetings with S., the woman, even rolling around with her in the bushes a few times -- until he decided it wasn't right for him to leave the order and gave up the relationship. And I learned, at around five o'clock in the morning, how at the age of fifty-three he gave a speech at a conference in Bangkok, at the end of which he said, "so I will disappear from view," then went to his room, took a shower, and was electrocuted by that fan. It was a five-foot-tall floor fan and it fell on top of him, just as the

cross might have done during the mock crucifixion years ago in Cambridge, and when they finally got the fan unplugged and off him there was a thick set of burn marks on one side of his dead body.

I lost most of my terror as I was lying on the bed all night, obsessively reading that book till I got to the electrocution at the end, but I never quite lost my sense of the presence of evil, my feeling that there are evil forces at work in the world as well as good ones. I know that Thomas Merton's life was all wrapped up with the good: with reading and writing and prayer and solitary contemplation. But somehow all I could think about was that fan falling on top of him, of the eerie coincidence between his death and his mock crucifixion as a young man at Cambridge, of the horror of Jesus's crucifixion and how that story seemed woven like a dark thread throughout Merton's life.

I used to say that there were demons and angels around Jim Beaman – that I could sense their presence. I loved him for the demons as well as the angels. Those demons ended up taking him, and me, to some horrible places, places I would never want to go to again. Now I'm a little embarrassed about the way I used to be intrigued by, attracted to, wildness, self-destructiveness, addictive behavior – those kinds of demons -- in men. I could only be attracted to those things when I was naïve enough to think I had the power to change them, naïve enough to think that goodness, hope, love – my love – were strong enough to overcome them, naïve about just how bad things can get. I like to think I could never be that naïve again.

But still, there's something in me that continues to be compelled by the shadowy, not bright-and-sunny parts of life. I never would have stayed up all night reading a book about Thomas Merton if it wasn't for the thorny, murky elements of his story. And I'm grateful – at least I think I am -- that whoever or whatever made this world created the darkness as well as the light.

“Midway through the journey of our life, I found/myself in a dark wood, for I had strayed/from the straight pathway to this tangled ground.” I thought of those lines – the opening of Dante's *Inferno* -- the other night when I was lying awake again with insomnia, this time at home in my own bed. I thought of how sometimes when we stray from the straight pathway, wandering or maybe plunging into the brush beside the road, embarking on one of those messy journeys that take us to purgatory and then lower and lower circles of hell, it feels like we've made a mistake, gone somewhere that another, smarter, wiser, more admirable person would never go. But it came to me in the middle of the night, in a sudden flash of insight, that we *are* supposed to go on those journeys. That those journeys are actually the very reason we're here in this world rather than in some other world.

In the weeks and months after Jim Beaman's suicide, I truly thought I would not be

able to go on. An endless span of pain and sorrow stretched out before me as far as I could see. Every day, every hour seemed like an eternity, and I kept focusing miserably on all the time I was going to have to get through before the end of my life; I figured I probably had twenty-five or thirty years left, maybe twenty if I was lucky.

That was nineteen years ago and I can barely even remember what that felt like now. Now, when I look back on that whole thing – the journey that started with me and Beaman on a Sunday morning lying on his rumpled bed and then took him on another day to the same bed, lying there alone with a shotgun pointed at himself, and then took me to a place where I was lying alone in my own bed, smoking cigarettes, trying to wish away all the life I had left – when I look back on all that now I don't regret any of it. I can see that who I am now is entirely different than who I was then and that it was the journey itself, even the very worst moments of it, that made me different. Of course, it's easy to say that now that I'm past the experience of it. Easy to see how in the moment on Beaman's lawn when the cop told me he was dead and I screamed and screamed, the fingers of the clenched fist with which I had been holding on like a person grabbing wildly onto a branch on the shore, were pried open and I was forced to let go and be swept down the river into life's waiting arms.



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