

# Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

November 12, 2018

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



## *Happy Ideas*

*I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel  
to a kitchen stool and watch it turn.*

—Duchamp

I had the happy idea to suspend some blue globes in the air  
and watch them pop.

I had the happy idea to put my little copper horse on the shelf so we could stare at each other  
all evening.

I had the happy idea to create a void in myself.

Then to call it natural.

Then to call it supernatural.

I had the happy idea to wrap a blue scarf around my head and spin.

I had the happy idea that somewhere a child was being born who was nothing like Helen or  
Jesus except in the sense of changing everything.

I had the happy idea that someday I would find both pleasure and punishment, that I would  
know them and feel them,

and that, until I did, it would be almost as good to pretend.

I had the happy idea to call myself happy.

I had the happy idea that the dog digging a hole in the yard in the twilight had his nose deep in  
mold-life.

I had the happy idea that what I do not understand is more real than what I do,

and then the happier idea to buckle myself

into two blue velvet shoes.

I had the happy idea to polish the reflecting glass and say

hello to my own blue soul. *Hello, blue soul. Hello.*

It was my happiest idea.

Mary Szybist<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Happy Ideas" by Mary Szybist from *Incarnadine*, Graywolf Press. Used by permission.

### ✂ Reflections

Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), the French-American artist associated with Dadaism and conceptual art, is often credited (along with Picasso) for playing a primary role in revolutionizing twentieth and twenty-first century art. Famous for his Readymades—art made from manufactured objects, notably “Fountain” (a urinal) and “In Advance of the Broken Arm” (a snow shovel)—“Bicycle Wheel” was the very first of Duchamp’s creations of this kind. Of its inception, he said in an interview, “It had more to do with the idea of *chance*. In a way, it was simply letting things go by themselves...To set the wheel turning was very soothing, very comforting, a sort of opening of avenues on other things than material life of every day.”<sup>2</sup> The poet Mary Szybist borrows Duchamp’s notion and creates a “happy” litany, marked by the repetition of “blue” (globes, scarf, shoes, soul) and by the curious tightening and loosening of emotional tension: the speaker is as happy to spin around in a blue scarf as to ponder the existential importance of Jesus.

Szybist’s poem seems to me as simple and as complicated as happiness itself; if Duchamp’s work asserts that choice and chance are creative acts and that what is art is defined by the artist, then Szybist’s work is an inspired extension, taking us deeper into that conceptual conundrum. Of course, context of this nature offers a rich backdrop for the poem but is certainly not necessary for enjoying it; in fact, I often have the happy idea to read poems for pleasure and pleasure alone!

“Happy Ideas” is part of Szybist’s award-winning collection *Incarnadine*, comprised of poems focused on the Annunciation (the Christian celebration of Gabriel’s announcement to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive and bear the Son of God). Raised Roman Catholic, she contemplates that divine encounter as a way of exploring other intimate moments between, in her words, “the human and ‘the other’—something outside of human experience...” The National Book Award judges called *Incarnadine* “a religious book for nonbelievers” and, upon receiving the award, Szybist said, “There’s plenty that poetry cannot do, but the miracle, of course, is how much it can do, how much it does do.”<sup>3</sup>

In this case, the poem not only engages in a dialogue with Duchamp that transcends time and space, but it inspires a dialogue with the self: the “happiest idea,” after all, is that which acknowledges one’s own inner life—the inner mystery and inner joy—if only to say, ever briefly, *hello to me and all that makes me. I, too, am a work of art*. And that, indeed, is a happy idea.

### ✂ About the Poet

**Mary Szybist** is the author of two collections of poems, *Granted* (2003), a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Incarnadine* (2013), which won the National Book Award for Poetry. With degrees from both the University of Virginia and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she teaches at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, and is on faculty for the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers.



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<sup>2</sup> “Readymades, Found Objects, and Assemblages,” <http://facweb.cs.depaul.edu/sgrais/readymades.htm>

<sup>3</sup> “A World Beyond the Glass: An Interview with Mary Szybist,” in the Paris Review, [theparisreview.org](http://theparisreview.org)