Book review

**INCARNADINE BY MARY SZYBIST**
GRAYWOLF PRESS, 2013, $15.00

Mary Szybist’s luminous second book of poems, *Incarnadine*, lingers on the moment of encounter; it takes up the marvel and violence of the annunciation as it is depicted in a range of settings. No matter what the context, Szybist appears captivated by the instance of annunciation as a moment of supreme change. And it is thrilling to see this poet think and feel through the inconsistencies and mysteries of suffering change. The distinct situations of annunciation that she conjures are surprising and unexpectedly dynamic. The poem, “Annunciation (from the grass beneath them),” for instance, gives us the famous story from the point of view of the grass:

> the girl tilted and lurched and then
> we rose up to it, held ourselves tight
> when it skimmed just the tips of our blades
> didn’t you feel softened
> no, not even its flickering trembled.


Particularly astonishing is the poem “Annunciation as Right Whale with Kelp Gulls,” which gives an account of the violence implicit in all encounter:

> I tell you I have seen them in their glee
> diving fast into the sureness of her flesh,
> fast into the softness of
> her wounds—have seen them
> peel her, have seen them give themselves
> full to the effort and the
> lull of it—

The poem intensifies the sense of violation in the image of the kelp gulls swiftly accumulating:

> For they
> eat her alive. For they take mercy on others and show them the way.

At high tide, more gulls lift form the mussel beds and soar toward her.
For they do sit and eat, for they do sit and eat
Szybist echoes the last line of George Herbert’s great poem “Love (III)” with the line “For they do sit and eat” and reinforces the notion of a self being overcome in order to receive divine mystery.

This feeling of being overwhelmed or prevailed over and the spiritual and carnal mystery of love are further explored in Szybist’s poems about motherhood and childlessness. She often conflates the poet Mary with the biblical Mary in scenes where the speaker speaks frankly about the longed-for condition of motherhood or meditates on her own fascination with mothers who kill their children. “Mary tells herself that if only she could have a child she could carry around like an extra lung, the emptiness inside her would stop gnawing,” she writes in “Update on Mary.” In “So-and-So Descending from the Bridge,” the speaker says that the mother who throws her two children off a bridge is what “out-nights” her, and the unfathomable mother seems at once to horrify and captivate her.

It is estrangement in which Szybist is most interested, or what estrangement can let into an existence. The various shapes that rift may take seem only to enlarge the poet’s imagination, to hold out other systems of contemplation. In the gorgeous “Knocking or Nothing,” the speaker passionately asks, “Oh my out-sung, fierce, unthinkable— / why rattle only the world / you placed in me? Won’t you clutter the unkiSSed, / idiot stars?” The poet chooses the word “incarnadine” instead of “incarnation” as the title of her book. Though the idea of something incarnate, made flesh, inheres in the word, I kept returning to it as a verb as the collection moved forward. To redden, to deepen in that color, is perhaps one pure and soundless image of change in all of its beauty, violence, ambiguity, and insufficiency.

But what a tender funny bone this serious poet has! The closing poem of the book, “The Lushness of It,” imagines what it would be like to be loved by an octopus: “If it touched, / if it tasted you, each of its three / hearts would turn red.” She deftly brings together the notes of spiritual questioning and the world’s irrepressible immediacy in the final couplet: “Will theologians of any confession refute me? / Not the bluecap salmon. Not its dotted head.”