

# THREE POEMS

by **Susan Matthis Johnson**

## DREAM: For Tom Merton

Last night I dreamt the Hagia Sophia  
came to your hermitage through the trees,  
pushing aside the blackberry briars  
that grow so thick in wet Kentucky summers.

Through the dark glass she saw a Shaker chair,  
a shelf with six or seven cheese crocks  
used for cups, plates and casks and baskets  
that cast Vermeer-like shadows on the cool stone.

Someone was returning.  
Surely, someone was returning.

She'd come so far and brought some precious nard  
to this rimpoche, seeking its seated figure,  
ready to reveal herself, wordlessly,  
while hummingbirds shot through St. Stephen's field.



SUSAN MATTHIS JOHNSON

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## A MONK, UNSILENCED, SPEAKS

1. At sixty, what a silly, shabby sight I am  
Tending cattle that aren't even mine,  
Rattling with ham bones for the dogs.  
There is no Arcady, when all is told.  
A man grows thin. A man grows old.  
A man takes yogurt for his bowels.  
He fans the flies that vex the cows.  
And yet, in little ways, I am consoled.
  
2. Once I set to song an ancient prayer  
with arpeggios and trills  
half-notes, rondoes, runs,  
animato, vivace — canny as a quince.  
I was twenty-six. After offices  
I'd find the hills behind St. Francis' Field  
where gentle elms receive the gentle alms  
of day: lark, cicada, quail. With my flute  
I'd sing the scarlet sun up with my sweet  
and tasteless tune — effusive, almost lewd.  
And what a tragic little scene it was:  
a monk, in love with his own voice,  
indulging in glad gluttony  
under a bleeding sky.
  
3. I've squeezed curds  
skimmed whey  
spread manure  
ricked hay  
washed potatoes  
stripped leeks  
dried basil  
scrubbed beets  
(St. Ignatius,  
pray for me.  
Aloysius,  
pray for me)

computed profits,  
losses, risks,  
posted rosters,  
schedules, lists,  
sewn shrouds  
sponged wounds  
dug graves  
daubed rheum  
(hounds and hinds  
scarabs, bees  
when you're not busy  
pray for me.)

4. Then one winter's mail  
 came harsh and black like braille  
 in rough dots to sore  
 and blistered hands:  
 On August tenth  
 your mother died.  
 Three weeks ago  
 your brother died.  
 Your father succumbed.  
 Your sister passed on.  
 Or is it, Stop,  
 your cat who's gone.  
 Mea culpa, mea culpa.  
 The world, the world, Stop, Stop,  
 is gone.

*Romulus, Romulus  
 Father of Rome,  
 Ran off with a wolf  
 And wouldn't come home.*

On bruising stone,  
 gulping for air  
 I fingered my beads  
 mouthing my prayer

*The King of Spain's daughter  
 Came to visit me  
 All for the sake  
 Of my little nut tree.*

Soon my knees were numb  
 my lips were dumb. I couldn't say  
 who'd died. I couldn't say.  
 Mea culpa, mea culpa.  
 And Who, in the world  
 has died? My beads hung limp,  
 my tongue was numb.  
 I tried to sing.  
 I tried to hum.  
 Except for these  
 no words would come:

*And nothing would it bear  
 But a silver nutmeg  
 And a golden pear.*

5. I wrote a letter, quite illicit,  
filled with half-notes, rondoes, runs,  
effusive, almost lewd,  
to a former lover.

Not lover, more stranger

to be exact. She never knew me.  
She merely moved me, leaning, as she did  
against the glass, cooling her face.  
I was seventeen, my loins turgid as the Chesapeake  
teeming with shellfish.

In any case,  
the mail went out in rough dots  
or I never sent it. I can't recall. It was,  
at fifty-two, my last great clash  
with the flesh. All that's left —  
ugly little lusts: calves' meat, snails  
(God's wounds, God's nails,  
Holy Helpers, pray for me)  
under a bleeding sky.

6. This shepherd dog and I  
will lead these Chinese cows  
with their ridiculous ears  
to the far salt lick.  
What's that you ask, old girl?  
He cannot fail who isn't called.  
Consider how discouraged now we'd be  
to count what little contemplation was accomplished  
amidst the scrape and scratch and grope and claw.  
I might have saved myself the trouble  
of the litanies and beads if I had seen  
my singular vocation, after all,  
has simply been, it seems, to be.

## FAME OF SANCTITY

Reduce a hundred million words to one?  
Two's a' near you'll ever come.

Atom-splitters have it down to three;  
Jung, to four. Some submit *agape*.

Love like monastery cheese, I've heard,  
Is skimmed and squeezed from whey and curd.

Behold! The lonely Lady of Carmel  
Is validation both for saint and infidel.