

Louisville Airport, May 5, 1966

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Louisville Airport, May 5, 1966

Here on the foolish grass
Where the rich in small jets
Land with their own hopes
And their own kind

We with the gentle liturgy
Of shy children have permitted God
To make again His first world
Here on the foolish grass
After the spring rain has dried
And all the loneliness

Is for a moment lost in this simple
Liturgy of children permitting God
To make again that love
Which is His alone

His alone and terribly obscure and rare
Love walks gently as a deer
To where we sit on this green grass
In the marvel of this day's going down
Celebrated only
By all the poets since the world began.

This is God's own love He makes in us
As all the foolish rich fly down
Onto this paradise of grass
Where the world first began
Where God began
To make His love in man and woman

For the first time
 Here on the sky's shore
 Where the eternal sun goes down
 And all the millionaires in small jets
 Land with their own hopes
 And their own kind

We with the tender liturgy
 And tears
 Of the newborn
 Celebrate the first creation
 Of solemn love
 Now for the first time forever
 Made by God in these
 Four wet eyes and cool lips
 And worshipping hands
 When one voiceless beginning
 Of splendid fire
 Rises out of the heart
 And the evening becomes One Flame
 Which all the prophets
 Accurately foresaw
 Would make things plain
 And create the whole world
 Over again

There is only this one love
 Which is now our world
 Our foolish grass
 Celebrated by all the poets
 Since the first beginning
 Of any song.

'Louisville Airport, May 5, 1966,' is the first of five poems published in *Learning to Love*, Volume Six of Merton's journals. Also included in the journal are 'I Always Obey My Nurse,' written on May 8, 1966; 'Aubade on a Cloudy Morning,' written on May 13, 1966; 'Certain Proverbs Arise Out of Dreams,' written on May 18, 1966; and 'A Long Call is Made Out of Wheels,' written on September 10, 1966.

These poems are among eighteen poems inspired by Merton's love for M., the student nurse assigned to care for Merton during his hospitalization for back surgery in late March 1966. Though he

recognized the private nature of the poems – for example, Merton notes that 'Louisville Airport, May 5, 1966' was "of course unpublishable" and "for M. only" – he could not resist sharing the poems with others as well. In April, he read one of the earlier poems 'With the World in My Bloodstream' to his novices, noting that "though I am sure that most of them did not understand much of it, they all seemed very attentive and moved—some (whom I would not have expected to be so) quite visibly." Merton added that the novices were "happy that I should share a poem with them—which I never do." In June, he shared some of the poems with his friends Victor and Carolyn Hammer and they talked about the possibility of printing the poems. They discussed the possibility of printing "a very elegantly edited, strictly limited edition: a real work of art. Not more than fifty or sixty copies in all." Of course, the author's identity would have to be "carefully concealed." Even though he wondered if that could be done, he hoped so. "Few people will have had such a memorial to their living love." In 1985, two hundred and fifty copies of *Eighteen Poems* were printed in a handsome edition arranged by Merton's friend Jay Laughlin. Merton had entrusted the poems and other personal papers to Laughlin for safekeeping.

Eighteen Poems has been the subject of two important essays: one by Douglas Burton-Christie published in *Crosscurrents* and a paper by Bonnie Thurston presented at the 1998 meeting of The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, published in *Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet*. Although, as Bonnie Thurston noted, the volume may not represent Merton's best poetry, *Eighteen Poems* certainly constitutes an important source for understanding Merton's own reading of this period in his life. Merton himself insists that the poems come closer than the journals to expressing what was in his heart. The love poems express something of the intensity of passion that Merton felt and witness to his efforts to celebrate and make sense of the love that was at once the source of deep joy and great anguish.

'Louisville Airport, May 5, 1966' was written a little more than a month after Merton met M. during a hospitalization for back surgery. They fell in love quickly. Although they had exchanged letters and talked on the phone, May 5 was only the second time they had been together following Merton's release from the hospital.

On May 5, Jay Laughlin, Nicanor Parra and Merton took M. to the Luau Room of the Louisville Airport. Merton described the scene this way: M. was

more lovely than ever. I had on only my Trappist overalls but anyhow we got into the Luau Room at the airport. Lots of rich people were arriving for the Derby (which is today) and the place was full of brass and money and there I sat having a marvelous time, looking like a convict, unable to turn my head to see all the swanky jets landing beside me, satisfied to look at M.. I could hardly eat anything—not unusual as it has been that way since the operation.

