



Amounting to Nothing
Poems by Paul Quenon, OCSO
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Review by Dennis Daly

LIKE TIBETAN PRAYER FLAGS HUNG OUTDOORS, pervading the natural world with wisdom and blessings before fading into invisibility, Paul Quenon's newest collection of poems, *Amounting to Nothing*, are wind-blown mantras of belief and renewal.

Quenon, a Cistercian (Trappist) monk living at Gethsemani Abbey in rural Kentucky, atomizes himself into his wondrous community of creatures and phenomena. His self-deprecation informs both his wit and wisdom. Inconveniently, however, the poet's brand of humility questions even his own judgment and thus his attempts to measure out a life. A flaw perhaps, but also an artistic irritation and poetic spur.

Abnegation of being or a merging with the divine holds the key for any good monk seeking holiness. In Quenon's opening poem, *Mad Monk's Life Ambition*, his persona tries to figure things out. Double negatives aside, clever word play animates the piece. Here the monk considers his mission,

*Did someone lay on a jinx and say:
You'll never amount to nothing?*

*How sad, since I took nothing
as my monastic goal.*

*I still don't amount to nothing,
still think I'm something.*

*I hardly amount to a hill of beans but
this already is too much of something.*

*What ever might you mount
to amount to nothing?*

Where is that magical mountain?

Hide and Seek may be a popular children's game, but Quenon discovers that it suits his monkhood perfectly. In practice the poet finds hiding as an opportunity to observe and understand the nature of creation. Other poets would agree. Quenon goes one step further in his poem entitled

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Alone with the Alone and declaims the divineness in distraction,

*Some poet said galaxies
are a good place to hide-- in a thicket of stars.
But any Kentucky thicket would be good enough for me;
there I could secretly watch small creatures
who want to go hide. And then I'll know
the thousand and one ways to be
and to be unknown.*

*It might seem like playing God on a small scale.
But God doesn't mind. God likes to pretend
at being God on a small scale.*

Mankind unpleasantly ages in parcels that bump into the future and fall back into an inescapable past. But there is a whole, a smooth sphere with no outer rims, an eternity of centers. Quenon mulls over timelessness in the context of his friend and mentor, Thomas Merton. His poem entitled Merton's Anniversary explains, for lack of a better term, monk's time. It opens this way,

*"passed" 50 years ago, they say.
Well, that number counts for nothing.
Better to say, "subsists in the ever untimed."*

*Years count not, no measure there is
for boundless embrace of All-time.
Was-is-will be
co-exist there
simultaneously.*

*Outside this, nothing is.
Time inside this revolves;
history is a closed circle
ever completed, ever changing.*

My favorite poem in this collection Quenon calls Critical Change for Whom? It begins with a troubling exchange between Quenon and Fr. Matthew. The perturbed Matthew questions the reality of things at hand as illusion. He further posits that reality is something other. Quenon, concerned with his friend's state of mind, asserts that simplification makes more sense. What you see, a table, a bed, really exists or at least is anchored in the real. Then the poet delivers the rest of the story,

*I step from Matthew's room,
leave him to his dark concerns—*

*suddenly I wake, startled to find myself
elsewhere, alone, on a mattress prone,
under Orion, stars and night—*

no table, no room, no Matthew,

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*already three years passed,
all except for this — the dream he knew
was a dream.*

Quenon excels in externalizing his thoughts and emotions. In his poem Winter Conversation of Trees he imposes expressionistic attributes on a variety of Trees with an ear to attention and expository internal need. The resulting tableau quantifies his human concerns and suggests much higher levels of discussion. The poet dispenses his fervors thusly,

Complex cherry branches look cross.

*Tearless weeping willow
faints earthward
from summer's heavy losses.*

Cottonwood widely embraces year's completion.

Gingko finely probes every minute detail of space.

*Cedar of Lebanon — straightforward
In all he speaks or tells.*

*All herewith written
is foreign language unto
their lofty discourse.*

The phenomenon of illumination and understanding Quenon chronicles in his poem Fireflies. Here he contemplates in the humble firefly's existence and obsessive activity, specifically the unrelenting continuity of the fly's off-on body switch. Individually, the fly seems to be trying a little too hard to highlight bits of earthly knowledge. In contrast the community of such creatures creates the context for their own magnificent artwork. The poet explains,

*... night crowds in.
Dark flees lamps lifted,*

*cautiously hides from
that fly-filled field spread with
lonely, drifting stars*

*that never collide —
earthly constellations swarming
the dark, grassy range*

ever without owning it.

Belief trumps death as Quenon, in his piece Walking Meditation, strolls through the monk's graveyard at Gethsemani. He connects with tradition and individual remembrances delineated by simple crosses. Comfort turns to monastic anticipation,

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*I sense a kind acquaintance
at each step pressed in grass
soles to souls
assembled below*

outside of space.

*The wash of dew is cleansing,
is peace, and pleasure.
This brief moment awaits
that blink of eternity's
eye*

Monastic traditions have always offered little insights and large illuminations. Paul Quenon, steeped in that heritage of great silences, offers a bit more—first rate poetry.