

A Confusion of Marys

SAMPLER

ALSO BY RUPERT M LOYDELL

The Return of Doom-Headed Three [with Daniel Y Harris] (Knives Forks & Spoons 2018)
The Co-ordinates of Doubt [with Daniel Y Harris] (Knives Forks & Spoons 2017)
Dear Mary (Shearsman Books 2017)
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A Confusion
of Marys

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SAMPLER

'The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.'

—Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

'If one can remember a thing
One never experienced,
Think how easy the forgetting.'

—Eric Pankey, 'The Dictates of Gravity'

'Every single song is one shadow of the whole.'

—David Rothenberg, *Sudden Music*

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Annunciations

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ANNUNCIATIONS

Crooked crosses and all sorts of heavenly light: blue rain, reflections in skyscraper glass, firestorms, neon, a distant sun, a sculpted moon beneath an empty hanging robe.

Mary finds herself alarmed and shocked, intruded upon, over and over again. Heavenly creatures appear in her apartment, lean in through the window, recline next to her on the beach, or turn up when she's shopping, trying to have time alone. They all say the same impossible thing.

Who knows how this might work out? How the idea will be sustained, the miraculous remembered, in the future?

•

She cannot escape the idea that she is special, but she is not ready for this. Alone in the bus shelter, she tries to summon the courage to keep her appointment for a termination, as the advertising angel peers down from the hoarding at the other end of the bench, trying to sell her toothpaste. It is, she knows, her right to choose, and she will not heed the prophets, friends or soothsayers who say otherwise, or those who predict that this simple operation might skew, or end, her world.

•

She wakes to the sound of trumpets, to curtains fluttering in the city breeze. Her cat is already crying for food, ignoring the angelic apparition floating above her, slender trumpet in hand.

He finishes his sprightly tune, coughs, then starts to speak. She cuts him short. 'I'll call the cops,' she says.

He wobbles slightly in the air. 'You wouldn't?' he smiles. 'After all the practicing I've done?'

‘For what?’ she says.

‘You’ve been chosen,’ he says. ‘You’re special. Though only God knows why.’

‘Special? Sure!’

‘No, you are. You’re going to have his child. I’ve come to tell you.’

‘Yeah, of course I am. My boyfriend left me months ago. You didn’t did you?’ She smooths her nightgown.

‘No, I didn’t. Angels don’t. We’re holy servants, nothing more. Messengers and announcers, musicians and choristers too.’

‘Well, go sing your song elsewhere. I’ve got to go to work. And take your trumpet with you.’

He’s gone. There are car horns and shouts outside, and she can hear the owner of the café across the street unlocking his door and opening up. If she skips a shower she can get a bagel and an espresso before she has to leave. Might soothe her nerves and wake her up, sweep the jazz and bullshit from her mind.

•

Andy Warhol’s annunciation is empty. Nobody says anything to anyone. A hand blesses the bottom left corner, a curtain is about to be pulled on the right. Trees and mountain point to heaven beyond a wall and a foregrounded tomb. The sky is flat, outline drawings are not aligned. The print is available in a variety of colours to suit the colour of your wall.

•

This one’s a riotous swirl of action, with a frightened Mary at the centre of it all. An angel, wings erect and out of proportion, is telling her how it is and what will be, while animal-headed creatures watch on, having

already destroyed her house. At the mercy of the elements, bathed in both celestial and moon light, she is caught in an awkward pose, afraid and shocked, surprised. Heaven and hell compete to draw a circumference around her and take the proffered lily for themselves. This ring of chaos is the moment a pebble gets dropped into the water and ripples slowly move away.

•

Why these empty arches, these porticoes full of light and air? What is a portico anyway, and why does she have to sit here quietly, pretending something is about to happen? Mary feels out of focus, blurred, as the world changes and shifts around her. She might turn to stone, or become dust. She doesn't like to ponder such things – look what happened last time.

There is always an interfering angel, who insists on speaking, however much she stops her ears or gestures from him to go away, even if she shouts or screams at him directly. Oh how she wishes he would leave and not tell her what she does not want to hear. She'd like to marry the carpenter and raise a couple of normal kids. A halo will simply get in the way, and she has never liked blue or the idea of crucifixion.

•

On the beach there are casts of angels, covered at high tide, proud and lifesize when the water's receded. You can wander among them and imagine them whispering to each other, telling you what will become of you, insisting it's for the best. You shake the sand from your shoes and think about an ice cream, walk along the promenade toward the distant pier. But the angels are patient and persistent, know you will meet again.

•

The angel's a shadow, a monoprint, a fashion model lounging on a rooftop shoot. He's gorgeous, he's naked, invisible, worried, concerned; a little bit creepy to tell the truth.

Strip away the feathers and you're left with only light or after-images of where they once were. You might have imagined it all, but something was there, you're sure.

The angels are shadows, squidges of ink, liars, imposters and frauds. They're enforcers of patriarchy, symbols of power, and they make you worried and concerned.

Strip away your self-confidence and all you're left with is a little girl, the memory of who you were. You might have grown up, have imagined it all, but *something* was there, you're quite sure.

•

The sea whispers to her, suggesting she will have a son, that he will change the world. The horizon holds steady but her heart is pounding and her eyes fuzzy with tears and disbelief, reflected light. She cannot focus on the waves, they won't stay still; she has not noticed that her shoes and feet are wet. Out of her depth and scared, she knows she cannot swim away from what she has just heard.

•

There is, says one art critic, an innate capacity for motherhood in all women, but each must find it for themselves. The new order is not always welcome, although paintings of Mary and the angel often evoke radiance and renewal. But there is terror and disruption, too, impossible distances crossed, as creation's extremes collide.

It is the beginning of a story that ends in suffering and death, it is a violation of a woman's body, it is the fulfilment of prophecy or the start of a great religion, depending on your point of view. All this triggered by an angel's sentence to a chosen girl, thrust into pregnancy and motherhood too soon.

•

Tear it up, tear it apart; the story survives. Re-imagined as a love affair, science fiction, or abstract colours in a square, it remains the story of a moment when something 'other' enters our world.

Of course, there were previous sightings, ecstatic visions or strange dreams, but this one seems the most well known, the one most explored in art. Symbolism thrives in contemporary and more traditional work: sacred blue, virginal white, empty chambers and porticos, lilies and descending doves, rays of light, winged angels and orderly gardens. We are reminded of the past, Adam and Eve exiled from Eden. Swirls of colour tell us the world will not last for ever.

Deconstructed or abandoned, forgotten or overlooked, the story always returns, gets told again. However much we disbelieve in angels they fly into our imagination and speak to us, tell us the same truths again, wings spread ready to catch the wind.

•

This angel's a bit of a budgie, pouting and preening in the mirror before he makes an entrance. All feathershake and swirling robes, he jumps in and proclaims in his most seductive tone. She doesn't seem to notice him, lowers her eyes to the floor and looks worried. He doesn't like being ignored, simpers and says his piece again. She doesn't move at all, but he knows she's heard his speech, decides it's time to go. She'll never know what a vision he is.

•

The scale of the human is out of all proportion to the angel. It's not that the latter is huge, he just fills the room with his presence, his light, and the words he speaks consume the previous silence. There's a hint of excess and adornment: the angel doesn't belong here but now he is everything is overshadowed and clearly illuminated. Colours flatten into bright tones, there are no dark corners any more, nothing is hidden except in Mary's heart. She wonders and ponders, consumes the moment before the room empties and the colours fade into centuries old frescoes in an empty church.

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