



Monastery of the Ascension

# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

Vol. XXXI, Number 1 MARCH 2022

## The Song of the Three Young Men: “Bless the Lord, all you Works of the Lord”

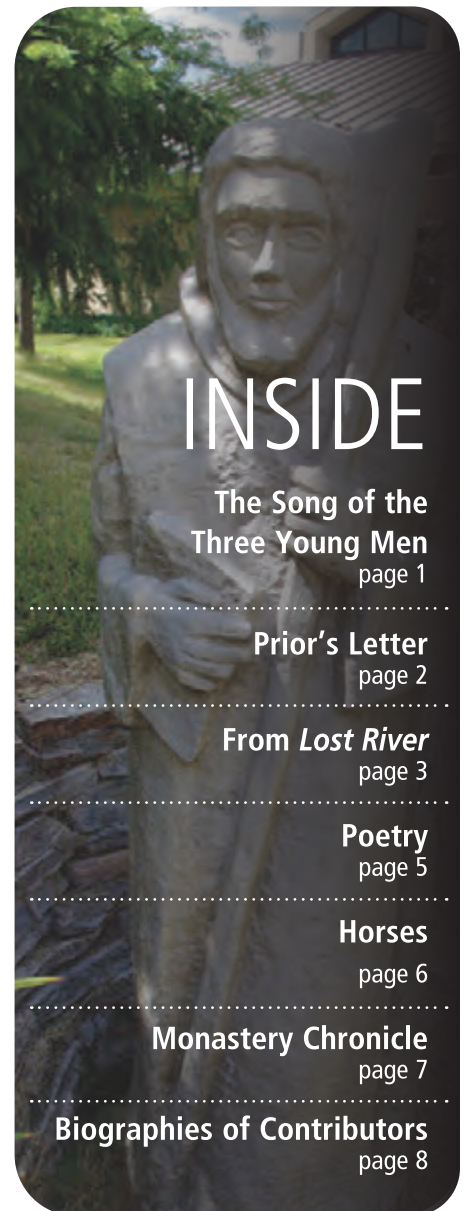
By Fr. Hugh Feiss, O.S.B.

**W**E ARE BECOMING EVER MORE AWARE OF HOW INTERCONNECTED EVERYTHING ON OUR EARTH IS. MOST OF THIS ISSUE OF THE DESERT CHRONICLE IS AN EXPLORATION and celebration of this beautiful and fragile world. Before the Industrial Revolution, European people, most of whom had personal connections with the land, probably knew the oneness of things better than we do. Certainly, indigenous people in North America were and are very aware of how the lives of all the children of Mother Earth are intertwined.

Long before even that, the author of Psalm 104 praised God for providing a place with holes for badgers, plants to feed cattle and people, cedars for birds to nest in, night for lions to prowl, and day for human beings to work. Another artful expression of the oneness of creation is the song of the three young men in chapter 3 of the book of Daniel, found in the early Greek translations of the Old Testament, in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, and in Protestant bibles among the Deuterocanonical books. The monks pray this “song” often at morning prayer.

This prayer is sung by three young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego after they have been thrown into a fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar. The fire in no way harms them. They begin by blessing God in heaven, then they call on all creation to do the same, starting from the top: spirits and angels above and in the sky, the meteorological phenomena between the sky and the earth, the waters and land and the fish, plants, and animals that live on and in them, and finally human beings.

See “THE SONG”, cont. on page 4



## INSIDE

The Song of the  
Three Young Men  
page 1

Prior’s Letter  
page 2

From *Lost River*  
page 3

Poetry  
page 5

Horses  
page 6

Monastery Chronicle  
page 7

Biographies of Contributors  
page 8



# Prior's Letter

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

Grass has appeared over the septic line. The thermometer reached 42 degrees recently. Seasonal allergies are among items on the list of things to deal with. Ash Wednesday is close at hand. Our community retreat will begin Lent, a time of new life. This year we will have a retreat master in person; having someone we can relate to in person is a plus.

Our community Lenten practices are simple. They include cutting back on desserts and, on Wednesdays, a discussion of topics about scripture, theology or spirituality. Chapter 49 of the Holy Rule gives us plenty to think about: “to keep our manner of life most pure and wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times” (RB 49:2-3).

For all of us, as followers of Christ, the readings at Mass set a goal that will be a continuing challenge: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6: 3). Lent is an opportunity to shape up. RB 4:20 reads, “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way.” Given the values of the culture, that is a challenge for sure.

