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An Annunciation for a Secular Age: The Struggle for Faith
in Mary Szybist's *Incarnadine*

Devin Morgan Theurer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

An Annunciation for a Secular Age: The Struggle for Faith in Mary Szybist's *Incarnadine*

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Mary Szybist's 2013 collection, *Incarnadine*, uses the Annunciation as a foundational narrative through which to examine the implications of faith and having a relationship with God. Transforming this pivotal Biblical event through metaphor, intertextuality, and different points of view, Szybist showcases what Charles Taylor terms "fragilization" of faith, or the contestable and dubious position of believing among plurality of belief and nonbelief. By repeatedly shifting the framing of the Annunciation, Szybist creates several different visions of who God is. Rather than reinterpreting the Annunciation with a new dictum on exactly who God is and what it means to believe in Him, she plays with her own definition of God, allowing readers to do the same, and thus work through "fragilization" and find a faith that fits them.

Keywords: Mary Szybist, Charles Taylor, Michel de Certeau, Mary, God, Annunciation, religion, faith, secular, space

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An Annunciation for a Secular Age: The Struggle for Faith in Mary Szybist's *Incarnadine*

The long-awaited follow to her debut collection, Mary Szybist's National Book Award-winning *Incarnadine* is a collection of religious poetry fraught with all the complications of contemporary society. As a collection of devotional poetry still searching for what devotion means, the poems articulate the tension between love and loss, the struggle for faith in a world of doubt, and perhaps even the need to doubt one's heritage of faith. The Biblical Annunciation—the event when Gabriel, the angel, delivers the message to Mary that she will conceive and be the mother of Jesus Christ—serves as the central focus of Szybist's collection, which tells of the event from different perspectives, using metaphors of plants and animals, and alluding to classic literature and political discourse.

In awarding Mary Szybist the National Book Award for Poetry, the judges called it “a religious book for nonbelievers, or a book of necessary doubt for the faithful” (National Book Foundation). Many of the book reviews of *Incarnadine* focus on the tension between faith and doubt. Craig Morgan Teicher, in the *Georgia Review* says, “These are poems not of faith lost but of faith constantly struggled for. At every turn, the speaker wants to believe, but doubts—and so attempts to set up situations in which faith might come more easily,” (757) while the review in *Publisher's Weekly* perceives that these poems “discover god in all sorts of unlikely places” (44). In the *Anglican Theology Review*, Henry Hart expresses a similar sentiment about the collection: “Her poems attempt to redirect our vision to the sublime source of the Creation and Incarnation” (371).

However, to say within these poems “the speaker wants to believe, but doubts” or even that these “poems attempt to redirect our vision” underrepresents the nuance of spirituality Szybist displays. The problem with this commentary owes more to umbrella terms like

“believe,” “faith,” and “doubt,” than to any misperception of Szybist’s writing. Yes, in this collection the speaker yearns for faith. But the focus of that speaker’s faith constantly changes. Likewise, the speaker also endeavors to disavow a traditional form of faith. And similarly, the nature and limits of that doubt are unclear. This duality—simultaneously revering and reviling God in varying ways—reflects more accurately the condition of how to believe or not today.

To address these questions and others, I will compare the Annunciation as found in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible (the version Szybist employs in the notes of *Incarnadine*) with the various retellings or framings of the Annunciation Szybist portrays, highlighting how the shift in physical space between characters, objects, animals, etc. create shifts in what it means to believe, exposing more possibilities of believing. I will show in these comparisons the broad range of attitudes that one can have toward God while still maintaining a belief in divinity, but more specifically I will elucidate how Szybist’s collection tries to understand the Virgin Mary’s faith. I will then build from that discussion of Mary’s faith to detail how space between characters and objects is used in the poems with a contemporary setting, drawing out the nature of contemporary belief in God, what Charles Taylor states “is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (3), and the implications of confronting old traditions of faith.

In Szybist’s collection, two poems bookend this spectrum to establish the positive and negative limits of God’s influence in Mary’s life: “Annunciation (from the grass beneath them)” and “Annunciation as Right Whale and Kelp Gulls.” These two representations of the Annunciation are respectively the first and last Annunciation poems in the collection.

The first poem, “Annunciation (from the grass beneath them),” introduces the reader to the implications surrounding Gabriel’s message to Mary. As the title suggests, blades of grass

converse just below Gabriel's feet about the otherworldly figure coming to this young girl. In an unusual turn, the expectedly inanimate blades brim with wonder at this strange visitor. Though readers know it is Gabriel they gape at, the blades refer to him as only "it" signifying the absolute unfamiliarity with angels, and presumably all things heavenly and divine. The blades ask five questions: "how many moments did it hover before we felt / it was nothing else" (1-2), "what did you feel when it was almost upon us" (7), "how cool would you say it was" (11), "how itchy the air" (13), and "didn't you feel softened" (17). Each question refers to some kind of feeling—the blades trying to comprehend what is to them a vague, seemingly indescribable shift to the world as they know it, this thing which is "like nothing else" causing such a bizarre feeling as making the air "itchy," giving the blades that tingling feeling of awe. Each question grows a bit more specific, from first knowing it is unique to describing the air around them, to giving a name to the feeling within them: "softened." The longer the blades of grass spend with the unknown figure, the more the grass internalizes the experience. The blades come to acknowledge this as a powerful figure as their commentary finishes with "no, not even its flickering trembled" (18). The strange feeling holds steady as the unearthly glow emanating from Gabriel.

