

**Unquiet Vigil**  
**New and Selected Poems**  
**By Paul Quenon**  
**Paraclete Press**  
**www.paracletepress.com**  
**ISBN 978-1-61261-560-8**  
**171 Pages**

*Review by Dennis Daly*

Out of great silence and temporal restraint comes an exquisite rush of words and, in turn, transcendental passion. Paul Quenon, in his latest book, *Unquiet Vigil*, belies the conventional understanding of repetitive monastic rituals, mystic self-abnegation, and meandering walls that delimit (at least metaphorically) wandering monks from worldly desires and ambitions. Quenon's words soar with freedom's exhilarating ardor, sustained by the fearlessness of his faith and the innate disposition of his environment, an unusual combination. Or, perhaps not. His poetry does not filter; it simply records quiet rhythms and perceives the essential forms of nature in compelling ways.

Born in West Virginia coal country, Quenon entered Our Lady of Gethsemani Trappist monastery, near Bardstown Kentucky, in 1958 at the age of seventeen. His novice master, spiritual advisor, and poetry mentor was the renowned Thomas Merton. For the last twenty or so years the monastery has supported Quenon's artistic endeavors (he has published five previous books of poetry and produced some extraordinary photography).

Opening with coy flirtation, the collection draws the reader in with a potent dynamic, a mini morality play entitled *Gone Missing*. Poetry solicits the poet. At the same time the poet seeks his poems-to-be through the forest of life, using his senses, following tell-tale signs. Does the quest enable the art? Consider these personified lines,

*... I am a poem without a poet.  
He has gone missing for weeks  
and my house is empty. Suffer me awhile,  
or go, and if you meet him—  
he with the distant look and shambling gait—  
tell him the hearth is cooling down.*

*I won't know a thing for days,  
He takes to a walk-about  
And never pays me notice.  
What kind of life is that?*

*Yet I've never expected different—  
I'm glad he just comes back at all.*

Quenon at his best conjures up natural images after internalizing them into a spiritual duality of connection and timelessness. The meditations that result are breathtaking descriptions of the human heart, a calming existentialism of sorts. Here's a selection from Quenon's piece entitled

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Transpiration in which the poet melds “white ranges of cumulus” with the “leafy hoards crowding below” into a single awe-inducing process, both metaphysical and natural,

*Two solemn masses, two summer throngs  
Breathing one sunlit worship.*

*Two transfigurations:  
Vapor heaving updrafts to evanesce into light;  
Groundwater exhaling into wind through roiling foliage.*

*Transubstantiation — that’s all  
Of you and me. We vanish into light —*

Erwin Schrodinger’s famous thought experiment, Schrodinger’s Cat, testing quantum physics takes center stage in Quenon’s poem The Un-Named Cat Merton. The source of the piece is an unpublished photograph showing a dead Thomas Merton being prepared for burial. The poet observes the scene through a sub-atomic indeterminacy perspective. Here the quantum world becomes the spiritual world metaphorically (or not metaphorically). Observation determines reality. The subject of the camera is both dead and alive. Of course Merton still does live through his books, his faith, and as part of a brotherhood. In his case, faith and brotherhood are inseparable. Quenon, in the heart of the poem, introduces the concept’s universality by alluding to ancient Sri Lankan Buddhist sculptures,

*Two stone Buddhas at  
Polonnaruwa,  
the one awake, standing,  
the other lies asleep.*

*Both, when you are jerked clear  
Out of the habitual,  
Half-tied vision of things  
Are one Buddha  
Asleep and awake.*

In his poem Restless Silence, Quenon discovers anew many of the questions that emanate from observational and audacious simplicity. Both poet and object engage in a kind of silent dialogue, a dialogue on nature, humanity’s mutability, and alienation. The poet elegantly concludes this way,

*A pigeon leaves a tree for another tree.*

*I can hear the sun  
grazing the dusty grass,  
until a breeze interrupts briefly  
then settles for ... a something...*

*Was it here already and gone?  
Or was it only here  
so I would come and wait?*

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*Why this sadness when,  
yielding to restlessness,  
I rise and abandon what  
never knows abandonment?*

Just for its title alone, *Confessions of a Dead-Beat Monk*, would be my favorite poem in the collection. However, the piece offers quite a bit more. As the poet describes the routine and sameness of a monk's life, excitement sneaks in. Words such as prodigious, bitter, sweet, gold, treasure, secret, and enigma appear. Even humdrum chores are punctuated by exclamation points. Quenon, sly and skillful poet that he is, turns the piece into a celebration of monkhood and a lingering celebration at that. The piece begins thusly,

*Of course, I've sat the same bench  
brushing off flies and thoughts,  
how many years? What winters of  
silence and summer variations,*

*what prodigious mockingbirds  
I've heard! And that kitchen job!  
Broccoli and spuds on Mondays,  
rice twice a week, and Oh,*

*toasted cheese sandwiches,  
Fridays! This diet of psalms,  
fifty and hundred, runs ever  
on from bitter to sweet ...*

Quenon's delicately phrased poem, *Mountain Climb*, goes way beyond the obvious metaphor into a meditational understanding of self and its concomitant contentment. He notes, perceptively, the constant change inherent in sameness. As his dream-time vision fades, he commits to memory what he can, and that is enough. The poet reminisces,

*I have been here before,  
explored alone the route  
that only I know. It is familiar  
though changed —  
always familiar, though  
never twice the same.  
I have the energy  
to take the long irregular climb.*

*I arrive at the summit  
totally alone. Something absolute  
grips my senses. I all but breathe it in.*

Breathing in Brother Paul Quenon's poems rewards with revelation after revelation. This soul-shaking writer turns solitude into wonderment. Quenon, unlike most poets, is not much of a self-promoter. Too bad. He deserves a much wider audience. Think world-wide. Get his book. Spread the word.