

Poems from *The Light's Beloved: Poems of Mary in Art*

Mary Ponders the Nature of Free Will

after *Madonna with Child* by Fra Filippo Lippi

Your hands know nothing
but tenderness, yet your eyes
slide away from the child
on your lap picking each bead
of blood from the pomegranate
resting in your palm.

Brows arch above your hooded eyes
like wings that would fly
to another story. Old eyes,
these, in such a lineless face.
Eyes that know what's going on
behind your back, behind the whirring
blade of your halo.

It's like a little factory back there:
Reach back and up and you can almost
touch your mother propped against
her pillows after childbirth,
handing your swaddled body to a servant,
her fingers reluctant to leave
the blonde fur of your cheek,
as though they fear the fate
they give you to.

A few steps farther back and up,
she greets your father, pulls him
upstairs through the doorway
of the room where she'll conceive you.

Do you wonder, my dear,
when the angel came to your door
that ordinary morning, if, eons before,
he had squinted through the keyhole
of this split-level story, glimpsing
this trinity of scenes?

Were you already seated

in the foreground of this tondo
before he knelt, wings throbbing
in the charged air between you?
Before he called you lucky girl
and reached into the perfect, pressed
folds of his robe to release the white bird?
Pages and pages before you whispered,
Let it be so.

Down-Home Annunciation

from Julie Vivas's illustrations in *The Nativity*

Girl, I can't believe you don't look up
as the falling angel bounces and crashes
through the branches of the apple tree
in your backyard, shrieking, *Hai-ai-ai-ai-ail*,
Mary, the Lord is with thee.

You're hanging out the faded rainbow of your laundry,
hens gossiping and pecking near your slippers,
and, for a moment, when he's hit earth, you mistake
the sunrise tatters of his wings for a dropped nightgown.
Then they flutter and he rises from beneath them,
starts his spiel—*Blessed art thou*, he says,
wagging his shaggy eyebrows, *among women*—
pretty close to lines you've heard before
from all the guys who think they are God's gift.

Still, something in his unlaced boots, his not
quite handsome grin, makes you invite him in
for coffee, even though the trailer's kitchen
barely holds the watercolor wings
that, like a hyper hound, won't settle down,
that shimmer with a light that looks like wind.

You've never been the easy kind, but by the time
you've hit the grounds at the bottom of your mug,
even though you still don't know his name
or why you are the winner of the sweepstakes,
you've bought the story anyway—
lock, stock and barrel-sized belly.

Madonna of the Wheat

from the painting by Wislawa Kwiatkowska

I like Jesus better
when he's a helpless baby in your arms,
not this miniature dandy
in a red dress trimmed in gold,
arms outstretched as though
he would fly from you already.

Or does he extend his arms to bless
the field mice poised impossibly
on strands of golden wheat, front feet
waving hosannas, in this frame
where rodents replace angels?

Or he is a tiny host
spreading his arms in welcome,
bidding us partake of sheaves
climbing the sky, weaving
a veil between the dead and living.

Your russet hair reaches down
to enclose his halo. Your fingers
meeting at his waist are folded wings,
are praying. You must know
there is a seed ticking within him,
that there will be a harvest
and a grinding.

With My Mother in the Garden

from the Polish Madonna oil paintings of Wislawa Kwiatkowska

Though you weren't into Mary,
you'd love these woodsy princesses
with long hair like your daughters'
when we were still your girls.
Whom do these girls belong to
with their peacock feather dresses,
cranberry-studded crowns,
bare feet even in winter?

To women like us, of course,
whose gardens are their chapels,
who pilgrimage to mountains and forests.
Who'd rather visit, like these virgins,
oak trees and magpies, foxes
and badgers, red squirrels leaping
from grapevines, angel faces
beaming from stained glass
panes of butterfly wings.

Mary's train is an entourage
of deer and bear and cougar,
and a flurry of herons, finches,
sparrows rises from the breeze
of her cape as she makes her way
between chrysanthemum and lily—
the simultaneous bursting
forth of seasons—in a garden
eternity has never fled.