While shifting the perspective of the Annunciation from the omniscient third-person narrative of the Bible to this unusual first person, the experience of the grass by itself is ultimately meaningless. Szybist, however, makes this new point of view striking and profound by juxtaposing the marveling blades with Mary. To the blades, Mary is only a girl, another unknown but familiar figure in the scene. After each question, the blades comment on the girl's actions. And just as each question clarifies the intensity of the blades' questions, the comment on the girl clarifies for the reader Mary's reception to Gabriel's visit. At first "the girl's knees pressed into" (4) the blades of grass—a vague action which could signify humble submission or

overwhelming collapse. The blades ask, “what did you feel when it was almost upon us when / even the shadows her chin made” (7-8), suggesting she fell a bit closer to the ground, her head close enough that her shadow holds defined edges of small body parts like her chin. After falling to the ground, the girl “tilted and lurched” (14) evincing an image of sudden sickness and perhaps vomiting.

These two opposing reactions to Gabriel’s visit work together to portray the varying experiences of interacting with the divine. Though Mary and the grass here interact with Gabriel, it is really a vicarious interaction with God. Gabriel, usually seen in the Annunciation as simply a manifestation of the power of God, “was sent from God” (Luke 1:21) to deliver the message to Mary. In Luke’s version, Gabriel speaks nothing of himself, only of God’s intended actions and the fate of the world according to God’s powers. The question “didn’t you feel softened” (17) recalls the two men travelling on the road to Emmaus who walked with Jesus and did not recognize Him, but still asked “did not our hearts burn within us?” (Luke 24:32). From this Emmaus-like perspective, engaging with God—with someone who seems to exist beyond the bounds of one’s own world—enlivens the individual with little to no implicated expectation following the encounter. Jesus neither expected nor demanded anything of the disciples, but merely walked with them. The same is true of the moment shared between the grass and Gabriel. The grass feels only the awe and power of this figure altering the environment, draws to it, “every spear of us rising,” (5) and “held ourselves tight / when it skimmed just the tips of our blades” (15-16). It is only after this the grass asks, “didn’t you feel softened” (17). The grass knows only that proximity to the figure affects change to the environment, to itself. No apparent consequences, restrictions, or dutiful calls follow. The mere presence of the heavenly—barring

communication, overt action, intention apart from presence—brings unfettered peace and the spectacle of mystical change.

Yet for Mary the moment is fraught with all the baggage, worry, uncertainty of consequences following a visit from an angelic messenger. That the grass “rose up to it” (15) while Mary collapses, even perhaps retching, highlights the severity of Gabriel’s message. According to the narrative in the Gospel of Luke of the King James Version (KJV), Gabriel announces to Mary “Hail, thou art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” (Luke 1:28), after which Mary “was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be” (1:29). Mary’s prior knowledge and belief of the angels and the otherworldly inflects her experience, coupled with Gabriel intentionally coming to her to deliver his message. The uncertainty of the moment, the implications of visitations from the otherworldly erases the high praise of Gabriel’s greeting and fills the scene not with the softening peace experienced by the grass, but an overwhelming concern about what this hovering figure could expect or demand from her. This Annunciation introduces the notion that experiences with God *can* be sweet and sublime, but such an experience hangs on what implications God and humanity both bring to the moment to influence how it can and should be interpreted.

Where “Annunciation (from the grass beneath)” offers an introduction to Szybist’s explorations of faith and the influence of the divine in this collection of poems, “Annunciation as Right Whale and Kelp Gulls” showcases the violence of God and the vulnerability of faith. The epigraph in the poem presents brief facts from BBC News about these animals: “The gulls have learned to feed on the whales. . . . / The proportion of whales attacked annually has / soared from 1% in 1974 to 78% today.” Immediately the poem directs the focus to acts of violence,

specifically learned acts. Such a rapid increase in the rate of attacks likely means the gulls discovered they could feed on the whales with impunity. Referring to the whale as “she,” in light of the Annunciation, signifies Mary in this extended metaphor. Immediately the whale suffers the vicious attack from the gulls, here representing God and His messenger, Gabriel, “diving fast in the sureness of her flesh, / fast into the softness of / her wounds” (1-4). These gulls attack the whale “in their glee” (1) and during the process “give themselves / full to the effort” (5-6). The joyfully ferocious approach the gulls take in feeding on this whale takes another more sinister turn when the speaker asks, “Why wouldn’t such sweetness / be for them? . . . a sweetness prepared for them” (8-9, 17). The speaker seems to suggest that the impunity not only justifies the attacks, but invites them. Similarly, God can take from humanity with impunity, and the Annunciation reflects that. Sending Gabriel with the statement that he will bear and nurture the most important figure in all Christianity, God uses Mary’s body, her life, for His purposes. A young girl upon whom “The Holy Ghost shall come...and the power of the highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). All Mary knows is God (and The Holy Ghost) will impregnate her. God not only determines that Mary will be the mother of Jesus, but also dictates the method and means to her conception. But, just as the whale, there is no recourse of action for Mary, she is just as helpless to keep the more powerful figure(s) at bay.

