

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



Annunciation

Even if I don't see it again—nor ever feel it
I know it is—and that if once it hailed me
it ever does—
And so it is myself I want to turn in that direction
not as towards a place, but it was a tilting
within myself,
as one turns a mirror to flash the light to where
it isn't—I was blinded like that—and swam
in what shone at me
only able to endure it by being no one and so
specifically myself I thought I'd die
from being loved like that.

Marie Howe¹

✧ Reflections

As we prepare to enter into Advent, a new year in the Christian calendar that marks a season of expectation and hope, we recall the story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, in which he says to her that she will conceive and mother the Son of God. Advent's story about Mary's pregnancy parallels a more metaphoric pregnancy in which all of us are invited to think about what is yet to be, about what might be coming to life, about what is difficult to imagine but that we might be helping to birth.

This particular poem appears in a section of Howe's collection titled "Poems from the Life of Mary," in which all are written in the voice of the Holy Mother. Careful attention to good art rewards us in prismatic ways: we consider Mary, yes, but we also consider our own selves in light of her, perhaps even as resemblances of her. This is a poem of intimacy and of silence, the self in dialogue with the soul; and so much of what the poem is about is concerned not only with what is not said, but with what *cannot* be said—an irony, to be sure, as "annunciation" means "announcement."

Howe's poem depends upon an ambiguous "it"—there are five in the first three lines alone—and as readers we are asked to consider what "it" might be. "It" remains unidentified but is something this speaker *knows*: "Even if I don't see it again—nor ever feel it / I know it

¹ "Annunciation" by Marie Howe from *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, W. W. Norton. Used by permission.

is.” And later we read that Mary is “only able to endure it by being no one and so / specifically myself...” I am led to wonder about the thing Mary must endure and how something can be at once inexpressible and also supremely knowable. A divine *it*, perhaps.

For each of us, it is worth considering those moments where we have realized—even if it means we are stunned, fearful, or bewildered by the news—that life from this moment on is forever changed. Each day, each moment, is a particular pregnancy, a weight of meaning and of possibility, and in the balance is our uncertainty and doubt as well as our optimism and faith.

Whether this poem is one of anxiety, ecstasy, transformation, or revelation, it marks a moment in time where the speaker—Mary, in this case—becomes aware that her life is now changed. It speaks not only to women and to mothers, but to all people who have been faced with a reality that the world is a transformed place, that their lives are, at a moment’s notice, far different from what they had imagined and that we each are bearers of Mary’s news, each witnesses to divine revelation and announcement.

✞ About the poet

Marie Howe currently serves on the writing faculties at Sarah Lawrence College, New York University, and Columbia University. She is the author of several collections of poetry and co-editor of the essay anthology *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic*. She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Academy of American Poets. She served as Poet Laureate of the state of New York from 2012 to 2014.



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by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
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