

More Than
Watchmen At
Daybreak

poems by Cyrus Cassells

Author's Note

In 2018, the prior and Benedictine brothers of Christ in the Desert Monastery in Abiquiu, New Mexico, gifted me with two hermitages to use for my writing. The first was on Three Kings Day in January at the Peace of Saint Francis Hermitage, close to the novice's quarters, and the second was in May, August, and December at the Saint Augustan of Canterbury Hermitage, next to the Chama River—a fifteen-minute walk from the monastery's striking chapel and main grounds. There was no Internet or phone reception. It was the first time in my life I was incommunicado for a long stretch and the results were dramatic. I've been composing new poetry and cultural criticism nonstop since the first wintry day that I landed in Abiquiu.

This twelve-part sequence, “More Than Watchmen at Daybreak,” examines the immense natural beauty of the abbey's Chama Valley setting, with its red and saffron-yellow cliffs, and the devotional life and hardy activities of the monks. The title is biblical:

*More than watchmen at daybreak,
My soul is longing for the Lord*

Psalm 130:6

I. Winter Abbey with Venus Rising

Pilgrim, under in-a-rush chevrons
Of restless desert clouds,

At shape-shifting winter's onset,
Picture the Benedictines' elating valley,

Its eminent gusts yielding
A Yuletide jackpot of curt,

Valedictory leaves—whirling, marshaling
In windswept cardinal directions:

Broadcast realm of *glory be*, insurgent
Kingdom of *kyrie eleison*—

Solstice: a slowly ascending,
Bold as a horseman sun

Burnishes each antediluvian cliff,
Each telltale winter crest,

With its equalizing gaze:
A resolute, dispassionate topaz—

Far from the deriding republic,
A mint-new Herod's decrees,

The poignant bronze of reed beds,
The strict rhythm of the liturgical hours,

And later, as irrepressible Venus rises,
Consecrating the far-flung abbey,

And the stalwart compass star appears,
The ink of darkened, sacramental banks

With pallid embroideries of ice,
The blessed Jerusalem of the pewter river—

II. Accepting the Peace of Saint Francis Hermitage

Listen, out of love and goodwill,
I was given a hermitage—

From the prior's hand, a choir stall
Of layered terracotta cliffs to contemplate,

To venerate: *Benedictus qui venit*
In nomine domini,

Benedictus qui venit . . .
A cusp of inchoate vermilion

And liberating blue,
An umber ribbon-length, imagine,

Of rustic, unpaved road,
Ushering my winter-proof boots

Past grazing ruminants and the lissome river's
Glitter and meander—

Dear beneficent prior,
Will I find impartial God

In the timeworn mountains that cradle
Cassiopeia and Cygnus, The Great Swan?

Will I learn to embrace the wind-blessed
Peace and serenity of Saint Francis?

In the breeze-plied December abbey,
Under the Dipper seeker,

Each midnight now I'm seized
By the imperial Milky Way,

The mainstay Seven Sisters,
Ruby-rare ornaments,

Gleaming in the brisk black cauldron
Of the midnight river's buffeted mirror—