After supper M. and I had a little while alone and went off by ourselves and found a quiet corner, sat on the grass out of sight and loved each other to ecstasy. It was beautiful, awesomely so, to love so much and to be loved, and to be able to say it all completely without fear and without observation (not that we sexually consummated it).

Came home dazed, long after dark (highly illegal!) and wrote a poem before going to bed. I think Nicanor Parra was highly edified. He was saying something about how one must "follow the ecstasy!"—by which he meant evidently right out of the monastery and over the hill. This of course I cannot do.

In an interview with Thomas McDonnell, published in March 1968, Merton remarked that "there are moments in human love in which loneliness is completely transcended but," he cautions, "these are brief and deceptive." Perhaps this evening at Louisville Airport on May 5, 1966 was one of those moments of transcendence—albeit a transitory one for both Merton and M.. Both wrote about their time together: Merton in a poem and M. in a letter to Merton from which he quotes in his journal:

I want to be with you, to never be without you...I want to live with you darling! I want to share everything in your existence, I can't bear separation. To love you, to walk hand in hand, with you straight to God.

Merton comments, "She breaks my heart. How can we possibly be together unless I leave this place and how can I possibly get out of here? I really would if it were possible." Remember this phrase "if it were possible." M. imagines a future in which they walk "hand in hand to God" and Merton, who knows a future is impossible, celebrates the present moment in a poem. Both spiritualize their experience, drawing on the language of faith. Merton begins 'Louisville Airport, May 5, 1966' this way:

Here on the foolish grass
Where the rich in small jets
Land with their own hopes
And their own kind.

We with the gentle liturgy
Of shy children have permitted God
To make again that first world
Here on the foolish grass
After the spring rain has dried
And all the loneliness

Is for a moment lost in that simple
Liturgy of children permitting God
To make again that love which is His alone.

His alone and terribly obscure and rare
Love walks gently as a deer
To where we sit on the green grass
In the marvel of this day's going down
Celebrated only
By all the poets since the world began.

What for the millionaires landing in their swanky jets is just an airfield becomes for Merton and M. a patch of paradise: "the paradise of grass / where the world first began."

Merton describes the encounter as "a gentle liturgy" celebrating God's "first creation of solemn love." For this brief time the Garden of Eden is recreated and Merton and M. become the innocent first couple in the garden. Their love-making becomes "liturgy"—an act of worship and thanksgiving in which God works in them. For as Merton sees it, it is God who is making again "that love which is His alone." Their love is God's creation:

This is God's love He makes in us
As all the foolish rich fly down
Onto the paradise of grass
Where the world first began
Where God began
To make His love in man and woman
For the first time
Here on the sky's shore
Where the eternal sun goes down
And all the millionaires in small jets

Land with their own hopes
And their own kind.

Merton draws on his own experience, expressed in the poem, when in an essay called 'Love and Need' he writes: "Love is not a deal, it is a sacrifice. It is not marketing, it is a form of worship." Love is not only worship of the beloved but also worship of God. Human love is lifted up to God – the human and divine become one – through God's creative act—as it was when the world began. Merton and M. recover paradise—if only for a moment. They are born anew:

We with the tender liturgy
And tears
Of the newborn
Celebrate the first creation
Of solemn love
Now for the first time forever
Made by God in these
Four wet eyes and cool lips
And worshipping hands
When the one voiceless beginning
Of a splendid fire
Rises out of the heart
And all the evening is one flame
Which all the prophets
Accurately foresaw
Would make life plain
And create the whole world
Over again

Their simplicity and innocence stand in sharp contrast to the foolishness of the rich who "fly down / on to the paradise of grass" and see merely an airfield. Merton differs from them not only in dress (recall the overalls) but in vision. He sees something the others do not see.

The symbolism of liturgy/creation/paradise allows Merton to celebrate his love for M. as a gift from God and, for just a few moments, to stay with the ecstasy. In this poem, as in the seventeen others, Merton expresses his love for M. in the language of faith, finding in myth and symbol the words with which to share what is in his heart and to say what is on his mind. The imagery of new creation and new birth serves him well.

There is only the one love
Which is now our world

Our foolish grass
Celebrated by all
The poets since the first beginning
Of any song.

But it is not a relationship that can last. A few months later, in another of the *Eighteen Poems* included in the journal, he would express both resolution and longing as in 'For M. in October,' as he wrote:

"If only you and I
Were possible."