Benedict does leave it up to each monk to do something “extra”. “During these days, therefore, we will add to the usual measure of our service something by way of private prayer and abstinence from food or drink, so that we will have something above the assigned measure to offer God of our own will with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (RB 49:5-6).

This is being written close to the beginning of Lent. Before the next Desert Chronicle, Easter will have come and gone. The “new life” of the risen Lord will again give us reason to be confident followers of Christ. We hope that will be true for you. We here at the monastery will be keeping all of you in our prayers. Please keep us in yours.

Peace and good things.  
Fr. Boniface Lautz, O.S.B.  
Prior



# From Lost River

*By Alison Sainsbury*

## A Girl and Her Horse

**T**HE HAYBARN SMELLS OF SUMMER, OF HIGH COLORADO MOUNTAIN MEADOWS LUSH WITH THE GRASS NOW DRIED AND BUNDLED INTO the stacked bales that fill the barn. I hang the wirecutters back up on their nail, work a few flakes of hay loose from the bale. The early morning sun slanting in through the east window turns the dust thrown up by the new-sprung bale into a golden haze. I gather up the flakes, holding the scratchy hay accordion fashion out and away from my body, and, with my foot, push open the door, which sweeps smoothly over the cushion of hay that softens the boards of the floor. The horse, waiting impatiently at the manger, crowds the fence, stretches his long neck out over the rail, reaching to pull a twist of hay free from the compressed flakes. I have to push his nose away with one elbow to give myself room to heave the hay over the fence. Then I climb through, fan the hay out loosely in the manger, and stand for company at his shoulder while he eats. How companionable it is to be with him, to watch his supple muzzle rustle up the wisps of hay, to listen to his deliberate, rhythmic chewing while the sweet fragrance of hay mingles with the horsey smell of his body and the dry and powdered manure underfoot, and the pines sigh and wave overhead, and lend their own pungency to the bouquet. I like the odor of horse manure, which I think smells fresh and not at all like waste. I even like the musty smell of his piss, which after spreading his legs wide fore and aft he lets off in an endless stream, stretching out and shuddering with the effort of expelling it. And if some of it splashes onto my boots, well, it comes from the horse, and so by definition is, as my cousin tells my aunt when caught tramping manure into the house, clean dirt.

Sometimes after a ride I release him back into the corral with a slap on his rump and he tears around the corral, bucking and farting, before he stops at his favorite spot to roll. I laugh at the way he kneels and flops down on one side, then flounders around, his legs waving in the air for leverage as he rolls himself over from side to side, and imitate him when at last he heaves himself to his feet and shakes like a dog, then blows out his breath in a great huff before trotting over to the cast-iron bathtub that serves as a water trough for a long slurping drink. I spend most of my free time up at the corral, brushing him,

combing out his mane and tail, cleaning his feet, sitting on him or just standing next to him, scratching his ears or running my hand down his neck, talking to him while he munches hay or roots in the grain bucket. I marvel at his beauty—even the vet, up one day for a worming, comments on how well-proportioned he is. He is supposed to be an appaloosa, like his sire who is all-over spotted black-and-white, what they call a leopard pattern, but Davey, my horse, didn't spot. There are white hairs here and there throughout his sorrel coat, but you can't see them unless you're up close and think to look.

On sunny summer days the red-gold of him glows as if from within, and I bury my face in his neck to breathe deeply of his burnished warmth. One afternoon I find him lying down drowsing in the sun, and I crawl between the fence rails into the corral to lie down with him. I lay my head on his belly and stretch out my body between his front and back legs, my own legs sticking out like a strange and misshapen third pair. And there I rest, listening to his measured breath and the calm beating of his heart

## September

The trees are changing fast now, thinning out, the underbrush down, revealing mysteries hidden all summer. The lake is another place with new lives. Joe pye weed, goldenrod, purple asters. The wind through drying leaves a sharper rattle. The scalloped oak leaf drifts curled in its spiral dance; acorns pelt the water like hail. Everywhere the woods rustling.

In the shallows near shore a muskrat dives for duckweed, a meager meal after summer's tender growth. A heron, looking pinched and discouraged, plies the water's edge. But the kingfisher, rattling on down the shore, carries on with usual insouciance.

Where in July the water lotus bloom, mist is rising, and the late afternoon sun sends horizontal light into the trees; framed by green pines behind, the sweetgums blaze red and rust, at their feet in grass still lush, an egret stands, white fire.

