

A Death in Bangkok

By Judith Valente

“Thomas Merton has died.”

Cable from the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok to the Abbey of Gethsemani

December 10, 1968

Dharamsala awaited. On the mountain drive from Pathankot
great silence of pines. From an open jeep, glimpses of mud huts,
bamboo stalks, feather reed grass waving like prayer flags.

He bows to the refugee herdsmen fingering prayer wheels,
to the leather-faced men building a roadside mandala.
From one of the workers rises a low prolonged “Om.”
Om Mani Padme Hum. Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus.

*Today I am to see the Dalai Lama. Meanwhile the world goes on.
We have run out of toilet paper and are using Saturday's newspaper.*

The sadhus and lamas wanted to know about the rule of silence
and whether Trappist vows rid the mind of passion,
and what if a monk died without enlightenment?

The rimpoches all advise against absolute solitude, stress compassion.

In Darjeeling, midnight dream of Kanchenjunga
still cowed in snow, *chastely white*, but no longer robed in clouds.

*There is another side of Kanchenjunga and of every mountain –
the side that has never been photographed and turned
into post cards . . . the only side worth seeing.*

Judith Valente is an on-air correspondent for national PBS-TV and Chicago Public Radio and a producer at WTTW/Chicago. She is the author of the poetry collection, *Discovering Moons* (Virtual Artists Collective/Chicago, 2009). Her chapbook, *Inventing An Alphabet*, was selected by Mary Oliver for the 2004 Aldrich Poetry Prize. She is also the winner of an Illinois Arts Council Poetry Award and the Jo-Anne Hirshfield Poetry Prize. She worked previously for *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, where she was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 in the feature writing category. She is co-editor with Charles Reynard of the anthology *Twenty Poems to Nourish Your Soul*, first runner up for the 2008 Eric Hoffer Book Award in poetry.



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Bangkok again. At the Red Cross lecture hall, he gathers his papers,
damp and curl-edged from the heat, eats a plate of boiled fish, sticky rice.
I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body.

And when he walks from the warm shower of his last solitude,
feels the cool terrazzo of the cottage floor, the surge of heat
burn through his chest, the silent scream like a pebble

lodged in the back of the throat, it is there again:
the white eye of Kanchenjunga. Then only blue, like ink pouring
over a blank page, a deep and permanent indigo blue.

So I will disappear.