

# THREE POEMS FOR THOMAS MERTON

by **John Charles Cooper**

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## FOURTH STREET RAPTURE

Broad street, light was red  
 eclipsing sun  
 A traffic light clicks  
 autos flow, high heels half step  
 in halting rhythm  
 sneakers shuffle, people curse  
 tracts inquiring "Are You Saved?"  
 litter a corner  
 Flipped by a Western Kentucky wind  
 down oil-stained pavement

under the Bo Tree  
 Siddhartha waits  
 Poised betwixt pleasure and pain  
 on the cusp of freedom

Father Louis, Merton's present self,  
 stops unexpectedly on the sidewalk  
 Struck beneath the level of sense  
 By the crowd, the noise, the motion  
 flowing downstream in Heraclitus' flux  
 It slows, God's gramophone reversed  
 No longer a part, he becomes the whole  
 Loving Itself in every face and slanted shoulder  
 Seeing himself in every swinging arm, in every hurrying gait.

Bo trees and button-down shirts  
 Red lights and enlightenment  
 Peace at the archemedian point  
 that balances the poles

Father Louis and Siddhartha smile:  
 Knowing they will meet again,  
 the appointment firmly written on  
 the entropic atoms of their souls.

I WILL FLEE TO THE DHARMA,  
 I WILL FLEE TO THE SANGHA,  
 I WILL FLEE TO THE BUDDHA

We tire

of all the daily work  
 to beat off rust and dust and age  
 Bugs in the garden, drought  
 and gully washing thunderstorms  
 Digging up dead trees  
 Replanting bulbs  
 Sniping at the kitchen table  
 Arguments watching TV  
 and endless threats of unemployment

Crocodile tears for the victims

glory for the conquerors  
 the measurement of life by dollar bills  
 the fear to speak our mind  
 lest we be lost in our freedom  
 cut loose, homeless  
 in an age ruled by things

Who said Father Louis gave up anything?

Merton was a genius  
 not a masochist  
 When the cable from the Ace's draft board came  
 He reported promptly to the desert fort  
 misplaced by angel engineers amid  
 Kentucky's Rift  
 Renouncing one citizenship for another  
 in God's Foreign Legion  
 knowing, no matter the seal on his passport,  
 that the Legion of the Burnt Men  
 was his country,  
 the silence of the darkened hills his peace,  
 the strict regime of censorship  
 his liberty to speak.

## A THAI TRANSLATION

Life trickles through the fingers  
 Water falling from the swimmer's hands  
 Once the River Lethe, the shoals of forgetting  
                   are crossed

Light fades, the camera struggles to focus  
 The last reflected rays  
 The lens fixes and stops  
 As Buddha smiles while Buddha sleeps  
 Plans made and remade  
 Itineraries shaped and formed by available funds  
 Dissolve into icons as the brain's cursor reverses  
 All is emptiness, all is silence  
 The grand vision that all will be one  
 Because All is One  
 Dwindles to a bright, then afterimaged black dot  
 All is emptiness, all is compassion  
 The mind attuned to ironies  
 Nimble on the parallel bars of paradoxes  
 Swells to maximum entropy  
 Freeze-framed into eternity  
 Beyond content, beyond refutation  
 The dryrotted cord of the toppled fan  
 Sizzles, burns out  
 The chakra nearest heaven opens  
 When the eye of the Soul can see again  
 The Trappist anchorite sees only God.