

Retreating

We look down
 from the balcony
 at the monks of Gethsemani,
 standing in darkness
 before Vigils.
 A single candle
 illumines the church,
 unadorned, undismayed.

It's 3:15 a.m.
 I'm sleepy.
 The monks seem sleepy too,
 moving slowly, like foals.
 Outside these walls
 the anxious world sleeps,
 gathering strength
 for its rituals
 of conflict and commerce.

Soon song will supplant the silence.
 Ages of men
 under cover of cowl
 will raise voice to the flame
 and sing psalm after psalm after psalm.
 Against the world of flattening noise,
 violence and social jockeying,
 they sing
 then go silent
 seven times a day.

We gaze at their faces,
 albino beards, dessicated skin,
 short-cropped horseshoes of hair.
 No one seems young here.

Even the youthful tread heavy,
 shouldering faith.
 They're here every morning;
 It's we who change,
 retreating with the seasons.

What draws us to them,
 I wonder,
 we priests and teachers,
 retirees and tourists,
 farmers and salesmen,
 standing sleepy at the pews,
 before dawn?
 And what do they see in *our* faces:
 alternate selves, discarded choices,
 flickers of shadow-families and homes?
 The mind can repress entire worlds.
 Souls cannot.
 We must not generalize about the heart.

Dawn is three hours away.
 It's cold now, this Kentucky morn.
 It won't be, later.
 Like their habits,
 black scapulars overlaying white robes,
 our motives seem basic yet stark,
 an arm's itchy crank in a sleeve:
 Some need to listen,
 some need to hear;
 others can only stare blankly
 at that single white candle,
 struggling to disperse the dark.

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