

SAMPLER

Dear Mary

ALSO BY RUPERT M LOYDELL

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Rupert M Loydell

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Dear Mary

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Preface

When you walk into the old schoolroom in Monterchi, where Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* now lives, the lights come on, sensing your motion. And for a moment, it is as if the two angels who hold open the little pavilion where the pregnant Mary stands have suddenly illuminated the whole world by uncovering the place where God has chosen to live.

Afterwards, as your eyes get used to the light, the painting, smaller than you expect and yet infinitely monumental (and what better analogy for the Incarnation?) starts to give itself up.

First come its soft greens and deep reds, blues and traces of brocade, the silvery-grey fur lining of Mary's tent, all miraculously fresh, caught in the plaster of the cemetery chapel like the hazy colours of the hour after dawn. Then come its careful lines, its cleverness in framing, out of dead flatness, all the fleshy comfort of the world in three, crisp perspectival dimensions and more than three others of thought and word and deed.

It takes time to see. You walk towards it to find traces of Piero's hand in the brush strokes, in the drawing of each contour, the economy of the foreshortened feet, the singularity of each feather. You walk away again and sit on the bench to try to see the whole, to stop your eye darting between the parts, to imagine beyond the outer edges of the surviving fresco into the place where Piero made it.

Despite the physical loss to the painting, though, the most striking absence in the *Madonna del Parto* is that of Christ. The Virgin is not supposed to come without the child, and if she does it should not be alone but as visitor to her cousin Elizabeth. An iconography of Mary alone and pregnant, even as serenely self-possessed as this (perhaps because she is as serenely self-possessed as this) is disturbing. This is the Mary whom Joseph wondered about leaving, the Mary he feared would bring shame on him, the Mary whose baby had been made in his own absence.

When Donatello came to make that moment of making, in the Cavalcanti *Annunciation* at Santa Croce in Florence, he did so in the plainest of plain stone. This gritty sandstone, whose obduracy Dante had compared to that of his Florentine countrymen, only later came to acquire its poetic name *pietra serena*.¹ When Donatello carved it, it was still called *macigno*, the stuff

¹ Describing the Florentine descendants of the inhabitants of Fiesole, his friend Ser Brunetto Latini tells Dante of the proverbial, residual hardness they retained after descending from the hills; 'tiene ancor del monte e del macigno' – 'still keeping something of the mountain and the rock'. Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*: ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols., (Milan, 1966-7), vol. II, *Inferno*, Canto XV, line 63, p. 249.

of millstones, of industry, the stuff of the city and its people, of a joke about worthless rocks in Boccaccio.²

Macigno makes the Cavalcanti *Annunciation* a vernacular and singularly Florentine object, more so than had it been carved from marble. It speaks to the *fiorentinità* of its patrons and of its sculptor and consequently is an object of place, specifically and precisely, the incarnation in Florence and the incarnation of Florence. Yet, having made his annunciation from the hard stuff of the working world, he adorned it with gold, accenting every decorative detail until the little space inhabited by the angel and the virgin became filled with the richness of divine mystery, a glowing casket like the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction*.

But, like the *Madonna del Parto*, the Cavalcanti *Annunciation* is marked by absence. Unlike most other treatments of Mary's encounter with Gabriel, Donatello's has no Holy Spirit in it, no Hand of God, no dove descending to the Virgin, no piercing ray to impregnate her. For all the richness of divine presence implied in its burnished gold and stately graciousness, it is as if the divine is present only by reflection. The world is filled with God's glory, but God himself is nowhere to be seen. Having arrived, he's biding his time. He needs to be found.

The work in this book needs to be found too, to be paid attention before it will fully give itself up. Introducing Loydell's *Ballads of the Alone*, H.L. Hix wrote about the 'difficulty' of his writing, the resistance it offers to the very conventions that it employs. The poems and prose in *Dear Mary* are similarly difficult, allusive and elusive, ekphrastic without strictly describing. Opposed to the facile, as Hix has it, they 'give form to invisible process'. However, what characterises them more than the form they give it is the space they leave for invisible process to work.