*See "LOST RIVER," cont on page 4*



“THE SONG”, *from page 1*

Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestors,  
And blessed is your holy name.  
Blessed are you in the temple of your holy glory.  
Blessed are you on the throne of your kingdom.  
Blessed are you who look into the depths  
From your throne upon the cherubim.  
Praiseworthy and glorious forever.

Angels of the lord, bless the Lord.  
You heavens, bless the Lord.  
All you waters above the heavens, bless the Lord.  
All you powers, bless the Lord.  
Sun and moon, bless the Lord.  
Stars of heaven, bless the Lord.  
Praise and exalt him above all forever.

Every shower and dew, bless the Lord.  
All you winds, bless the Lord.  
Fire and heat, bless the Lord.  
Cold and chill, bless the Lord.  
Dew and rain, bless the Lord.  
Frost and chill, bless the Lord.  
Hoarfrost and snow, bless the Lord.  
Nights and days, bless the Lord.  
Light and darkness, bless the Lord.  
Lightnings and clouds, bless the Lord.  
Praise and exalt him above all forever.

Mountains and hills, bless the Lord.  
Everything growing on earth, bless the Lord.  
You springs, bless the Lord.  
Seas and rivers, bless the Lord.  
You sea monsters and all water creatures, bless the Lord.  
All you birds of the air, blessed the Lord.  
All you beasts, wild and tame, bless the Lord.  
Praise and exalt him above all forever.

All you mortals, bless the Lord.  
Israel, bless the Lord.  
Priests of the Lord, bless the Lord.  
Servants of the Lord, bless the Lord.  
Spirits and souls of the just, bless the Lord.  
Holy and humble of heart, blessed the Lord  
Praise and exalt him above all forever.

Thus, as though in four-part harmony, the sopranos of the celestial world, the altos of the world between earth and sky, the tenors of earth and sea and their inhabitants, and finally the bass voices of humanity are called to join a great chorus of blessings to God in gratitude for the blessing of the world. •



“LOST RIVER”, *from page 3*

Spider silk is everywhere over the lake, a mesh shining in the sun as if the invisible web holding the world together were momentarily made visible. I think about the spiders, how they depend on a slim, strong line of silk, giving themselves over to chance and the wind, their courage and their faith.

**Prince William Sound, Alaska**

High mountain ridges, cornices like waves of snow trailing icy spume. The green-blue of the glaciers, their fissures, cracks, slumps; their grinding. Talus slopes above flat grey stones on moraine beaches. Milky streams drain into a green sea, and the calving glacier booms. The outer face falls, and the newly freed ice fans out in its own wake, driven by its force downward and the wind off the glacier.

In the kayak I talk with the water, and the water with ice and air and light, and they with the land, its contours and vegetation.

This necessary line of connection.

A seal crosses the bay alongside me underwater, and when I slow to rest, bobs up at the bow to see who I am. Hello, I whisper, Hello.

Together we ride the running tide, its deep and hidden currents. •



# POETRY

## Birth Vigil

By Ruth Saxey-Reese



When the facts run out, we nest watchers crave opinions.  
The chat feed stalls, scrolls, stalls again,  
our speculations more satisfying than fresh sunfish:

why the fifth eggshell is dented,  
whether air is leaking into the perfect orb,  
where the quiet mother went at dusk.  
Someone said he saw the great horned owl  
attack last night with spectacles of doom,  
or maybe nothing but soft swoop.

We are up far too late, or much too early,  
and begin tossing poem chunks like wriggling fish,  
an impromptu guessing game of titles, so many birds.  
Our frog song soundtrack plays through tiny speakers.

In Sapsucker Woods, a heron parent  
raises his head heavenward, nuptial plumes trailing.  
Words wing through the air, simultaneous sighs.

## Lines after Grace

By Ruth Saxey-Reese



White dove manifests, startling the willow.  
Awed daughter exhales: the Holy Spirit!  
Never mind the shed feathers, the hungry lice,

In her eager net of fingers is sanctuary  
becalmed, a sprung rhythm heart  
reclaimed from wild skies.

The willow tree becomes shrine,  
reverent sparrows leave daily tokens.  
The spirit rests within, at home.

## Ruptured Pastorate

By Ruth Saxey-Reese

Soft Answer carries oats and apple peelings for the goats,  
water for the calves, millet for the doves.  
Soft Answer leaves the cote door ajar,  
not noticing as she refills the cups.



