

## At a Monastery

This bed is tiny. Spreading out is not an option. I am resigned to either lying on my back ready to be embalmed or on my side as a foetus. Neither desirable to me. The singular thin pillow is also an issue. I heard it's best to have your head as flat as possible, but I'm a sucker for comfort. I try to fold it in half to get more elevation for my tired brain. No joy. I'm restless, on edge. Why am I so anxious? The second hand of the clock ticks louder with every passing moment.<sup>1</sup>

I take the batteries out, smash the clock on the floor. Your heart shall beat no longer my friend. I control time. I am God.<sup>2</sup>

I flirted with the idea of becoming a Buddhist monk for a while, living in the Himalayas or the jungles of Myanmar. A time for solitude and reflection.<sup>3</sup> A time to transform, to emerge a better person. Reborn. I often want to escape the complexities and pressures of 21st century life. A simpler existence filled with a romantic sense of mysticism. I fear that this will always remain a wish unfulfilled. However, this same interest led me to stay at a Benedictine monastery in England. There was no intention of personal growth on this visit though, solely curiosity. I thought I wouldn't gain anything due to a preconception of dreary stoicism. I came to make images. I feel the cold metal of the camera in my hand, I had never realised its weight before, heavy and clunky. Its external appearance seemingly at odds with the delicate internal process of making fluid time still. That's all I was after. Stills. A collection of snapshots recording the end of an era. These monks were a dying breed. Morbid fascination.

My body is screaming. My mind aching. I am dissolving as ink on wet parchment, diluted and stretched thin.

Am I. I am.

The excruciating sound of my alarm cuts through my dreams into the back of my eyes. I'm awake. I'm awake. It isn't light yet. I pull my body up as a deadweight to sit on the side of my bed. I push a thumb and third finger into my corneas, the pressure is soothing. How had the night gone so fast? I get dressed. Lauds. Two lines of hooded figures stand against the grey stone of the cloister's walls. Through an arched door they move into the abbey and take their seats in the dark timber quire. Sitting amongst the empty pews I watch from afar. It is still dark. Soft electric lights shine over the hunched forms while they sing in Latin. I am moved. It is stark and vague. The early hours can leave me breathless, within them sits an

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<sup>1</sup> 'Whoever devotes himself to the work is drawn by it toward the point where it undergoes impossibility. This experience is purely nocturnal, it is the very experience of the night.' Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> Both in writing and sleeping, I need 'surrender to the fascination of time's absence', I must enter 'essential solitude'. I enter the work as I enter sleep. Within both states the brain is able to drift into a space of limitlessness. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*.

<sup>3</sup> This work 'is solitary: this does not mean that it remains uncommunicable, that it has no reader. But whoever reads it enters into the affirmation of the work's solitude, just as he who writes it belongs to the risk of this solitude'. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*.

undistilled clarity. I rarely indulge in this sacred time and, when I do, I regret my slovenly daily ritual. One sin out of seven. Light starts to strengthen, forms take shape in the naked morning. A glorious incision in the day's fresh skin. Stepping through the opening in a state of preparation and devotion. What it must be like to have faith that strong. Faith in something. Faith in anything. An unwavering love of 'God', of any 'God'. I hadn't opened the prayer book, it hangs limp from my chilled fingers. The air's cold. Every morning I forget to bring a coat. Perhaps I am hoping that without thick layers I can form a closer bond with the present, drinking in a sacred existence with my entire body. I exist. I exist now and that is all I know. How can anyone assume that life stretches out in front of them as a vast ocean into the foggy realms of old age? A fool's promise. These monks are old, years are seared into their faces as fault lines through the earth.<sup>4</sup> Strength. I don't dare to think about my strength in comparison. What strength you must have to follow the same ritual every day. Or is that weakness? An inability to not be a slave to routine. To be brave is to strike out from the ordinary. Is their whole life preparation? Or is their daily devotion an end in itself? Perhaps it is simultaneously both. My life unfolds before me with little thought about the future, a series of lurches and impulses. I have thought about death though.<sup>5</sup> To me it is an acceptance of a lack of something after, and through this acceptance then I can find peace.<sup>6</sup> Through devoting your life to 'God', are you waiting for an immortal life in Heaven? If this is so, is the life of a monk selfless or selfish? Questions bleed through me, staining slabs of stone under my feet. The liquid creeps through the cracks into the earth below, worms and grubs squirm in delight of its warmth. Glistening in ugliness, they are not aware of their destiny as they eat through the coffin of a departed Priest and into his decaying carcass.<sup>7</sup> Will they be taken with him? Or perhaps he is in them.