This space is sometimes literal. The opening thought of 'Displacement' is not about the recreated worlds of the Boyle Family's square metres of territory but about 'The holes in the map [...] left by the darts we threw'. The 'segments of the world moved somewhere else' seem then not to be the Boyles' facsimiles but the places themselves, and the holes not indicators of what and where should be represented but markers of the places where a gap has been left in the world. The hiddenness of the Holy Spirit in Donatello's *Annunciation* has an echo in Loydell's 'Annunciations' with their 'Empty

² In the *Decameron*, Elissa's tale of the foolish painter Calandrino, the trickster Maso del Saggio attempts to gull him into believing that it possesses special value, describing, 'due maniere di pietre [...] di grandissima virtù. L'una sono i macigni da Settignano'. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio: vol. IV, Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan, 1965), Giornata 8, Novella 3, line 19, p. 683.

rooms / full of absence / waiting for / a child to arrive // and fill the world'. The child is coming, he is even conceived, but for now his absence is real.

But the absences from Loydell's work are not just those of missing objects – the Boyle's stolen square metre, Mary's child, the elusive representation of the Holy Spirit – or missing words. They are the spaces between ideas, which require the reader to engage off the page with whatever it might be that will fill the lacunae, completing not the sentence but the thought.

There is a riddling quality to Loydell's willingness to leave gaps in telling that has common cause with the images he engages with and (sometimes, somehow) describes. In them, the attempt to make mystery on the one hand and the impossibility of avoiding mystery on the other underlines the difficulty of any kind of ekphrasis, of the picture that records the world or the word that records the picture.

Thus 'What It Is': 'it is trying to look at strange photos / and guess what they are.' Loydell repeatedly insists on the inability of images to describe the world, and in particular its interaction with the numinous, any more successfully than words can. No kind of image or image capture is adequate to the task of making any clearer those things that are fundamentally beyond understanding. In 'Surveillance System / Annunciation', there is 'Not much to go on. Here, look at the tape: / Something arrives, looking grey and blurred, / something too fast for our cameras to see, / something we can't identify.'

Equally, though, he dwells in 'Something More' on the equivalent incapacity of the word alone to express the Word. 'Attempting to create / an image of the Absolute / we decided to escape / the cage of language'. The escape is necessary. In 'Between', 'Words cannot accurately describe / the experience of light and tone, / the incremental changes and shifts / in between black and white'. Neither the verbal nor the visual can shoulder the burden alone and so it is in the movement back and forth between the two and in their repeated, complementary and contradictory efforts to give comprehensible form to the ineffable that the writing finds its rhythm.

What Loydell brings to the book as both writer and painter is the recognition that it is only the constituent parts of text and image, line, tone and hue, shifting and recombining, which are sufficiently agile to capture the fugitive picture. Sometimes it is necessary to 'rely only on paint / let colour do the talking'. Sometimes monochrome nouns are better for making images out of fragments, as in 'Ideas of Flight': 'The owl man has gone / away for winter; / leaving only memory, / talon, beak and eye.'

Georges Didi-Huberman, writing about Piero's near contemporary Fra Angelico, came to focus not on the lapidary clarity of his draftsmanship or the sumptuous freshness of his colours, but on the fugitive dots and splotches of paint which pepper some of his frescoes at the Dominican

convent of San Marco in Florence and in particular on the fictive marble panels beneath the *Madonna of the Shadows* in the dormitory corridor.³ Alexander Nagel, reviewing Didi-Huberman, identifies the painter's aim in apparently having flicked and thrown paint randomly across his otherwise immaculate picture as being to produce, 'something like a performative analogue to the mysterious process the divine "seed" is disseminated in all things'.⁴ For Nagel, 'the point of Didi Huberman's analysis is not to reveal what the panels "signify" unequivocally.... He is instead interested in how they participate in a plurivocal "figural" economy in which meaning is relayed from figure to figure and from place to place without taking on substance, producing something like a cloud of associations that "circle endlessly around a mystery".'⁵

Here, though, a cloud is too imprecise and too fugitive a vehicle for the conveyance of meaning. The 'cage of language' is a necessary confinement. This is a book of words, after all, a linguistic rather than a performative analogue to the problem of representing the unrepresentable, whose poems pick at its lock to reveal (without ever actually showing) that the elusiveness of grace is not the same as its absence. If there is a lesson here (and, of course, there need not be but Loydell is also a teacher) it is in the tension between the various kinds of absence and presence that these poems paradoxically embody. The invisibility of the incarnation is not the same as its withholding. The world is not empty of the divine, but pregnant with it, suffused by it. Mary is not alone and neither are we.

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³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago, 1995).