“Annunciation as Right Whale and Kelp Gulls” deepens the suggestive violence, conveying the gulls’ attacks as targeted on this one whale. Though the epigraph states “The gulls have learned to feed on the whales,” this poem suggest this one whale suffers alone. The gulls “swoop down on her wherever she surfaces” (13) and “take mercy on others and show them the way” (14). This lone whale sees how the gulls guide and aid the whales on their journey,

understanding the gulls may attack, but they also provide a service for the whales. Though for this one whale, she suffers repeated attacks, never left alone, never helped like the others. Exclusion from the other whales indicates this whale exists in what Carl Schmitt defines as the “the state of exception” (5) and God is the sovereign who decides on this state—while the other whales receive guidance, this whale, as an exception, suffers violence. Mary should have no reason to fear God when the Annunciation occurs, but presented as gulls coming to a right whale, God acts with divine malevolence, an invasion. The mercy and guidance occurring for others adjacent justifies the violence. The faithful individual must consider the allowances he/she will make for God if, just as the whale must breathe to survive, he/she needs God in order to find salvation. Rather than condemning God for His violence, “Right Whale and Kelp Gulls” raises questions of the limits of power God can and should use and still act for the salvation of humankind.

The strong differences of interpreting an experience with God displayed by these bookending poems point to Charles Taylor’s argument of the state of secularism, what he defines as not simply the absence of God, but “a spiritual supernova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane” (300). The rise of pluralism has undermined the foundational paradigms of many religions and denominations. Dogma from any one religion no longer behaves as the corrective lens for an entire societal worldview, moving away from a time when religions simply defined faith, belief, and doubt as yes-or-no, all-or-nothing principles. The possibilities splay out in front of each individual, a seemingly endless array of ways to believe in God.

Szybist’s poems also provide access to another consequence of the new state of faith and belief. Szybist’s poems exhibit what Taylor calls a “fragilization” (304) effect alongside the liberation. Fragilization, as explained by James Smith, occurs when “in the face of different

options, where people who lead ‘normal’ lives do not share my faith (and perhaps believe something very different), my own faith commitment becomes fragile—put into question, dubitable” (141). These bookend poems, as well as the breadth of *Incarnadine*, tries to come to terms with different ways of believing and what it means to believe, each poem effusing a complex, fragilized concoction of belief and doubt which punctures each of them.

As faith becomes dubitable in a fragilized state, part of putting that faith into question includes testing the weak points of that faith, particularly in whom one places it. Szybist tests those weak spots, looking further into the dark corners of God’s violence against Mary. Szybist shifts her perspective, using notable figures from American culture. Using the words of Vladimir Nabokov in *Lolita* and Kenneth Starr in *The Starr Report* in a form of found poetry, “Annunciation in *Nabokov and Starr*” displays the difficulties of understanding God through an event like the Annunciation. The source texts immediately conjure images of older men employing their positions of power to use the bodies of younger women. Rather than condemn a God who commands the use of a woman’s body, this poem uses these more contemporary examples of older male predation to raise questions as to why the Annunciation doesn’t disturb audiences who would automatically be upset by Humbert Humbert’s molestation of Lolita or Bill Clinton’s exploitation of a young female intern, Monica Lewinsky. Szybist makes a bold and perhaps heretical comparison to question the acceptable limits of God’s power. If Gabriel had said “*I could not tell you how gentle she was, how calm she was / during her cooperation*” (4-5 original italics) traditional faith could easily interpret such a message as a display of God’s love. God understands how much He asks of Mary, and he is impressed by her willingness to trust Him. But the poem is asking us to reconsider the sexual dynamics of the Annunciation. The narrator’s only actions, “I bent toward her” (6), occurs in “the windowless hallway” (5) exuding

a knowingly clandestine approach because the action is questionable, not above reproach. The Annunciation itself is similarly secretive; Szybist thus challenges the traditional notion of safety and peace when worshipping God, claiming as she did in “Right Whale and Kelp Gulls” that the threat of violence hangs over communion with the divine—a violence here injected with sexual overtones.

Humbert and Clinton both use their power to take from young girls according to their sexual desires. Neither man’s actions would be considered aggravated rape or sexual assault, but rather a result of grooming. Humbert and Clinton both draw in young girls through trusted relationships—Dolores’s mother approving of Humbert and Clinton as president and boss of Lewinsky—to persuade and manipulate them. Drawing on these narratives, “*Nabokov and Starr*” represents the Annunciation as an act of grooming: God uses His trusted position as Heavenly Father to “overshadow” Mary. Could Mary have said no to God irrespective of her feelings toward the Annunciation? At a time in which women are beginning to fight back against such masculine maneuvering, Szybist confronts the fear and fragility as a woman, of exposing oneself to a powerful man. While men who use power to gratify their sexual desires may suffer punishment, no punitive measure keeps God in check. At a time when men’s actions are more carefully scrutinized, when sexual assault is less often dismissed, Szybist expresses the confusion and dismay at believing in a God whose actions escape scrutiny and reprimand.