I don't want to be buried, the thought of it makes me claustrophobic. Far better to go in a heroic blaze of glory. Fire is elemental. I have always been entranced by its primordial power. An amateur pyromaniac, volatile. However, to be reduced to a sad pile of ashes and kept in a jar, I don't like that idea either. Best to be scattered immediately into the wind to fertilise the soil. My reduced mass of carbon, food for the earth.<sup>8</sup> I became it. It is another thing. The cycle continues, transformation.<sup>9</sup>

We eat in silence. How empty the dining room is. Unoccupied chairs remain as a stark reminder of loss, ever dwindling numbers.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Whatever is born and will die is nature. Since we, humans, are also born and will die, we are nature too. Thus nature and humans are one.' Satish Kumar, *Soil Soul Society*.

<sup>5</sup> '[...] in reality there is no experience of death. Properly speaking, nothing has been properly experienced but what has been lived and made conscious.' Albert Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus*.

<sup>6</sup> 'Sense is: that existence should be without essence, that it should be toward that which it essentially is not, its own existence. Toward death, if you like, but where 'death' = the nullity of essence, existence. In other words, toward death would be toward life, if "life" did not refer too simply to the contrary of death (immediacy as opposed to, and in the final analysis as indention with, infinite self-medication). Hence, toward existence.' Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*.

<sup>7</sup> 'Everything comes from the soil and returns to the soil. Food which sustains life comes from the soil. Water which nourishes life is held by the soil. The sun, the moon and the stars all relate to the soil.' Kumar, *Soil Soul Society*.

<sup>8</sup> 'Our relationship with nature has to be embedded in the principles of reverence for life. Deep ecology leads to a reverential and spiritual ecology.' Kumar, *Soil Soul Society*.

<sup>9</sup> 'The earth gave life to a man; gave him his food, language and intelligence; and the earth took him back when he died,' Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*.

I walk through the vast stone hallways and take a moment to be still in the cloister.<sup>10</sup> Stillness, all there is. These halls would have bristled with monks once. Now, as all things, it must itself change; as cells empty through an evolving external world and internal ecclesiastical scandal. What is to become of the last monks? What will become of this building? It is built for worship, it is fit for purpose. The power of stone runs into my fingers and body as I clutch at the wall.<sup>11</sup> How many hands have done the same? Did the stone make them feel assured, certain? As there is no certainty in the ones I possess. The echo of my footsteps allow me to be aware of my weight, my size and my being. I push a wooden door with my body, for a moment we are one, equal reactions, neither moving. Finally, the living becomes too much for the dead, but there is life in this door yet, it swings open. Transference. The abbey's columns soar up to hold stained glass windows. Light floods in to convince me of the presence of divinity, existing in a constant state of the in between, neither is, nor was.<sup>12</sup> Seemingly timeless. Rows of empty pews bring me closer to solitude. I envisage hundreds of devoted faces all searching for something. The congregation. Blind faith. Would they be given a place with God after death alongside the monks? Is their devotion equal as part time lovers? This space had such power, so unnervingly convincing of its saintly aura. No wonder it commands devotion.

Days passed through an endless cycle of prayer and ritual. Constant focus. You must be with 'God'. You are distracted. Pray. Pray again. Living the Liturgy of the Hours. Unrelenting in its continuum. I went to seven out of eight, the thought of rising at 2am was too much for my undisciplined self. Fragmented conversations with the priests interrupted my clouded mind, shattering previously held ideas, forging new concepts in their wake.

Nothing is ever finished or started, just a series of unfolding layers. Perhaps once this is understood it is possible for the finished to be realised.

I am stripped of myself. With skin peeled from my body I lie on this bed without the screams that had been etched into my brain. Silence. Anxiety has stopped. I am calm and my heartbeat slows. In this cell I understand why my hair had been pricked up these past days. Throughout my stay I had been transforming into myself. How many times had I swam into the depths of my core to question my true being? Not inspecting the surface but emerging from the heart of darkness.<sup>13</sup> The 'who am I?' had changed into 'I am'. The context in which I normally exist, erased. I am simply me. A stranger. Society drained from my flesh, I am living. I am alight. Immolation. Is this the state that monks exist in? Or do they exist within the context of the church? Would the same process happen to them if they left and became a civilian, drained of the

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<sup>10</sup> 'The buildings of the monastery, then, reflect a particular aspiration to stability. The entire monastic life cycle can be passed within the accommodation of the monastery'. 'Even in death, the monks' bodies remain within the boundaries of the monastic household'. Richard Irvine, *The Architecture of Stability: Monasteries and the Importance of Place in a World of Non-Places*.

<sup>11</sup> 'Every touching experience of architecture is multi-sensory: qualities of space are measured equally by the eyes, ears nose, tongue, skin and muscles.' Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*.

<sup>12</sup> 'All the senses awaken and fall into harmony in poetic reverie. Poetic reverie listens to this polyphony of the senses, and the poetic consciousness must record it.' Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*.

<sup>13</sup> 'Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest.' Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

ecclesiastical, would they be born anew? Or perhaps faith is so strong that it can't be peeled off, unlike society's frivolous narratives. What will our new faith be in the disappearance of religion?

My feet feel light, I glide. I feel strong yet fragile. I know that in time I will revert back to a being defined by the shackles of society demands.

I am okay.

Better to know you're poisoned than to be poisoned and not know it.