

Five Photographs by Thomas Merton

Seán Dunne

The observed particulars take on the mystery of revelation . . .

The Hermitage

A house for quiet built in the woods,
One good place for a man alone.
Trees surround it and jets fly over
Halfway through a psalm, words caught
In the slipstream and blown away.
It sits within the lens and seems
A shack for solitude in the wide world.

Still Life

A chair, a ladder, a bowl, wood
Strewn with shavings on a plain floor.
Behind the chair, an old cup stained
With rainwater. Singled within
The frame he fixed, they are firm
And plain, mundane as the shadow
Of chair on bowl, ladder-rung on chair.

The Broom

The broom in a corner remains
No more than a broom, its bristles
Firm when fingers press,
Its handle smooth from months of use.
There are no messages here; no moral lurks
In the plain wall or the bunched broom.
Take it or leave it. It swishes and sweeps.

Icons

From a distance, they might be framed
Pictures of high-school friendships,
Students with scrolls and gowns,
Family portraits in studios.
Closer, a worn madonna pines
On painted wood. Near her, the flecked
Faces of prophets stare.

Writing Table

Words spilt despite the silence,
A curved lamp over them as they formed
In spiral notebooks. So little
To say for it: its sheaves of paper,
Its marked book and pair of pens.
All it lacks is a mouse from Kells,
Perched on a word while the monk sleeps.

Seán Dunne (1956-1995) was a poet from Cork, Ireland, where he made a living from freelance journalism writing for many publications including *The Tablet*. He was also a columnist for *The Cork Examiner*. He published three collections of poems. 'Five Photographs by Thomas Merton' first appeared in *Time and the Island* (1996), 'Marginal Man' (see pages 48-49) in *The Sheltered Nest* (1992). Both poems may also be found in *Collected* (2005). We are grateful to the Estate of Seán Dunne and to The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland for permission to reproduce these poems.

Marginal Man

Thomas Merton 1915-1968

Seán Dunne

Black and white stranger in a snowy field,
Your gloved hands chop wood with an axe
That cuts through bark with the flat
Thud of steel through silence. A cap
Heavy as a fisherman's circles your head.

Easy for me to think of you tonight
With an Irish wind howling against the glass,
A teapot cooling among sandwiches packed
For children's journeys. Shadows from plants
Trail into corners where books are stashed.

Otherwise little to notice but sounds —
Floorboards crackling into place and coals
Collapsing in the grate. A broken tap
Sounds its annoying morse while wind
Whistles around bins in the wet yard.

Silence was the theme you took,
The quiet of places where nothing stirred
But pens on paper in cold scriptoria,
Your knuckles cold as Gallarus or Kells.
Yet still you never let anything go:

Meadowlarks singing in settled snow
Moved you to scribble a margin note
While light on gables in dying fields
At times could answer your deepest need.
And while you worried about the Bomb

Or agonised over a nurse you loved,
A bird seen suddenly over an elm
Became a *koan* containing everything.
The sky at evening was a parchment
Flecked with lines from Japanese prints.

In Washington the meetings dragged
On and on, words snapping like sticks
As maps were altered by a mood. The Pentagon
Was hardly your temple, you who loved the mat
Spread loosely over the earthen floor,

Who loved the simple pot and the sound
Of a camera clicking as you faced the last
Shaker buildings left in cold Kentucky,
Your lens aimed at a broken sash
Or the peeling walls of a house that still

Moved you, its message one you understood.
You were outside everything, marginal man,
Forever on the edge with the necessary trash
Of poems or silence, content to watch geese,
Or light blazing into a teeming barn.

I keep your picture in my crowded room.
What worth your silence or your quick death,
Your side scorched and the electric fan
Tangled on the floor, your bare feet wet?
The monk is a bird who flies very fast.

Locusts sounding among sycamores,
Light was shaken between rows of pines.
Snow fell lightly as a brushstroke
In the cold dusk when they buried you.
You who wrote of the need for peace

Came home in an army plane. The teapot's cool.
The fire guts out and the house is still.
A cat cries out in a neighbour's yard
And trawlers turn towards flares at sea.
The world in the end comes down to these.

Wood-gatherer in a snowy field,
You pose on logs in rolled-up sleeves,
A Buddha at ease. Your silence spreads.
The raw gales rip yachts from moorings.
The morning's thaw is a new page turning.