Similar to the manner in which “Annunciation in *Nabokov and Starr*” is found poetry, the original texts in “Annunciation in Byrd and Bush” revolves around power struggles and violence. The “Byrd and Bush” refers to Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia—in particular, a Senate Floor Speech he delivered February 13, 2003—and President George W. Bush—the texts here are the Address to a Joint Session of Congress, September 20, 2001, and “Remarks by the

President to Coal Miners and Their Families and Their Community” in 2002. Senator Byrd’s remarks were an incendiary contrarian voice against the push toward war with Iraq in Spring 2003, and by extension, George W. Bush. President Bush’s address to Congress followed the September 11 terrorist attacks. Bush delivered the other speech when nine coal miners were rescued after four days trapped underground. While similar in their call for unity and single-mindedness, President Bush’s remarks to the miners and their families contrasts the violent rhetoric of his address to Congress by their words of peace and comfort. Senator Byrd’s remarks challenge President Bush’s actions following the terrorist attacks, questioning the efficacy and value of the continuance of unilateral violence, of expanding violence. Comparing these texts, we can ask ourselves who has the power to resist the violence of the powerful? What are the limits of violence enacted by the powerful?

Szybist uses lines from these speeches to create a dialogue between Mary and Gabriel. The poem displays a conversation between “the president” and a young girl—The president’s words taken from Bush and the girl’s one line taken from Byrd. Similar to the biblical narrative, the young girl hardly speaks while the president speaks in firm declarations and directives. Szybist presents an incisive and direct comparison between a secular framing and a transcendent God: political sovereignty. Humanity comes to understand God in a tangible way through those with power. The poem plays with notion of Gabriel speaking for God saying, “I’d rather the president’s word were merely spoken by / a stranger” (7-8). Gabriel’s appearance is fraught with tension and anxiety, because “*the language of diplomacy is imbued with courtesy*” (3), after which Szybist asks “Who can bear it?” (4). Diplomacy reigns as Gabriel delivers a message using language imbued with courtesy, praising Mary, speaking of her favor before God, and emphasizing the sacred role God calls on her to fulfill. In truth, however, the courtesy masks the

violence of God's plans to appropriate Mary's body to eventually protect humankind from damnation, much as President Bush planned to invade Afghanistan to protect America from future terrorism. As the poem continues to quote President Bush, the language of diplomacy exudes courtesy, failing to conceal the violence which will follow the message. If the stranger Gabriel tells Mary, "*you have a decision to make. Either you rise to this moment or . . .*" (9) and then "*Show uncertainty and the world will drift / toward tragedy*" (18-19), he places upon Mary the guilt of a world drifting toward tragedy, in which evil (terrorism) gains power and evil enacts violence on the world. Such language suggests that violence will be the consequence no matter Mary's decision. If Mary does not suffer the violence God wishes to enact on her, the world will, "drift toward tragedy." This threat of violence is itself a violent act by God. Unlike the sexual violence on display in "*Nabokov and Starr*," this violence is psychological.

With diplomatic language, Gabriel heaps guilt upon guilt to persuade Mary commit to her role. Beyond the direct warnings of violence, Gabriel seeks to soften Mary by telling her "*For this, he says, everybody prayed. / A lot of people*" (25-26), shortly thereafter repeating the intended comforting support "*If I say everybody, I don't know if everybody prayed. / I can tell you, a lot prayed*" (29). God wants this to happen, yes, but so do many people, perhaps even the whole world. While he calmly threatens early on the world hangs in the balance for her decision, he changes his approach right at the end by promising "*I don't need to explain . . . but the highest call of history, / it changes your heart*" (48-51). His soothing statements and warnings echo the interrogations of abusive husbands in the way they hurl accusations of broken families and motherless children and speak of their love for their wives shortly after bruising them. Gabriel's diplomacy masks the manner in which God simply takes from Mary what he wants.

Looking at the Annunciation from various angles must include Mary's response to Gabriel's shocking announcement. In her response, we can see how God takes from Mary and what is at stake for her, that is what is happening to the solidity of Mary's identity as result of this moment? Mary's response is contingent on the new message delivered by Gabriel.

According to the KJV, Gabriel is kind and concerned, representatively showcasing God's love for Mary and His empathy for the massive and terrifying task placed on her. For one who has an undisturbed faith in God, it follows that Mary would respond with the acquiescent "be it unto me according to thy word" after hearing "thou art highly favored of the Lord" and that her immaculately-conceived son "shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of his father David." (Luke 1:28-32). It is a grand prophecy in which Mary has the blessed opportunity to participate, to be an integral player in the redemption of God's chosen people.

Under erasure, Mary hears an entirely different message, one less prophetic and more directive. In the poem, the fragmentary portions remain distanced by enjambments, indentations, and extra spaces. It appears that all the other words—the praise for Mary, the prophecy of Jesus Christ's mission, the assuaging language—are still present, but merely faded or hidden from view. Perhaps the Annunciation happened precisely as Luke recounts in the KJV, and "Annunciation under Erasure" is the event from Mary's point of view. Stunned by the presence of an angelic messenger, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the assignment, Mary can only recall portions of the conversation. Perhaps she did not hear the praise or prophecy, or forgot that she even responded to Gabriel. In the same space, the space both Mary and Gabriel occupy, there are multiple vantages from which to view the event, the retelling in Luke—a third-person limited

view—only one of several. “Under Erasure,” like other poems in the collection, plays with the possibilities of points of view, highlighting how fraught faith can be.

