SAFETY IN SUFFERING

'He said "thou shalt not be overcome".'
 – Julian of Norwich

'quite original, although not heretical'
 – Brant Pelphrey

The pandemic swept through Europe
with terrifying speed, leaving in its wake
a staggering death toll and economic disaster.

The disease was the Black Death, the time was
the Middle Ages; but as the world reels from Covid
churches are seeking new ways of engaging in

self-isolation and seclusion, cut off from normal life.
Julian lived in a sealed room, attached to prayer
and history, a forward thinker fighting illness

through devotion and spirituality, struggling
to understand the divine and conquer the virus,
to control the mice and rats. Whilst there is

considerable disagreement about her value
as a theologian, communication with the world
continues from behind a mystical black curtain.

What solitude does is take away your own existence,
brings you into nothingness. Are we all going to die?
Yes, as a matter of fact we are, resisting erosion

and with our identities obscured. It is easy to see
the people around us as threats and have our bodies
broken, but all shall be well and all shall be well.

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JULIAN'S CAT

I press close to the memory of my previous life, when life was full of comfort and warmth, and I ate more than mice.

I have a sacred duty to perform, to patrol this cell and keep the rodents away, so they do not disturb my mistress.

She is lost in mystery, although sometimes she holds me tight and tells me about what she sees that I cannot.

Her body is less warm than it used to be, and she is less inclined to stroke or pet, to share her food or bed.

She is becoming cat, living for the moment, accepting what is; has reduced her life to an essence of self and selflessness.

If I had a soul I might share her devotion. As it is, I snuggle into the warmest corner I can find, content to sleep and dream.

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HEAVENLY VISIONS & HOLY DREAMS

'We can make no distinction between the man who eats little
and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes.'
 – Bertrand Russell

This is an invitation to explore the relationship
between religion and madness. Stories have always
been a source of power for religious organizations,
proof of their authority to interpret ideas of the divine.

Being a biblical prophet wasn’t a foolproof shield against
accusations of insanity. Mental disturbances were often
seen as divine punishments or demonic possessions,
were rarely regarded as heavenly visions or holy dreams.

But ignore the historical downsides. The employment of
mystical concepts and language will revolutionize your life,
**although without some boundaries, mysticism can veer
into potentially dangerous, unorthodox, even occult areas.**
Many Christians only want their doubts quenched but
I try and let readers decide for themselves. The words
people use to describe mental illness say a lot about
how they understand the nature of existence and how

mysticism has wormed its way inside evangelicalism
so that the two have become integrated and inseparable.
There is both compromise and infiltration going on, so
I would encourage you to continue your own research.

There’s much more out there than we can imagine
about our God, so much we can’t understand or know,
but is extremely difficult to discern between angels and
fallen angels. Finding out about a mystical experience

that imparts secret knowledge is different to believing.
I don’t think it’s wrong or dangerous to read revelations,
everyone’s journey with God is a beautiful thing, even
if it doesn’t look or seem the same as Julian's or mine.

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Rupert Loydell is the editor of *Stride* and a contributing editor to *International Times*. He has many books of poetry in print, including *Dear Mary*, *The Return of the Man Who Has Everything*, *Wildlife and Ballads of the Alone*, all published by Shearsman, who also published *Encouraging Signs*, a book of essays, articles and interviews. He has co-authored many collaborative works, and edited anthologies for Knives Forks & Spoons Press, Shearsman, and Salt. He also writes about post-punk music, pedagogy, poetry and film for academic journals and books.