

The Virgin Mary Confronts Mary of Magdala*

Richard Shorten

Don't say that.
I never called you whore.
It's a dream word I never knew.

Let it lie there on the floor.
Still, by the prophets,
the covenant and the angel's sword,

the word is not far from my mind.
You reel back, your big eyes saying,
"Who, me?" Yes. I've known you since

you were a girl. Stand there.
Look. I've got eyes too.
I see, I feel, I dangle

these pearls, these jewels
before me. Where did you get them,
these things? White and ice blue,

they set off the scarlet bodice.
It's low, but never mind the cut.
The lacing, Mary, it's slack,

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*Inspired by Andrea Vaccaro's seventeenth-century painting "Martha Rebuking Mary Magdalene"

the ends barely tied. (Here,
in this dimness, I am the one who
is tried.) To talk . . . we . . .

I know you, the bright girl with
the flash, the eyes. Yet, I had
a vision you'll never see.

Even Joseph didn't dream.
The brightness that came that day
long ago, chancy, revealing,

bringing me . . . I won't defile.
It circles in here, the fear,
knowing the thing is not yet sealed

as the golden shock in me
those years ago would have it,
and ordain that it settle about me

forever. My skin chills, Mary,
even now under this shawl.
My eyes open with a nearness.

I can see further into the years
with a terror you and I talk about
but will never feel. You,

lucky you. The tinsel—the pearls,
it all dances so well for you.
My words leave me.

Your arm there, your arm—
around who, how many, when?
Your chestnut hair is loose, Mary.

And now I must leave.
Can't stay. This thing is done.
A cold haze seeping up to me now,

quenches the fire I felt
when I came. But the dream is real,
Mary. I ask you in the name of

the seed of David, the prophets,
and what must be . . . I whisper,
“Stay away from my son.”