

Annunciation – A Poem by Denise Levertov

We know the scene:

*the room, variously furnished, almost always a lectern, a book, always the tall lily.
Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings, the angelic ambassador,
standing or hovering, whom she acknowledges, a guest.*

*But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.
The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent.
God waited.*

She was free to accept or to refuse, choice integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?

*Some unwillingly undertake great destinies,
enact them in sullen pride, uncomprehending.*

*More often those moments when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair and with relief.*

*Ordinary lives continue. God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.*

*She had been a child who played, ate, slept like any other child - but unlike others,
wept only for pity, laughed in joy not triumph.
Compassion and intelligence fused in her, indivisible.*

*Called to a destiny more momentous than any in all of Time, she did not quail,
only asked a simple, 'How can this be?' and gravely, courteously,
took to heart the angel's reply, the astounding ministry she was offered:*

*to bear in her womb Infinite weight and lightness;
to carry in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain in slender vase of being,
the sum of power - in narrow flesh, the sum of light.*

*Then bring to birth, push out into air, a Man-child needing,
like any other, milk and love –*

but who was God.

*This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.*

A breath unbreathed, Spirit, suspended, waiting.

*She did not cry, 'I cannot. I am not worthy,'
nor, 'I have not the strength.'
She did not submit with gritted teeth, raging, coerced.*

*Bravest of all humans, consent illumined her.
The room filled with its light, the lily glowed in it, and the iridescent wings.*

Consent, courage unparalleled, opened her utterly.

Denise Levertov (October 1923 - December 1997)

Born to an English mother and Russian Hasidic Jewish father. Her father became an Anglican priest.

“My father's Hasidic ancestry, his being steeped in Jewish and Christian scholarship and mysticism, his fervour and eloquence as a preacher, were factors built into my cells”.