Wrath noses in, hungry and brusque,  
black fur bristles from his knobby spine.  
Soft Answer slips a finger under his collar,  
bends his force into an arc, back out the door.

Wrath flows silent into the field, the fluent grass.  
The youngest calf lows for Soft Answer.  
The doves coo.  
You don't have to be so slow, Soft Answer.  
But yes, I do.

## Snow Day

By Joanne Draper

In fresh-fallen snow,  
A lone squirrel sits upright,  
A vast frozen whiteness his playground.  
He scampers and frolics around the locust,  
Then climbs it and stops, tail twitching,  
And it seems he's looking at me as if to say,  
"Don't you wish you were out here?  
Don't you wish you were me?"  
And I think how lovely it would be,  
To be a squirrel, or a child,  
For even an hour— to play in the snow,  
Unencumbered by all the grief in the world.



# Horses

By Alison Sainsbury

## Cats, Horses, Me, Us

WITH ANIMALS, WE MUST STRIKE DEALS BETWEEN UTILITY AND AFFECTION. CATS WERE DOMESTICATED FOR THINGS THEY did by nature that we found useful: killing mice. They found useful warmth and food in our ice age caves, but they stayed on by our shared love of soft and playful things. Imagine being the first person in your group to hear purring. What would you not do to hear it again, and feel the small wild cheek gradually lean its weight on your stroking hand?

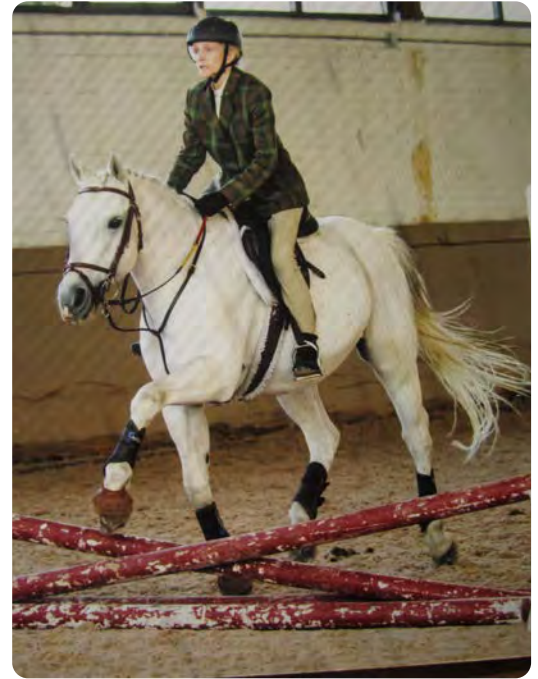
Horses aren't really domestic, but as herd animals wary of prey they are observant and curious, and seek companions, including curious and social humans. Human participation in horses' movement by riding for delight, or using their power, rests on horses' wish to be recognized as individuals with a designated part in a group, who will be fed and not eaten.

Learning to ride, you first find your own balance. But next you must give balance to the horse, by the way you sit and signal. Balance beyond what a purely wild life affords, asking for exercises on both left and right sides, for gait changes and turns, that strengthen muscles and promote agility. And all this training, of horse and rider, depends on relationship: recognizing an individual's talents and doubts, and, in return for sitting on him and cantering over jumps, befriending the animal with respect, reliability, and carrots in your pocket. And a well-trained, well-ridden horse gives us much in return: they'll gallop when they're tired, jump when they're hot, stop when you're unbalanced, and decide to maybe not nip your behind today.

Cats and horses recognize our individual smells and voices. They memorize our routines, learn our names for them, look into our eyes, and recognize faces. If they are aggressive, but see us lower, even close, our eyes, and turn away into the stance of our 'beta' to their 'alpha,' they relent. Their manipulation of us amounts to scheming – yet nothing's more true than my cat's love for her giant can-opener.

### What makes these relationships right?

One learns patience, attentiveness, and empathy. My mother used to say, "When I'm dying, take me to the vet" – the physician who cares for someone who cannot talk to him, and doesn't want to.



They remind us to live to the moment. They don't use

more than they need, or need more than is good for them. Not usually. Their pleasures arise from the needful. A horse just washed rolls with zest in the dirt, to shed the soap smell and restore his own scent. When a cat settles down to a saucer, grateful without thinking she should be, we see the devoutness of her eating.