Mary’s fear of her responsibility, her faith, conflicts with the dominion of God’s purposes and plan. A conscious fear may consume Mary’s experience during the Annunciation, affecting how she interprets the experience. What to Gabriel might be considered a joyous event—the delivery of the good news of the gospel and an intimate exchange between God and Mary in which he participates—seems merely large and vacuous to Mary, even frightening. There is more fear than just Mary’s in this poem. This poem raises questions of what one loses to heed divine directives. To follow God, must we all “be / nothing be impossible” (9-10)? Is there such a thing as agency when God can instantaneously alter an individual life? Does identity exist when we can be used without warning for God’s purposes? The erasure in Szybist’s poem not only changes the conversation between Gabriel and Mary but potentially erases some portion of Mary’s identity as well. As the actions, words, and thoughts within this space conflict, God’s actions subsume Mary’s. God’s operations ultimately orient and situate the space between Himself and Mary. While altering the course of human history, this version of the Annunciation presents a certain measure of darkness to the value of sacrifice for salvation. Faith, in its many iterations, wrestles with the relationship between God’s demands and rewards. Salvation may only come as a result of sacrifice according to God’s dictates, but one must still come to terms with how it changes everything that is here and now, all that can be tangibly understood. For Mary, God disrupts her life, changes her life as it is lived day to day as he returns only a promise of “favour” and salvation at a future time. Losing identity, an anchor to existence, weakens the value of a promised salvation which lacks the certainty of evidence.

Szybist shifts the view slightly from violence to vulnerability as devotion in “Annunciation as Fender’s Blue Butterfly with Kincaid’s Lupine.” Fender’s blue butterfly, as the epigraph states, lays its eggs only on “the very rare Kincaid’s lupine” (13). The lifespan of an adult Fender’s blue is only ten days, in which it must not only mate, but find Kincaid’s lupine. Once deposited and hatched, the larva feeds on the flower, survives the winter in the root system, and then in the spring undergoes metamorphosis. From a human’s perspective, the life of a Fender’s blue seems harshly brief and frantic as it chases its own survival as a species. Once placed within the context of an Annunciation poem, the brevity of this butterfly’s existence strikes the reader as potentially similar to the manner in which God—who exists without time and without beginning or end—may view human existence.

To present the Annunciation as the brief and perilous life of Fender’s blue butterfly in its chase for Kincaid’s lupine and thus survival, Szybist’s poem suggests the Annunciation itself centers on survival. In the poem, the speaker, who we assume is Mary given the Annunciation mentioned in the title of the poem, imagines herself as this rare butterfly. “But if I were this thing, / my mind a thousand times smaller than my wings” (1-2) speaks to Mary more as a body than thoughtful woman. Though she is praised, in the end it is her body, capable of bearing a child, that holds the most significance in the Annunciation. If she, like the butterfly, “finally stumbled / into the soft / aqua throats of the blossom” (4-6), if she happened upon the thing that would guarantee her survival, she’d “do the same” and “fasten myself / to the touch of the flower” (9-10). Survival—through mortality and beyond death through salvation—is potentially just as instinctual for Mary as it is for this butterfly. But she prefaces committing like the butterfly by saying in a separate stanza “*if* I lost my hunger / for anything else” (7-8 emphasis added). The stanza break lends itself to a quiet pause, an introspective moment about her

thoughts on life. Mary is young and thoughts of survival—whether in life or beyond it—likely feels distant for her, but *if* the peril of surviving hung all about her mind, then she would “bind myself to this moment” (14) to ensure survival. If acquiescence to God’s directive keeps her demise at bay, then she sacrifices little. She finishes the reflection considering her legacy saying, “what would it matter if I became / just the flutter of a page / in a text someone turns / to examine me in the wrong color?” (16-20). Years, centuries, millennia later people will know this story (how could the story of the mother of Jesus be forgotten?) and they will do exactly what Szybist does: interpret many times over the incident between Mary and Gabriel and God, using it to better understand how God uses them for His greater purposes. But for Mary, it would mean nothing to be examined poorly, incorrectly, because she will have survived.

Though the Biblical narrative intimates that Mary lacked agency in becoming the mother of Jesus Christ, this poem suggests otherwise. Gabriel’s announcement sends Mary down a radically new course of life, and imagining herself as the Fender’s blue butterfly is a means for Mary to feel as if she retains power in this moment. Though it appears that she, like the Fender’s blue, “stumbled / into the soft / aqua throats of the blossoms” (4-6), she is not imprisoned. She decides to “fasten” (9) and “bind” (14) herself to the flower. But for the Biblical Mary, if the boundaries God establishes leads to survival, how do all the other implications about this event matter? If Szybist knew what Mary knew—that is to say if she had an angelic visitor come to her and speak high praise, speaking as if God Himself were speaking to her, calling her to a task which ensures her survival—if we knew what Mary knew, wouldn’t we let our lives play out in just the same way, irrespective of the nature of the event which leads to that survival?

