

Purifications

How many Hail Mary's do I need to get to heaven?
How many do I have now, and how many left to go?
When I have them all, got them under my belt like a
holiday meal, what do I do in there?

Give me a minute to savor the time.

I'm gonna start with coffee and a cheese Danish from old New York.
Thin sliced almonds in the crust.
Served by a girl with brown eyes and an honest smile.
I saw her in *shul* once.
Pale with soft, barely noticeable dark hair on her forearms.
Fascinating. Her dress had short sleeves that were puffy.

And – I will be grateful without ambition.
(Is that possible for the likes of me?)

Hail Mary.
Hail Mary.

The Station

I had a brother, an older brother,
who at ten years old was left at
the train station.

And he stayed there the rest of
his life.

The Ice Cave (Father Theophane, I See You)

Seeing the ambulance from the local rescue squad, its lights flashing off pines and snow banks, brought miracles to mind. Days earlier, seated across the *Ice Cave*, about twelve feet from me, in his rough brown cassock, is Father Theophane, snout running into his full black and grey beard. He, like myself, is on a wooden platform, the *Tan*, about eighteen inches off the stone floor. Perched on his meditation cushions, in a run-down zendo clinging to the side of a cold mountain. From his comfy Trappist monastery in bucolic upstate New York, he sojourned.

Like a fable from Cervantes, he was taken with the idea, the strong desire, to visit some of the alternate spiritual communities that had sprouted like dandelions across the country at that time. He, whose life was dedicated to prayer, meditation, good works, and the spirit of Christ, would spend time in the company of other practitioners who were also searching for purity and harmony. He found Zen appealing.

I found the Marines appealing. It remained that way until a redneck drill instructor grabbed my warm New Jersey body and yanked me off the bus and into the awesome hell of Parris Island, South Carolina. The appeal evaporated into a desperate struggle for survival in the sweat, the swamps, and the sand fleas of that place, where everything from breathing to pissing was in complete control of drill instructors still holding off the Yankees at the Battle of Pea Ridge.

We had been the third community Father T. visited. The first was a Vipassana center in New England. Strong daily practice, private rooms, humane, nurturing. And heat.

After that he went to a Soto Zen center. Cool, fascinating, with all the robes, rituals, chants, and plenty of Zen monks. Firm but affirming. An understanding practice place. You talked to a monk, or the Roshi, he listened. Often over tea.

And heat.

Then he came to ours, strictly Rinzai Zen and borderline bonkers. Restrictive, negating, crossing the line into the Mad Hatter's realm on a regular basis.

A lively, gentle, intellectual had arrived at the Gulag.

As the guards used to say to new arrivals in the Russian Gulag, "You'll probably live, but you won't feel like fucking."

Let me say, odd as it may sound, all these disciplines work. In the right context, with the right raw material and the right guidance, they may indeed bring the seeker to the "Heart of Christ."
"We are indistinguishable."

At least into proximity of that heart. Crossing the finish line into His embrace is up to one's *karma*, and one's will alone.

And getting the conditions right is a fragile mix.

The myths and parables sound great, even heroic. But in real no-time, real no-place, forgettaboutit!

Like the Marines, the Path attracts a lot of dreamers who have no idea. Those that can't, won't overcome their erroneous expectations are found strewn along the wayside in various conditions of damage, disappointment, depression, and, "what happened?"

The minimum winter temperature in our zendo was supposed to be 55 degrees.

That sounds warmish. It's not warmish.

Note: you may not wear a coat over your robes, so you must fit as many layers as you can under them.

Is this a five-layer day, seven-layer, or god forbid an eight-layer day?

The head monk, Chuck, a former shop teacher in a junior high school, had his own ideas on the best solutions for deepening meditation and speeding up kensho.

There are things in the myth of Zen that bring out the primitive and punitive in some westerners.

As in: lower temps, longer sittings, and seeing your breath in the frosty air.

Or, if you were too sick to come to the zendo and the dining hall, our cook, a former truck driver with no talent, none, for cooking, would not cook for you.

You got leftover muffins and hard-boiled eggs.

Sick as a dog, longing for hot soup, you lean on an elbow in your sleeping bag and say, "What's this? A cold hard-boiled egg? Where's my mother?"

Those goddamned Toshiro Mifune samurai movies are killing us!

Our Japanese Zen master was old and charismatic.

From a Spartan tradition vanished in another century in another land.

He didn't give much away and looked serious, though from a distance he did care for us.

But let's face it, America seemed the Garden of Eden to the old wood gatherer.

A garden plump with low-hanging fruit, and under his sparse feudal exterior, he was blown away.

And so we'd gather in the darkness, a little after three a.m., and find our seats on the *tan*.

I'd look over and there'd be Father Theophane, like a stray shaggy specter, climbing up on the meditation platform. Candlelight from

the Buddha altar making the scene droll and surreal.

Like a boxer with more determination and grit than talent, he kept coming out of his corner when the bell rang. I kind of wished he'd throw in the towel.

The old guy was dissolving in front of us.

Then one morning his seat across from me remained empty, and I was relieved.

But he showed up for afternoon tea and zazen, looking like one of those big thin birds caught in an oil spill.

That was the last I saw of him on his feet. A day later I went to visit him in his cabin.

Hey Jesus, are you there? Now would be a good time!

About twice a month, Joan, the girlfriend of one of the senior monks, would visit for a couple days, don her robes, sit with us, whack us across the shoulders with the *keisaku* (a long flat stick used to keep our focus tight or wake us up during *zazen*).

I knew her mother in New York City. A busy excitable woman. Joan was steady and practical, and a nurse.

On the second day of this visit, the head monk approached her:

“Joan, I hate to bother you, but can you take a look at Father Theophane, our visiting Trappist. He don't look so good.”

She went to see Father T., sweaty, sticky and immobile in his sleeping bag.

And so, into the ambulance they loaded our comrade, and drove him down the seven thousand plus feet of windy mountain roads to a hospital in the valley where it was always warm.

Where I was sure they would clean him up and comb all the dried sweat and snot from his beard and save him from the advanced pneumonia he had.

I even pictured hot chocolate and canned peaches.
And they did, and then sent him home to the care of his Trappist
brothers. And there he stayed.

A community of full-sized hobbits, chanting, praying, working hard
in vineyards and carpentry shops, clean and convivial.
In the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Every once in a while one of them gets an idea that is a bit out of
the ordinary and goes off in search of something shiny.

Father Theophane, I still see you.