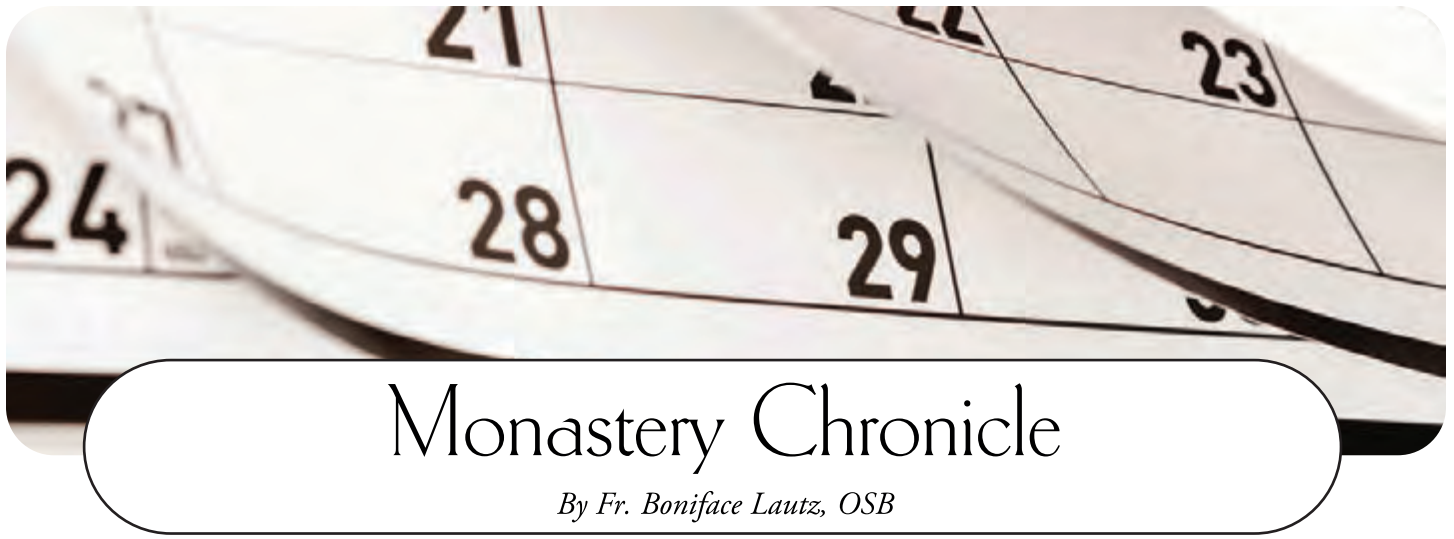
One evening my cat Buddy and I laid down at the same time under the same tree in the yard, about four feet apart. I looked at the changing sky colors, the patterns of the leaves. Buddy looked at things I don't know. We spent some while out there. And we both rose to go into the house at the same moment, without conscious communication. We were in touch with the turning of the earth. I had this because I followed him to the maple tree.

They show the very form of life, with no test of beauty, intelligence, usefulness, or being in a good mood. Noah took all kinds into the ark, not just the cute ones.

They live well by living in their nature. A cat or horse does not know it is good, but is happy when it is loved, leaving to God to pronounce it "good." They remind humans that it's right to like being alive, and expect us to help them like it. They bring us a pleasure key for civilized beings: the pleasure of bringing up a companion to whom we need teach no morality. Absent that, what knowledge of Life for its own sake emerges from relationships based on neither virtue or use, but on love and pleasure? How far, indeed, do real use and virtue approach authentic pleasure and love? How is Civilization part of Nature? What the animal and I want from each other begins to answer that question.

Adam may have named them to organize his knowledge and complete their creation, but soon learned that when he named them, he recognized them, and entered a new, or a very old, relationship. •





# Monastery Chronicle

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

## DECEMBER 2021

The top story of 2021 is the coming of the Missionary Servants of the Word. Since their arrival in September, they have become an integral part of life here at the monastery. So far, for 2022, the top story is the weather. We're getting a lot of snow, a welcome and much needed gift. Drifting snow and icy roads have kept some of our lay staff away. The heating system in the guest room area has needed some professional attention. John Wasko has been busy on the large snow blower, and the Marshalls have helped out. The MSP's have cleared walks and uncovered cars. Mail and grocery delivery systems keep going thanks to their hardy personnel. We're now getting the daily paper delivered in the mail.

Covid-19 continues to cast its spell. Our area has some resistance to vaccination. We've all been "boosted" and, so far, are free from the virus. We've gotten some self testing kits and the results have all been negative to this point.

