

Annunciation  
Denise Levertov

**Poem: Denise Levertov's "Annunciation"**



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.

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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.

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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.

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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.