The entirety of this poem, though, rests in the conditional “if.” Five times Mary connects herself to the butterfly with the word “if” preceding her comparison. Each “if” draws a line to the

Fender's blue butterfly, signifying Mary feeling out after this small insect, but failing to feel and *be* as this butterfly is. She wants what the butterfly has. She wants the impulse to "bind" itself to the thing it must. The purpose of an adult Fender's blue butterfly is to find the flower where she can lay her eggs and ensure the continuance of her species. For a human like Mary, her purpose is to worship God and obey Him to receive the grace and redemption necessary for salvation. The butterfly commits to its purpose, but Mary only wishes she could. She does not feel God so acutely that her life is drawn to Him. Called to be the mother of Jesus, she is tasked with being connected to God in a way she does not strongly feel. And so, she examines this rare butterfly to try to find a way to fill within her that which is not yet in her: faith in God and His plan.

Nestled among these various representations of the Annunciation is the poem "Update on Mary." It is not directly an Annunciation poem, but draws them to a contemporary setting. All the variations on the Annunciation give readers access to Taylor's notion of "fragilization" through how Szybist goes about putting her childhood faith into question, showing that it is in fact dubitable. But "Update" opens a window into the *lived* experience of fragilization and how that fragility of faith spreads out and affects numerous aspects of daily life. The title "Update on Mary" plays on Szybist sharing the name "Mary" with the Virgin Mary, evoking a sense of what the Virgin Mary would think and feel if she were alive in 2013. The poem plays out a tension between idealistic yearnings for faith and the disruptions of small, quotidian expectations and distractions. The poem opens "Mary always thinks that as soon as she gets a few more things done and finishes the dishes, she / will open herself to God" (1-2), which gives a general feeling of the entire poem. Mary wants something more than the simple tasks of daily life, but those tasks demand too much of her. Each line is a moment in her day, a brief but urgent task she completes, the tasks punctuated by contemplative pauses in which she thinks of God and faith

and her relation to Him. The prosaic style conveys the everyday tedium of these experiences, commonplace and repetitive. The speaker comments continually about Mary's desire for change, to be and do something different such as she should dress herself: "so each morning she tries / on several combinations of skirts and heels" though she ultimately ends up "retreating to her waterproof boots" (3-4). She settles for an old comfort rather than taking a risk. Though the attempt to take a risk "takes / a long time, so Mary is busy" (4-5). This sense of being busy comforts her, helps her life to "feel orderly" (7). Being busy and feeling orderly indicates to Mary that she maintains control of her life, that "she is not going to die / before she is supposed to die" (7-8), that to die before one is supposed to is to fail to make the right or most meaning out of life. She carries with her a tinge of guilt that her name always conjures "*Holy Virgin! Holy Heavenly Mother!* But Mary knows / she is not any of those things" (11-12). She feels without something, a meaning and purpose like the Virgin Mary possessed after the Annunciation. Losing control and empty hours indicate a hollow life, hollowness being the deepest fear for this Mary.

The fear of hollowness pervades Mary. She "worries about not having enough words in her head" (13), she wonders "if only she could have a child she could carry around like an extra lung, / the emptiness inside her would stop gnawing" (28-29) and so she fills her cupboard with many kinds of tea" (14) and "has too many earrings" (17), thus keeping her life filled. And yet "Mary sometimes closes her eyes and tries to imagine herself as a door swung open" (21). She wants to "open herself to God" she wants the fulfilling comfort of divine belief and guidance, "but it is / easier to imagine pink macaroons" (22). Mary does not simply fear feeling hollow. She fears allowing herself to be hollow enough to make room for God, of acting in a way that would give space within her for faith to make up for menial tasks and things with which she fills

her life, and faith never filling the hollow space. She may fear that filling the emptiness with God will allow Him to exercise violence on her, to use her without her consent, or limit her future like Fender's blue. And so, tea, earrings, macaroons, thick books with solemn titles (25), and watching clouds by moonlight (36) have to suffice to fill her life. They are at least something.

Growing up Catholic, "Update on Mary" is the most direct representation of what it might be like for Szybist to contemplate finding a way to bring back God in her life. On the role of faith in her own life Szybist says, "it is a struggle. I have a hard time distinguishing between faith and hope . . . I am wary of fixed beliefs because they can and sometimes do become 'substitutes for seeing'" (Q&A with Mary Szybist). All of the quotidian *stuff* that Mary fills her life are clearly defined for her. The ease of imagining pink macaroons versus "imagining herself as a door swung open" highlights this fear of what faith can become. A door swung open could allow anything—beautiful, mundane, or even malicious—to come in from the outside and stay. What old traditions or beliefs might come in through the open door if it is swung open? Though she desperately wants to fill the emptiness within her, she clings to the simple and inconsequential things to avoid being filled with something or someone that would haunt her.