It's the kind of place where
I'm always looking for you, sure
when you appear to one of us,
it will be where fur and petals,
wings and leaves are
always weaving this world
from the next one.

Van Gogh's *Pieta*

“In a picture I want to say something comforting.” (Van Gogh)

More *pas de deux* than *pieta*,
they hold the pose
ancient as the repertoire
of son and mother.

Limp as any fish, he flops
into the waiting blue
waves of her raiment,
his chest green, gold,
cerise—a rippled sunset.

The sad part is how far
he is beyond her comfort.
Even if he could feel
the cool cave of her body,
dip his hand into the tonic
of her sorrow, the punctured
palm would come up empty.

I came to the exhibit expecting
the dark shudder of crows' wings,
an orange sun that shows no mercy,
an indigo so deep I could stop seeing
my own grown son's face twisted
in the turbulence I drown in.

All I want to do now
is fall back into the arms
of a child's faith, let myself
be lulled past the horizon
by a sunset so beautiful
it must be true.

Mary-Persephone

from the oil painting *So Human* by Wislawa Kwiatkowska

The young girl wears blonde braids,
a halo golden as a new straw bonnet
and a dress etched in blue violets

to rival hollyhocks and roses
closing in around her
as she passes.

It must be almost nighttime,
for stars arc above her head, drawing
moths from hiding places in the forest.

She grips white lilies in one hand—
a torch or shield or offering
should she come to need one.

She doesn't guess their meaning,
nor does she hear the foxgloves—
so many throats of warning:

Not yet, not yet. She reaches
back to pet her lamb for comfort.
But where is this girl's mother?

Can't she see her daughter's sandals
hesitating on this path, almost
as though she knows
what's waiting for her?

Did she plait these morning glories
as a frame to guard this moment?
As if there ever lived a girl
who didn't step right through
her mother's border to the future.

Mary, After the Angel

from *Transformations: Looking to the Future with Dove*,
egg tempera on panel, 10 X 8 inches, by Carol Mothner

What has he left her
but this puzzled profile,
these arms wooden

with wonder, this window
that holds neither
moon nor star,

this dove she pulls
into her girlish midriff,
hands crossed like waiting

wings across its breast,
cradling the fierce
pulse of the future.

Our Lady of the Cudgel

from the painting *Santa Maria of the Relief* by Ignoto Fiorentino

In another life she would have been
the pretty school marm all the boys
have crushes on, used to charming
little devils into cherubs.

But there's always one who won't
be sweet-talked, one she spots
from the beginning: his reptile wings
and canines from hell dead giveaways.
Like this little wolfman clawing at her
other charges with a poker.

Who'd guess the little lady'd
pack a cudgel? Don't let the prim
blond ringlets fool you. She's no lily,
no shrieking female counting on God's
riding in like John Wayne to save her.

Cape flung back, arm raised, you'd better
believe she means business, mister.
Yet it's a graceful business, even
as she fixes to give him a good whack—
more like grim ballet than righteous rage.

Can that be pleasure staining
her pursed lips? Maybe this ruffian,
whose braided tail drags between his legs,
is doing her a favor. How often does she
get to break out of her halo, kick up
a little dust? How easy can it be
to keep on being everybody's darling?

Mary Visits Her Cousin Elizabeth

from the Native American icon painting by Father John Giuliani

Gabriel may have had the patter
and the courtier get-up, but
if there's a love story in this gospel,
surely it is here—in these braided
women wrapped in blankets, holding
one another before a backdrop
of cloud bellies nearly as full
of promise as theirs.

Mary's arms support her older cousin's
stooped back and shoulders. Elizabeth's
hand lights like a brown dove on scarlet
stripes running down Mary's belly,
while her other palm reaches up
to cup the younger woman's cheek.

Why are we given this image
of these two, belly to belly—
knowing what they know of God
and what's to come via the wisdom
of the body—when it isn't central
to the bigger picture: divine plan
meets willing human heart?

Overhead their gold orbs converge
into a heart-shaped sun, as though
two women might be needed, after all,
in telling the fullness of God's love.
Perhaps they stand here not only as mothers
of God and his prophet, but also as mirrors,
magnifiers of each other's stories.