

Most pictures of the Annunciation are terribly polite,
painted in pale pastels marking the exquisite courtly etiquette
of medieval Florence or Venice,
demure Mary keeping her distance from demure Gabriel.

It all seems a very long way from Pussy Riots' 2012
punk protest in Moscow's cathedral:

‘Virgin Mary, Mother of God, become a feminist.’

Llandaff Cathedral staged its own protest back then, displaying
Virgin of the Goldfinches by Clive Hicks-Jenkins.

Set on the Welsh coast, an unusually sensual Mary
has escaped her parents clutches while it is yet dark
and is sporting with an equally sensual Gabriel,

who you'd think was a pop star were it not for his wings,
suede shoes, grey suit, bare chest, skin flushed bright red.

The goldfinches fluttering close by are points of connection,
along with Mary's crimson shoes matching Gabriel's blush.



Kathleen Raine's raw poem, Northumbrian Sequence IV,
musters Northumberland's fierce storms and fierce history
to beat a distinctly reluctant Geordie Mary into submission.
It's pure Gospel according to Wuthering Heights:

Let in the wind,
Let in the rain,
Let in the moors tonight,

The storm beats on my window-pane,
Night stands at my bed-foot,
Let in the fear,
Let in the pain,
Let in the trees that toss and groan,
Let in the north tonight.

Let in the nameless formless power
That beats upon my door,
Let in the ice, let in the snow,
The banshee howling on the moor,
The bracken-bush on the bleak hillside,
Let in the dead tonight.

The whistling ghost behind the dyke,
The dead that rot in the mire,
Let in the thronging ancestors,
The unfilled desire,
Let in the wraith of the dead earl,
Let in the dead tonight.

Let in the cold,
Let in the wet,
Let in the loneliness,
Let in the quick,
Let in the dead,
Let in the unpeopled skies.

Oh how can virgin fingers weave
A covering for the void,

How can my fearful heart conceive
Gigantic solitude?
How can a house so small contain
A company so great?
Let in the dark,
Let in the dead,
Let in your love tonight.

Let in the snow that numbs the grave,
Let in the acorn-tree,
The mountain stream and mountain stone,
Let in the bitter sea.

Fearful is my virgin heart
And frail my virgin form,
And must I then take pity on
The raging of the storm
That rose up from the great abyss
Before the earth was made,
That pours the stars in cataracts
And shakes this violent world?

Let in the fire,
Let in the power,
Let in the invading might.

Gentle must my fingers be
And pitiful my heart
Since I must bind in human form
A living power so great,
A living impulse great and wild
That cries about my house

With all the violence of desire
Desiring this my peace.

Pitiful my heart must hold
The lonely stars at rest,
Have pity on the raven's cry,
The torrent and the eagle's wing,
The icy water of the tarn
And on the biting blast.

Let in the wound,
Let in the pain,
Let in your child tonight.

Let in your child tonight.

The Advent prayer for us all.