

DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN

At Christ in the Desert

We believe that the best way that we can give hospitality in the desert is to offer our guests a chance to share in our Benedictine way of life.... The atmosphere most conducive to this kind of sharing includes silence and some solitude.
from "Welcome to the Monastery Guesthouse"

I cannot meditate. Neither these eyes, nor this breath will stay for the skittering stories to settle and fold in on themselves
In from the highway, paving turns to graded dust, scratched into the Chama's valley—raw bluffs, red-dust-caked brush, river, fishermen casting, winding, casting.
Sin that I come without intention.
Sing. I will. In the language I speak, and in Latin. In the cruciform chapel—eight corners into which singing might crouch, four corners around which it might bend and
Sting me awake, drive me from the hard bed, down and up the road to the chapel, flashlighting my feet on unreliable ground, one of the loose
String of the guesthouse unprofessed. We're knots on a bell rope, knots on a cincture, knots on a twine rosary, burrs on barbed wire,
Staring at the road, ignoring the sky so full of stars, they blur. The monks sing already,
Starting—voices reach across the nave, pushing back and forth transept to transept. In the center voices lacing, knotting together, clutch of call and calling, answering, leaving behind. Between Compline and Matins, I read a saintless book.
Startling me from the book (battery light clipped to the cover, night filling everywhere else), the bat, rag of black fl-fl-fl-fing around the room, unable to sound its way to open door. I sit outside until it remembers how to be itself and leaves.

* * *

I take the long path back after None—Via Dolorosa—sun-weathered crosses, path through sage, willow, cholla, juniper, pinyon. Walking in shift and drag of gravel. They've made the path hard to move along. I cannot find a whole breath.
Sin not to feel the breath of God filling my lungs in this place.
Sing instead. Everything sings here—bluffs boom, river spins continuo. The sky is melody, the monks harmony.
I'm a small voice, a squeak. The God I hoped to hear is a raptor. I walk the road at night.
Sting-light everywhere in the day. Work in the fields, lashed by it. Scorpion light.

String out my heartbeats—a line in the river—cast, wound back, cast out, dragged back.

Staring down, the bluffs watch. Try to draw them, pull them onto paper, take them into my right hand. They
won't go. I'm too small.

Starlings shake loose from the trees in the evening, wheel, scratch the air, leave,
Startling the air like sudden bells.

* * *

I, in sin, sing.

Contumacious, stung, strung like ungrounded wire

Tree to tree, stripped and juddering,

Staring at my own hands,

Starting to breathe and starting to die,

Startling my own breath.

HERON TREE

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ABOUT DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN

Devon Miller-Duggan is the author of *Pinning the Bird to the Wall* (Tres Chicas Books 2008) and *Neither Prayer, Nor Bird* (Finishing Line Press 2013). Her poems have been published in *Christianity & Literature*, *Rattle*, *Gargoyle*, *Kestrel*, and *The Delmarva Review*. She received a PhD from the University of Delaware and teaches creative writing there. She is also the founding editor of *Kenning Journal*. She lives in Newark, Delaware, and blogs at *Fatmatters* (fatmatters.wordpress.com).

A note:

The epigraph for this poem is taken from materials for the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, available online at christdesert.org/Monastery_Guesthouse.

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