

Mary Szybist's Poetic Balancing Act

By Christopher Wicks

This past February, Graywolf Press issued *Incarnadine*, a new collection by Portland poet Mary Szybist. A graduate of the prestigious Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Iowa, Szybist teaches at Lewis and Clark College.

Szybist's poetry does a balance-beam act between adoration and awe in encounters with the divine, and scarcely veiled blasphemy in mockery of the conventional themes and tone of devotional verse. Her first book, *Granted*, published by Alice James Books in 2003, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. It provides an introduction to the poet's style and concerns.

Granted is dedicated to Szybist's parents, who must be very proud to have such an eloquent and celebrated daughter, but perhaps also a little disturbed by some of her preoccupations. Biblical references are peppered throughout the book, often in contexts that may seem cryptic or unexpected.

One characteristic poem is "Monologue to be Spoken by an Archangel," which presents itself as a sort of mockery of Gabriel's annunciation of the birth of Jesus to the Virgin. "The lamb is not with you," he stammers between awkward stage directions in parentheses, closing with a cavalier and sarcastic "Who has not been God's wife?"

A climax of disarming anger is attained in the poem "...What a Lovely Way You Have of Putting Things...", titled with a quotation from iconic Jazz Age writer Anais Nin. In this poem, the Virgin Martyrs of the Roman Catholic Church, celebrated for protecting their chastity as a devotion to Christ in the face of threatened death, turn into furious madwomen, speaking and singing words of rebellion and blasphemy, asking for prayers from those who used to appeal to

them. The poet refuses to “explain” them. Instead, she tears away the veil of rhetorical distance, saying, “Literature is falling away. I am entirely sincere.” Thus an angry author speaks directly to the reader.

Szybist wrestles with the social and psychological constraints that religious structures place upon us all, Catholic or Protestant or otherwise. Some of her poems, such as “What the World Is For,” decline to project goodness onto Creation, insisting instead on finding it exclusively in an unnamed Beloved, who can only be the Creator.

This is not to say that Szybist’s poetry lacks lyricism. Its expressiveness of form is among the notable rewards it offers its readers. We Oregonians are blessed to have such a strong poetic voice among us.