Our Christmas liturgy was different this year. We had decided to have Mass on Christmas morning, rather than the night before. Our reduced numbers and advanced ages made that a good choice. We did have the Office of Vigils on Christmas Eve. The MSP's had a Mass at 7:00 PM Christmas Eve. They joined us for Mass on Christmas morning.

With LuAnn's help, the MSP's prepared a great dinner for Christmas. One unique dish (for us Anglos) was home-made tamales. A great addition! Some of us

finished the day with a Christmas movie on the large screen in the conference room.

## JANUARY 2022

Our New Year's schedule was packed because the solemnity of Mary and the Epiphany occurred on successive days. We celebrated them with the MSPs.

Our friend Chuck Mitani died that same weekend. His ties with the Marshall family brought him into our orbit. He visited us each Sunday and was interested in our welfare and helped out when he could.

The heating system in the north section needed repair, but parts were not to be available 'til February, so we heated the area with space heaters. It has been weeks since the temperature went above 32 degrees.

MSP priests from around the United States joined their superior from Mexico, Fr. Moises, for a meeting here January 10-14. Several new lay MSPs have joined us. The MSPs have had several other gatherings here in January.

On January 21, in the early morning, there was a power outage, but it did not cause much inconvenience, other than requiring us to reset our clocks.

On January 31, we held our annual corporation meeting. Our business manager gave a clear report. By closing down the retreat center in 2021, Covid-19 bit into our income, but not drastically.

## FEBRUARY 2022

The Feast of the Presentation began with the blessing of candles for the year.

Br. Sylvester and Fr. Boniface were given prescriptions for physical therapy and some exercises to do. John Wasko is making a raised exercise mat for those of us who have a hard time getting up from the floor. He has also installed a handrail on the stairs into the chapel, and a grab bar in Fr. Boniface's shower.

We have a new hot water tank, one that doesn't leak.

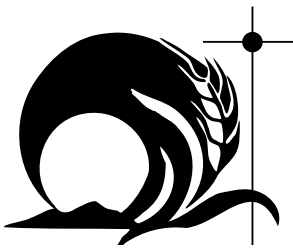
The MSP weekend retreats in Spanish have had good participation. The MSPs are having Mass and adoration on Thursday evenings in Spanish for Catholics from our local area.

The weather has stayed below freezing most of the month, though there have been days of welcome sunshine. The grass is starting to appear over the septic line in the south lawn and the temperature did rise to 42 degrees one day. We need more precipitation.

Br. Selby and Fr. Boniface had birthdays on the 6th and 9th respectively. Sausage and German chocolate cake were on the menu for the 9th. Yum.

On the 19th, Fr. Hugh met with the Oblates in Boise and reported a good turn out. The local Oblates meet here. He meets on Zoom with those in Idaho Falls and Pocatello on the second Friday and Saturday of each month respectively, and has another Zoom meeting for Oblates farther away on the third Sunday of the month at 1:00 pm.

In March, Abbot Peter from Mt. Angel will give the retreats to Oblates (4-6) and the community (6-11).•



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## *Biographies of Contributors*

**Jane Castelan Buccola** ([janecastelanbuccola.com](http://janecastelanbuccola.com)), is a member of Lunaria Gallery, Silverton, OR. She has been painting in pastel, oil, and acrylic for more than 50 years. (paintings of Ana and Toby)

**Joanne Draper**, an oblate of the monastery, teaches English at the College of Southern Idaho and hosts knitting retreats. (photo of baby owl)

**Cathy Feiss** is a studio ceramic artist working in San Francisco, CA. She earned a master of fine arts degree from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Her sculptural works are shown at galleries and exhibits in the Bay area. (ceramic mugs with whale, owl, and chicken)

**Hugh Feiss, O.S.B.**, is editor of Desert Chronicle (photo of snow).

**Fr. Boniface Lautz, O.S.B.** is the prior of the monastery.

**Ellen Martin** is a retired English professor who divides her time between Detroit and New York. (horse photos).

**Alison Sainsbury** was born, bred, and educated in the western U.S. Her contributions are excerpted from her memoir *Lost River*, a finalist for the 2010 Katharine Bakeless Nason Award.

**Ruth Saxey-Reese** teaches writing and literature courses at Boise State University and Northwest Nazarene University. Her poems, essays, and reviews have appeared in *Chiron Review*, *Calyx*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Boise Weekly*, *Rattle*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *America Magazine*.

**Dan Terkla** is emeritus professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, IL, and an expert on medieval maps. (photo of squirrel).



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