

# “Burning Balance”

- in the style of Dean Koontz

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## Introduction

This writing exercise was completed for the April 2015 *Inspirations Writers' Group* meeting – the challenge was to go to page 120, line 8 of your favourite book, copy that line out and then pick up the writing from there.

I picked up the opening line below from Dean Koontz' *Brother Odd*, not my favourite book, but certainly one of my favourites. Having read the line I decided to proceed with a blend of the style that Koontz used for *Brother Odd* and the simple innocence that Walter Miller Jr ascribes to Brother Francis Gerard in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

This piece mostly achieved the effect I was seeking but it contains an error. I wanted to go back to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century period of Catholic Inquisition and *auto-da-fé*, including the punishment of death by burning. The vision I had was of the world-wise *Brother Odd* carefully poking the Inquisition in the eye, with a simultaneous mockery and reinforcing mockery coming from the spirit of *Elvis Presley* who features in Koontz's book. The error is, of course, that Elvis would not have lived in that era, and Brother Odd would certainly have had no knowledge of the films that he had starred in. Such are the mistakes that happen when completing homework at midnight, the day before the meeting!

However, the overall tone of the piece *did* achieve the effect I was seeking, and I am not too bothered by the mistake to share it here.

One small confession: the lines about insolence below, where Brother Odds says “I am sure I would succeed if I tried” are drawn from the ‘Yes, Minister’ episode entitled *The Writing on the Wall*:

Sir Humphrey: Bernard, are you trying to be impertinent?

Bernard: Oh no, I'm sure I would succeed if I tried.

The credit for that humour belongs to Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn; it makes me laugh every time I watch this episode!

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## “Burning Balance” – by Lee Russell

In the closed world of a monastery, where deviations from routine are rare, the disturbing events of the morning ought to have been the first subject of which we spoke. Abbot Gerard's question was strangely tangential to the smell of roast flesh wafting through the open window of his cell:

“In confession, Abbott Bernard told me that you see the spirits of the dead, Brother Odd.”

I remained silent. So did the ghost of Elvis Presley who was dressed as Clint Reno in *Love Me Tender* and brandishing a gun at the Abbot. Elvis is often near me. Sometimes, when he thinks I'm not watching, I see sadness in his face. He knows he should move on but something seems to hold him back. When I tell him that it is alright and he doesn't need to stay any more he simply shrugs and carries on playing the fool.

“You do not answer?”

Ignoring Elvis' antics and maintaining a bland expression I reply with a clear voice, "Forgive me, My Lord Abbott; I did not recognise a question and silence is a virtue at times like these."

His eyes narrowed and I felt the sharp point of his suspicion probing me, weighing me in his scales of faith and heresy.

"What did you think of Abbot Bernard?"

"I thought he burnt with dignity, although the fire must have been painful."

Abbot Gerard banged his fist on the table: "That is not what I meant!"

"I am sorry, My Lord. I am a humble man and misunderstood your question. I thought you were questioning my faith."

"Should I?"

"No, My Lord, My faith was reassured when he died so quietly. He must have been a pious man to have been received so lovingly into God's arms."

My heart pounded as he stared at me, his chin set in firm displeasure.

"Perhaps you seek to taunt me, Brother Odd? Are you trying to be insolent?"

I crossed my hands over my heart: "Oh, no my Lord! I am sure I would succeed if I tried."

Behind him Elvis doubled over in wild laughter.

"I don't know what to do about you yet. Our Holy Father in Rome has himself said that at times he has seen spirits of the dead and comforted them as they wait leave our world. Are you claiming to be as blessed as the Pope?"

I met his gaze serenely: "It is not a blessing for me, My Lord. These poor souls often suffered terrible deaths that they now wear in hideous detail. It hurts me to see their suffering."

Abbot Gerard shook his head and sighed. "On one side the fire of heresy burns brightly for your soul, Brother Odd. On the other the flame of purity may have given you a rare gift. We must try to see which it is. We will talk again, but you can go for now."

I made the proper obeisance before leaving him. As I left Elvis was miming playing a fish from *Follow That Dream*. He knows I think that is his best film and it always makes me laugh.