Michel de Certeau's theory on "practiced places" can help to illuminate the manner in which physical space—or, for Szybist, the distance and movement between objects and people—gives meaning to the experiences and conflicts in "Annunciation as Fender's Blue Butterfly with Kincaid's Lupine" and "Update on Mary." "Places," to Certeau, are the physical locations occupied by things, such that no two things can occupy the same place. Certeau's term "space" "occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it" (117), meaning one understands a certain space—that is, a terrain and their relation to it as well as its relationship to other spaces—through the intersecting, adjacent, and relative operations of places.

For Certeau, operations are physical movement, speech, and thought—really, anything one can perform which then makes sense of that space. Kincaid’s *Lupine* is just a flower, but the operations such as searching and laying eggs orient that space as what Certeau calls “a practiced place” in which Fender’s Blue butterfly can perpetuate the species. By reflecting on the single-minded nature of Fender’s blue butterfly, Mary changes the practiced place of the Annunciation. Many of the poems convey the Annunciation in a dark, violent hue, but Fender’s blue butterfly helps Mary to distance herself from that violence. The Annunciation itself does not change, but it does not have to be a moment of fragility for Mary. Mary’s new perspective can empower her to feel in control of her destiny, still an agent of her life.

Certeau finishes his definition of space as a practiced place by saying that the effect of these operations “make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities” (117). The operations performed by one operator do not determine the orientation and situation of a certain space for other operators, but numerous operations performed by a variety of operators can create a shared understanding through a sort of social contract, despite conflicts between operations, which is precisely the experience of “fragilization” which Charles Taylor discusses. In society, what was once only a few different operations competing in a given space, none of which really conflicted with how faith was understood, has now become a space in which an almost limitless number of operations influence how one interprets their faith. The greater the number of actions to give meaning to faith as a practiced place the greater the fragilizing effect on that faith. “Update on Mary” is filled with conflicting actions, objects, and people. Though Mary wants desperately to find God and feel connected to Him, her desire is kept in check by all the things immediately around her, and thus her faith is fragile. The problem for Mary is proximity. She feels keenly after God, but God is too distant for her; the macaroons

and waterproof boots are close, and as such consume more of the space around her, influencing the practiced place more than God. Mary does many things, thinks often and deeply, but retreats to that which is near and familiar, retreats to a comfortable practiced place.

In discussing Certeau's theory of practiced place, it is vital to note Szybist's play with form in her poems. While my discussion of space in Szybist's poems is limited to exploring the space she describes between herself and God, poems such as "How (Not) to Speak of God," also makes this space concrete and typographical. Atypically arranging the words on the page, as Szybist does, challenges what poems should be and how they should be read. Just as Szybist performs with the Annunciation, unique forms create an unexpected experience with the poems, encouraging them to be open and flexible about how poems convey meaning. While I cover only briefly Szybist's use of form, it deserves more attention because it details the experience of how operations can significantly alter the meaning of a practiced place. That is the poems, for the better, become something different by slightly changing how the lines are arranged on the page, giving the reader more possibilities for understanding the experience of the poems.

One of the final versions of the Annunciation in the collection, "Annunciation: Eve to Ave," conflates the most revered woman in Christianity with one of the most notorious: The Virgin Mary and the first woman, Eve. Presented in the first person, the poem contains language for the Fall of Adam with the Annunciation. The poem leads readers to believe that Eve and Mary both "liked the way his voice deepened as he called" (5) and both, though scared were "quiet, quiet as / eagerness—that astonished dutiful fall" (13-14). Just as Mary was astonished and acquiescent when Gabriel came to her, it is reasonable to think Eve felt the similarly when the devil, disguised as a serpent, came to her. This conflation creates a more sympathetic view of Eve, often vilified in Christianity, by suggesting she is not all that different from the mother of

Jesus Christ, a woman canonized in Szybist's childhood religion. A mysterious man using flattery and grandiose prophecy, convinces a woman to believe him—Mary is told she is highly favored and will be the mother of the savior of the world; Eve is told “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5). By comparing these two women in this way, Szybist highlights how paradoxical it is that one can be demonized in Christian lore, while the other is canonized and prayed to. Both are compelled by the flattery, by the promises and praise delivered by each visitor, whom both women see as someone unusual and otherworldly when each “learned he was not a man” (9). Once “dream[ing] his lips. . .lik[ing] the way his voice deepened as he called. . .lik[ing] the showmanship” (2-6), they have become opposites, the virgin saint and the fallen whore. Szybist confronts the given trust in God that accompanies faith when the validity of the visitor is obfuscated. When someone appears to speak for God, the consequences of having faith can differ depending on the choice, and so the ability to have faith, the assurance God will guide one to happiness and eternal life, erodes. Experiences with something otherworldly, something seemingly divine, demand not automatic acquiescence and reverence, but skepticism.

In drawing connections between Eve and Mary, Szybist offers sympathy to Mary and the confusing nature of the Annunciation. “And when I learned that he was not a man” begins the final stanza, implicating the fear of God in different ways for each woman. Both women, on discovering the nature of the visitor, are so filled with fear they want to escape by any means necessary to get away from the visitor. In Eve's predicament, she wishes to flee because the visitor is not God, not the one in whom she should trust and rely on. In Mary's situation, fear of the task compels her to flee, both of the responsibility and the expectations demanded of her in this newly revealed role in world history. However, the poem does not differentiate why each

woman wants to run and hide from the visitor. Conflating these two offers a compassionate reading of both women. Satan dupes Eve, convincing her he is benevolently sent. If Eve could be deceived so thoroughly, it is forgivable that Mary should be afraid of Gabriel. Neither woman fled, for both “could have crawled / through thorn and bee, the thick of hive” (10-11), but did not actually make such an escape, because they were both “quiet as / eagerness” (13-14). Though God’s power can terrify, it thrills—some figure from beyond this world reaching out to seemingly-insignificant them, wanting them for something larger than themselves. Mary and Eve recognize this opportunity, this possibility to be and do something more than life has yet to offer. Eve looking for all the forbidden fruit has to offer, and Mary to fulfill God’s most sacred calling. Once this unknown, otherworldly individual comes to both Eve and Mary, the possibilities for what these women can and should do change drastically, entirely changing their perception of life.

However, reading this poem, the original narratives cast a shadow no matter how much Szybist draws comparisons to these two. The influence of the biblical narratives on these scenes highlights the tenuousness of Certeau’s practiced places. Different operators performing a number of actions, thoughts, and speech give meaning to Satan’s invitation to Eve and Gabriel’s invitation to Mary. “Annunciation: Eve to Ave” shows that the practices of Satan and Eve, Gabriel and Mary, are essentially the same. And yet our understanding of them today drastically separates the two narratives. Someone else operates within the “polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities” (Certeau 117) to create distinction between the two women. It is God, determining that one woman should now and forever be labeled a sinner and the other sanctified and revered. While showing compassion to both women in “Eve to Ave” Szybist also confronts God’s mercy towards human error. From the view of this poem, the error, though not

identical, is similar enough to warrant similar reactions from God. But He denies Eve what he grants Mary.

Continuing to use language that blurs the distinction between Eve and Mary, Szybist suggests both events are “falls.” The quiet eagerness which keeps them both listening to the transcendent visitor is “that astonished, dutiful fall” (14). Each commit to the invitations from their otherworldly visitors, leading to their respective falls. While Eve’s fall was from grace to the frailty of humanity, Mary’s is the converse: she falls not from grace but toward it. Her fall is a fall of the excusable nature of humanity and mortality. The power of choice, of existing in a life which does not rely on God’s grace, is in its own way an elevated and loftier life. It is a fall from deterministic opportunity, from the tabula rasa of agency. While the Biblical account of the Annunciation presents Mary’s experience and decision to be simple and uncomplicated, this imagining of Mary’s first encounter with God displays the terror of faith. Faithful duty signifies surrendering something of oneself, to allow for any possibility to occur, though one hopes for God to enlighten, uplift, and bring closer to salvation.

All of these metaphors, perspectives, imaginings that Szybist uses within *Incarnadine* to look freshly at the Annunciation display all the questions, problems, and confusions related to embracing faith in a secular age. Szybist confronts what John McClure states as the tension between “the impulse to recover the moral, emotional, and ontological richness of religious life against a whole range of obstacles” (342), obstacles which dismiss and deride religious structures of thinking. Although there is certainly a “moral, emotional, and ontological richness” borne of religious modes of thinking, *Incarnadine* posits questions in which religion can be ontologically uncertain and frightening. What are the implications of inviting God back into our life, good or

bad? *Incarnadine* may welcome resurrecting traditions laid to rest, but it also questions that if we seek out those things long since dead in our lives, what ghosts will follow us back?

Incarnadine works to show that unyielding faith may inflict pain, that as God enters the spaces in which we move, we potentially may lose control over that space. This collection also does the opposite: spaces can feel hollow if we cannot in some way feel God's presence in that space. The Annunciation offers the standard boundaries between God and women, and how we define God and Mary through their actions. By using the familiar Christian myth as a foundational story and combining with other stories, the Annunciation poems redefine God and Mary through the different iterations of their actions: God the facilitator of humanity's salvation, mysterious and unknown; God as the predator of a young woman; God as fickle in his violence against humanity for humanity's sake, in which Mary is a young woman overcome by God's omnipotence, shrewd to accept God's decree, and finally brutalized by God's use of her body. All of these iterations ask us to be more skeptical when it comes to God.

As varyingly faithful and disbelieving as *Incarnadine* is, the collection provides foundational stories upon which readers can create an understanding of God beyond Szybist's own interpretations. Just as she played with and reimagined the Annunciation to articulate the fluid nature of faith, readers can reimagine and play with her stories to find new forms of believing. Szybist said, "I turn to poems to find spaces that might enlarge, rather than distill, experience" (Interview), and these poems do just that regarding faith and doubt. Rather than reinterpreting the Annunciation with a new dictum on exactly who God is and what it means to believe in Him, she plays with her own definition of God, allowing readers to do the same. Readers can choose to embrace poems about a violent God, poems about holding to faith for the rewards, poems about feeling lost, or somewhere in between all these. The intersection of faith

and doubt is manifest only in the individual life, the point at which the pressure is truly felt.

Reconstructing the foundational story is a reconstruction of faith, a means through which one can find a faith that supports rather than diminishes life.

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