

Akulah Agbami

*Cherish*

Chase and Chalke Poet in Residence

2022-2023

Five poems by Akulah Agbami giving an insight to the life of five of the abbesses of Shaftesbury Abbey, between its foundation in 888 to its dissolution during the English Reformation in 1539.

Herleva (abbess 966-982)

Agnes Lungespee (abbess 1243-1247)

Joan Ducket (abbess 1345-1350)

Alice Gibbes (d. 1496)

Elizabeth Zouch (abbess 1529-1539)



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# Menses

## Ianuaris

It is always the night  
When the world disrobes

*Fog was the Christmas  
iced hands locked in prayer  
knees frozen on spell-filled pews  
and the smell of the broth swirling*

Before my eyes  
My visions fuzzy little miniatures

*The Christmas saunter along paths of our making  
Burrowing into the crevices of old hills formed by Your plan  
Formed to offer hope in grand designs  
A sense of You*

I step beyond our walkway  
Into stupendous purring of stars

*Night is when I press my body into Your arms  
Like a child trusting in love, a kitten sure of affection  
And Your writing in the heaven, across this land  
This exquisite lifting, a sense of Your unendingness  
As delicate as the wind-kissed holly berry*

Decipher the blankets of hilltops  
Apparel for one greater than my spindly being

*Sheep stare back with their dark pools of grasping  
Perhaps the angels flitter past though I am sightless  
Crooked but longing for this transcendence  
This emptying into One*

Love. Surrender. Forgiveness. Service.

Compassion. Abnegation. Regret.

A place of mist.

*Swinging through chilled fields our chanting still  
Splashing in my ears. Iced raindrops. Sheep droppings. Patterns  
Giving back to this land. On the look out for rare birds  
Sent to me as messengers. On this Christmas Day fleeting*

*As corn buntings' Christmas blessing etched in sky  
bleating as a new born lamb's first glimpses of  
Her first born day. How can what I pray  
Say anything in response to this unleashing of valleys the chiming of tree  
Tops swinging and the muffled whispering below the earth  
Entangled roots hidden giving.*

Frosted earth. I pity the sleeping worms  
Their segments charred by ice.

Peepin and walking , embracing this night

*How can what I pray say anything  
How can I be consequential in the magnitude of this scheme of things?*

Then after hours of reflection midnight to deep depths  
I see shades and patterns and glimpse sights of those so different

Dancing by waters; I Herleva will not be remembered  
For my living, walking, stumbling  
let alone for these gelid fragments of dream

(anno 977)

## Maius

Four is the time of my rising

You will find me hovering like a moth

Contemplating the stuff of the new day

To come

I had not made any plunge for greatness

But just as a valley say Broadchalke is fashioned by factors beyond

It was almost without my volition

Of course I can sing, can lead our community in our soul's elevation

But the rest. The healing, the maintaining our substantial lands

And the properties that have wended their way to us like fish fry in Ebble

May is the month of Mary she who carried our Lord

Who was taken by surprise as I to be here

*We give because it is our canon*

*To offer care cocooned in love to all*

*Who come our way and not by chance*

*We mop the blistered brow*

*Grasp the dying hands pretend that we know how*

*That we somehow have happened into answers*

*Oh Lord*

Then the dawn alights in her delicate way

Solomon's seal, aquilegia, delphinium

*We give freshly plucked flowers on certain Sundays smiling*

*They never last long and yet their beauty quivers us*

Hovering like moths as the fragrances combine in a medley

Of clean. Jubilate deo.

*We give our breath the dainty wimpled outline*

*Of our faces the illusion of permanence*

*Give our breath and joined up voices singing songs of always*

Today, I, Agnes de Lungespee, will pluck dripping flowers, make soap

Bind the wounds of the dying, bind my own sense of being. And be.

(anno domini 1246)

## Quintilis

I have renounced many things

In this life, and now sleep

For they have come to our doors seeking healing

And food, come to our doors in droves

The younger sisters struggle with the night watching

With the increasing of dying, one after another they drop

I try to be in a state of love as I hold their scrawny, trembling hand

Note their trembling fear, remind them that the Lord is beside them

Remind them that all is forgiven for they are loved. Anoint them with holy water

And rose oil. Our bodies such cumbersome things.

After Lauds and before I take to my bed I rush to the copse

So I can be surrounded, ensnared by hornbeam and hazel, as if these can root me to life

Seven souls drifting away in one night, I do my best to remember, to forget, to remember

I was there. I held their hand. Spoke of resurrection.

I, Joan Duket, standing still in this haven of trees , recollect the laughter and gaiety

Of my girlhood. Then a fawn flashes by, of such beauty; I have usurped her place, on this morn.

(anno domini 1349)



## Mensis September

You may think we know naught of the ways of the world  
But we watch how the dye is cast and can see where it will end

John Cabot, Italian born, voyager with greed in his gaze  
Issued with papers by our King to discover unknown lands

As September diminishes our days, I fix my eyes  
On the distant soft hills, bells and the infrequent hoot of an owl

Lucky to have something to gladden my heart

The swirl of sycamore

Glints of crimson and tawn

Skies with the bloom of a shooting

Star

The smell of ripe fruit

Cows coming home yet

Greed, human greed, can devour all things, feel entitled

To defalcate, to embezzle, to abscond

Where will it end, this ocean of gorging?

Will any stone of destruction be left unturned?

Nature blesses us with such abundance. The stem of one  
Bean plant dripping in food; cartloads of apples from one tree  
Cows waddling home

No need for any interference in the order of things:  
Lavender fragrance cleanses the air all year round  
My thin fingers softer  
Cows coming home while I

Alice Gibbes, stroll, seize this afternoon glow,  
Stride to Gold Hill, counting out gold and dangle my hand  
To my guardian angel believing  
(anno domini 1492)

## Mensis December

Youth has expired, like blossom of a cherry tree  
Shot by the wind in fury.

Youth of being taught how to pitch your voice  
How to ride a horse bending with its downhill canterings

Youth of being taught how to curtsy how to genuflect  
Off by heart the words of the psalms: The Lord looks down from heaven  
on all mankind to see if there are any who understand,  
any who seek God.

I am the one who seeks not in the  
Obvious places as chapel or rosary beads  
but in puddles in honeysuckle in  
chicken squawks in chimney stack spirals I am the one who  
Creeps

How could it be other? How could I have found myself thrust  
Into grandeur into people to nurture buildings to improve  
On my own  
Imagine you are the window holes in our abbey walls bedizened with  
cow's horn soon on my bidding to be replaced with glass

To cull the December harsh hoar

To bleed light a statement of faith

Youth of walking alone by the Ebbles dipping toes into tadpole

Territory making a wish whenever I slide a pebble down our well

These days a wish is a prayer these days a toe dipping is a ceremony of blessing.

Frogs.

Despair.

Belonging.

Rough sheets on a rough bed.

The steady pleats of our day

With stuffing in between.

Glimpses of sunshine

Sprigs of children chuckling.

Leave me alone.

Do not leave me alone. Ever.

This is not easy.

This is not a given.

Only this instant a given.

None of us able to divine what lurks

Round the very next corner. In the next  
twitchel.

Playing my part. In the riotous.

Forging this company of the righteous.

God is present in the company of the righteous

And I, Elizabeth Zouch, seek entry to the company.

So they may say.

(anno domini 1538)



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