⁴ Alexander Nagel, 'Review Recent Literature on Fra Angelico', *Art Bulletin*, vol.78, no.3, Sept 1996, pp.559-565, pp. 561-2.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.561.

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‘Dear Mary
Thank you for the day
We shared together’
—Steve Miller, ‘Dear Mary’

‘Language and diagrams enable us to navigate the extraordinary complex terrain of colour and to communicate with one another about colour, and without them we would easily get lost. But at the same time there is a value in getting lost, in becoming immersed in the endless proliferation of natural blues or greens or yellows and greys that are always around us and always merging into one another, but which often go unnoticed.’

—David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey*

‘The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends on how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen.’

—Gertrude Stein, ‘Composition as Explanation’



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Stop Looking

When you stop looking
the colours soften and blur.

Greens and blues become fog,
ochres and reds a stone block.

I can't tell if the sky is purple
or blue, deep orange or grey.

Everything is the colour of sun,
of dusty land; Tuscan memory.

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Forecast

Viking Fisher Dogger

Disruption to travel and the possibility of fog,
maybe some apparitions or visitations.
But do not be afraid.

Rockall Shannon Malin

Temperature increasing, so no likelihood
of frost, but miracles and signs may occur.
Listen to what's being said.

Fastnet Lundy Sole

Bright lights and wings near Bethlehem
and reports coming in of voices,
along with shock and awe.

Fisher Humber German Bight

A cold front to follow, with the realization
of what's happened. Things will be
unsettled in the coming weeks.

Gabriel Mary Joseph John

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

'A Process of Discovery'

for David Miller

'My writing must also, along
what unfamiliar way,
be company?'

– David Miller, 'Unity'

The poet's book is one of the four I have brought away on holiday. It was a choice between my favourite versions of the short narrative poems of a Greek author, made especially awkward by the translator, who does not appear to be fluent in English, and my friend's new book.

Eventually, I decided on the poet's new collected poems, and looked forward to the dislocation between warm Tuscan light and the nameless grey cities that often form a background to his fragmented texts.

With shutters pinned back, windows wide, sun burning through morning cloud, the poems speak of love, confusion, moments and ideas, all threaded into necklaces of language.

•

The colours in my set of paints never match the colours outside. I have to work hard to find the muted tones of mist or dusk, even more to mix the faded earths and stones, the burnt greens that fill the view.

I have little need for red – a few roof tiles here and there, and only use yellow to mix variations of foliage in the distance. Neither the earth nor stone seem at all brown, more grey and off-white. The distant mountains require blue to give them distance, purples and greys if the light has gone or a storm arrived.

•

There is hardly any music here.

Sometimes a faint radio
in the distance,
a few CDs in our hire car
for long journeys,

those drummers we watched
at a medieval fair –
the whole village play acting
for a weekend.

A falcon flew
off into the silence.
A saxophone,
a clarinet:

reported
conversations
on the pages
of his book.

•

Despite itself,
the silence
is the event,

the appearance
of the angel
is the event,

the moment
as pregnant
as the madonna;

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bird spirit
of God
top right,

a sparrow
flying across
window-framed sky.

•

In one version the angel
speaks in painted script,

is always speaking,
never silent.

I prefer the mute
gold wings of flight,

the ethereal earth
beneath celestial feet,

the always unsaid
unbelievable truth.

•

The poet's book has served me well, and has sat literally and conceptually alongside a short book on colour, a re-read novel of occult training and enlightenment, and a fictional exploration of moments when the celestial and human met or even touched.

Our conversation has been a long one. We first met on the page and later in the flesh, but there is still a lot to be said.

For the moment, I am again listening.

•

The sun is even brighter now.

It is clear my painting's colours are all wrong.

I rinse my brushes and head out for a swim.

A startled lizard runs from the sudden splash.

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Lost in Colour

Phil who I knew at college
used to say that I was
seduced by colour, which
he meant as a criticism
but I thought was great.

Oh how my paintings sang,
how the edges zinged.
You could stain and pour,
risk everything each time
you touched a canvas.

But nature is always
greater than the sum of
my parts: oil on water,
sunset over the creek,
mist on morning hills.

It's important not to
compare yourself with god
or others, or hope to
best the world outside.
Now I'm reduced

to black and white:
shadows on the page,
cold lines of type,
pale marks and
faint grey stains.

Lost in colour,
I don't have
the words
although words
are all I have.