

Gestus

*I had wondered...what was holding the universe  
from cracking in pieces and falling apart.  
It is places like this monastery....*

-Thomas Merton

*...a choice made now, today, projects itself  
backwards and changes our past....*

-Czeslaw Milosz

only Brother Raphael—  
in the cheese barn since 1954  
when he entered at 32  
now guestmaster—  
knows my name  
forgets it soon after  
he shows me to my room  
#205  
no reputation or relationship  
to moor me

I am a fish  
whose tail and joy  
have hurled it ashore  
flailing, rubbery  
gills fan up  
slum  
slower, slower  
it realizes  
*breathe in*  
arches  
scales sprout thin roots  
it rises, slides  
among the alien trees  
that smile at the sun  
and tuck her to themselves

a grave 4 feet  
from where I've set  
the coffee cup—

true peace in drinking  
near men now soil  
in a stillness made of bones

a small leaf drops—  
let no thought  
hold it in the air

light & leaf  
the garden floor  
rustle scrabble scratch song  
sounds braiding collapsing clinging  
snap of wing  
claws on bark—  
my ear reaches to receive something  
long forgotten  
never absent  
leisurely wakened  
I sit being quietly eaten  
by this energy

too much is made of finding  
being found—  
freedom in being lost  
at last  
without anchor  
aim  
or purpose

shadow-striped wall  
a slight breeze—  
the wall sways  
the shadows stay

a wide path gives to a view  
of urgently ripening hills  
& a vast parquetry

of fields and pasturage  
I hear a sound  
slightly more prolonged  
than the crack of a jawbone  
at its hinges  
follow the rhythm—  
a cypress has died  
& in its slow rot  
has started to topple  
only to be stopped  
in its sideways keel  
by another tree  
green & keenly alive  
the one-note squeal  
is the dead tree swooning  
against the upright one

breakfast coffee in Tim's cup—  
I bring him to my lips  
this way

a door clasp  
a wasp on the path—  
gradually desire loses its appetite  
for itself—  
an eaten leaf  
knee-high wheat—  
the sense-seeking mind drops  
to an unheard pitch—  
flowers nursing at the breasts of a hill  
4 orange moths  
close & open their wings  
on a thin skin of mud  
a web spun between the limbs  
of two pine boughs  
caught to it  
a small dry leaf—  
far off an owl hoots

door slams  
an exit  
an entrance  
no matter—  
either creates the same  
sound & motion

Notre Dame de Melleray, France:  
after 8 centuries  
only so many plots  
in the burial yard—  
when a monk dies  
the oldest grave at the time  
is opened  
the remains are gathered  
& placed in a small box  
which is used to cradle the head  
of his unknown brother

take my ancient body  
eat hip & limb & puckering brow  
vein & palm & bellyplane—  
eat earth whole  
clean & radiant in readiness  
be freely eaten  
your bloodloam washing words  
over bones of white joy

yellowing leaves of a sapling  
move whole  
all at once—  
in a hundred years  
someone will be writing  
of a width  
I shall never see

slow susurrations  
of low-pitched Psalms



sung at Compline  
draw us deeper into the night—  
eyes on the sanctuary candle  
in its clear glass holder:  
body heavy in itself  
mind muttering endlessly to itself  
fidgety flame morred to dark wick  
eye to flame to eye to flame  
being received  
taking in  
received  
receiving  
taking taken

an eldermonk  
walks the cemetery perimeter  
I rise to leave  
he turns  
looks straight to my eyes  
says *Stay right where you are*  
entirely  
swings half a circle away from  
disappears through an open door

a scatterbrained rain blows in  
on a hijacked carousel  
flinging moist coins  
to the flowers of children  
with cherished hair  
laughs before the ark of the sun  
& her warrior daughter

before science  
psychology  
prayer—  
water  
dawn  
the willow

long shawls of shadows unroll  
over the hills' shoulders  
fields furrowed like Zen gardens  
& hazed with the dying day's heat  
air aflame with spice  
of earth's cycle  
finches scatter overhead  
beneath a skyspread of truest blue:  
a geometry of timelessness—  
I walk among the well-tended dead  
as casually as I roam with the living  
who carry a book or nothing  
or coffee in a white cup  
shabby bricks of monastery buildings  
beckon with a welcome as fresh  
as their mortar once was

beneath what I have seen  
far beneath the words I have written  
or spoken or read  
beneath the listening  
is a tinder that ignites:  
I have place  
as surely as do the sun  
drowning in its own water  
of fabulous color  
or the woods' wild perfume  
or the humidity that cloaks—  
alone  
I have place  
with others  
I have place  
& proceeding from this place  
I continue to be created  
the ineffable is resident  
in every step  
breath  
& mouthful of food  
I have taken  
there is no existence apart  
from this

Amma:  
meet us  
in the breath we breathe  
which is you  
destroy what is merciless  
seize us—  
we offer straw and dross  
receive them in fullness  
as your own true blood  
& bread  
& face

*There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity,  
a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity  
is Wisdom, the Mother of all, natura naturans.*

— Thomas Merton

**Rusty C. Moe**

\* a sequence of poems written while on retreat at the Abbey  
of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky