Her Slender Dress

Susan Yuzna

The University of Montana

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HER SLENDER DRESS

by Susan Yuzna
B. A., University of Iowa, 1974

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1995

Approved by

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Chairman, Board of Examiners

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Dean, Graduate School

May 2, 1995
Date
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HER SLENDER DRESS

While the lioness
Loos'd her slender dress,
And naked they convey'd
To Caves the sleeping maid.

- Blake

The second time
I saw Nureyev dance, I was on heroin.

It was cold in Iowa, but I was not cold
in my slender dress, gold brocade with a fringe, black,
a cheap affair, but the closest I could come
to elegance in those days. My new-found friend
kept saying, all the way over, it's too cold, let's stay home,
but it was really the high-brow nature
of ballet he resisted: the dancer leapt
into heaven and I would have cried
the lion's ruby tears, as I did the first time
when they handed him the roses, but heroin
(stanza break)
allows no tears, no fluids whatsoever, you can't even pee,
so I just sighed and scratched my nose, sort of floating
in the seat as I floated on the floor
where we laid our bodies down, never
bothering to buy a bed, after shooting up together.
Needless to say, I never knew
where he was when he was beside me, when I drifted
over the arena like a gilded angel
on a cobalt ceiling, watching, with softened eye,
all the tiny people down there cheer, watching them wave
their little flags in the air, and how I loved them,
my brain's pleasure chamber humming away.

How it's not with the heart but with the brain
you follow him to the King, which is what we called heroin,

and surely it was God I felt like
with my eyes closed, serene and sexless, with the light
(stanza break)
sparking off their sunglasses, off the watches
they encircled such delicate wrists with.

The multi-colored shirts, endlessly endearing,
those silken scarves blowing in the wind. Maybe

it was a bullfight, Christians and lions, or bears.
The contest didn't matter. It was the audience I loved,

all my lively, my finely-wrought creatures. And if I slipped
off my dress, just this once, I thought I could stay

forever, I thought I could sleep there, safe
in the ice-cold heart of a star.
THE WAY OF THE MOTH

Where is there Theatre for such a fragile audience?

-R.M. Rilke

While I read late, in bed, the circumstance
of Crazy Horse’s unmarked grave, the moth
drowned herself in my coffee cup. Did she
mistake the reflection of my reading lamp
for the warmth of love? Now she floats
in a pool of her unmaking, despite my resolve
to let them all live, these nocturnal visitors
slipping through screenless windows.

There really are tiny gold threads in her wings,
as if she wore a brocade evening gown
and on the way to the theatre, collapsed.
Drowned, like tragic Ophelia. Is she really
Rilke’s miniature woman, or merely one
of the insects pathologists use to fix the time
(stanza break)
a corpse has lain in the grass, one of those
moving into the soft tissues of decaying flesh?

The magazine article I read at the beauty parlor
as my hair turned red, mentioned this fact.

Once again, in the pursuit of beauty,
the poem is drawn toward death.

A young woman, heading back to college,
had car trouble on I-80. Last seen with a phantom
trick driver thought to be a serial murderer
Another man, stopped by the roadside near Joplin,

Missouri, covering the equipment in his pickup
truck (it was raining), found her body.

She wore a brassiere with the word *love*
embroidered between the cups, and frilly panties,

not hers, apparently provided by the murderer.
The body was already a home for insects.
(stanza break)
Where do moths go in the rain?
Where do poems go?

I've been to Grinnell, Iowa, where she was heading, to hear the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. I don't know how he died, how to keep beauty in mind.

I've been through Joplin, Missouri, on a greyhound bus, my companion's fingers digging into my arm as we passed the small bridge where the pickup truck slid into the car he slept in the back seat of, popping the driver like an egg, he said, throwing the rest of them forward (it was raining). He held their baby before him like a pillow (he was hitch-hiking) praying her bones would break before his did. Later, thinking it over, he claimed to be a hero, saving the baby's life. It makes a better story.

The gold-threaded wings of the moth (stanza break)
float on a surface of honey-colored coffee.

Her hair was blonde. My friend, also murdered,

was blonde. It took her a long minute to die,

the man answered, when asked on TV, confessing

only after acquittal, and then to save

a friend on trial. His hands wrapped tightly

around her throat. The hair, the nails, outlast

the body's soft tissue.
SHAVING THE LEGS

He loved to watch me shave my legs.
Sitting on the toilet, he’d talk, then a quick
gasp as the blade nicked a bony place.

The skin burns, the skin objects, as when
a needle goes in the elbow’s underside.
I’d offer an ankle, a knee: here, lick the blood.

Otherwise, an arm. Whoever goes first
offers her life. What more could he ask, I think,
each time I pull the razor over a leg, the white lotion
mounding like snow before a plow. Snow, then,
pulling myself up to the sill, standing on tiptoe.
What is this big surprise I’ve been promised?

Lifted by the waist, I could reach the glass
and there, over the garden, the fields, a universe
of white, curving everything. It snowed, he quietly said.

Touching our noses to the window, we could feel
the cold come rushing in, a violation
(no stanza break)
like steel. How hasty I was, always willing
to shoot up first, to shave fast. The snow
keeps piling up. Then wings, dropping down
from a thick kind of sky. Irresistable, are they?

Like the slim, white limbs he worshipped.
But my nose to the window, I don't feel it
long, the burning. It just keeps on snowing.

And the trees out there, feathered,
a dense white congress I am moving toward,
so dimly now, on failing wings.
POSITIVELY MINNEAPOLIS

There was a time I would have set myself on fire for you.
But not today.
Today, the orange leaves are themselves quite enough, placed, as they are, into a blue sky.

Once, stepping off a ferry in Seattle or Tacoma or wherever it was out there where there is too much water, where the foghorns moan all night as animals do when their young are taken . . .

Once, I looked up and saw you smiling from the platform with the others who waited for their lovers to come sailing across the water, and I saw, I swear, your bones were on fire.

As I recall, the evening ended with my screwing (no stanza break)
your friend as you watched.
I would always do what you wanted
me to do, hurt you.
Hiding in the crowd, crying out with the others,

_Crucify him!_

Once, the years pulled away
as smoothly as those ferries out there,
wherever it was, do.
But the last one
seemed to stop and wait, for who knows what,
huge, and burdened with light.
THE CHEERLEADER

You can put down the pom poms now, honey.
Weren't they heavy, though made of paper, like weights

lifted high, like the fireworks of his fingers, the impossible
intensity of orgasm? And your arms so skinny.

The breasts, ideally, should be full, rounding
an inflated letter nicely. You can place the rifle on the floor

Your father safely sleeps, his head on a pillow, its border
patiently crocheted, in pastels, by your grandmother

while you watched, remember her busy hands?
This blood mixed with brains, it looks a lot

like her berry jam. And the shrink, his white sheet
of a coat, explaining your self esteem is low, that's why

you can't accept love from a man, he'll help you learn how,
he's gone, too. Don't your arms feel like they're floating?

Don't the birds, clearly out the window, sing a strong
(no stanza break)
three beat line, over and over, like a cheer?

As for the roses, there, in the white vase, lift those out
and eat them, one by one, the red, red roses, while you wait.
THE RADIO

I still have it,
the radio you bought
that time a heroin deal
fell through, and you didn’t know what
to do with the money.
It works.

I’m sitting in the basement,
listening to a man
whose job it is
to track the paths of various
tornados, whose job is much like
mine once was,
being your girlfriend
back in Iowa.

The radio’s face is black,
trimmed with chrome,
and it has ears,
a hole on each side
where the handle was once attached
before one of us
(no stanza break)
yanked it off
during a fight.

I don’t remember who
but I get a strange and disgraceful
desire to hit you
over the head with it
just one more time, though it would be
difficult, with ho handle.

I’m listening
to the flat, nasal voices
of Minnesotans
rise in pitch and velocity, for tornadoes
deeply excite us. It’s as if
a cosmic sex act
flies over our heads, and we
get to watch.

_We’re lucky, damn lucky._
_Lived here all my life._
_Never seen nothin’ like it._

I’m thinking
(no stanza break)
of what your psychiatrist said
after the policeman dumped you
in the Detox Ward
at Seattle General: you are capable
of anything.

Darling,
we should never have left the Midwest.
THE LONG SHADOW

My young lover complains
he stands in line without his name.
He wants to know how many, more than two dozen?
O dead countrymen, O ancient governors,

what's the use? So much hoopla to the first,
in a cemetery, on a blanket, counting stars.
After, checking the mirror, my face
looked paler, surely more womanly?

So if, tonight, I listen
obsessively to Clapton's guitar
soar with tormented love for the wife of a friend
he gets in the end, then leaves

after she helped him kick heroin, for an Italian woman
able to bear children, and their son
falls out a window left open
on the fifty-something floor and dies, forgive me.

I listen because love really is so sad.
And if the man who first played this song
(no stanza break)
for me, clutching his chest
each time the guitar broke loose, its yearning
so like the human heart’s, later
tried to kill me, at least I took the blues along
out the door. Was it a fair exchange?
Of course not.

But the point is, pity, the point is, maybe
I just wanted to wrap my legs,
my coat of mink,
around his long, hard winter.
THERE ARE PAINS WHICH WILL NOT BE MISSED

I will always love you
and like the pain in a small bone
of the foot I broke, expect your return with the rain,
with each grungy theater
I enter. *The Shadow knows*
what evil lurks in the hearts of men.
for the shadow was an incredible jerk himself
back in his Butcher of Lhasa days.

I love my son more
than I will ever love you again
and when I look over the popcorn, I see he's close
to a visionary state, his eyes Blakean, shining,
nothing like the deadly eyes
of those women in the porno flick, downtown
Chicago, as they pretended to come, repeatedly,
on the rail of a fake corral.

Dear Ghost, we're nowhere near
Chicago, where you wore
a leather jacket and rode the trains at night, high.
When you bashed my head
(no stanza break)
into the wall, the police were called
and they said, yes, a woman out of control,
*what can you do,*
*take a walk next time, buddy.*

Then you, off on those damn trains, snorting
with the driver, the lot
of you looping over the city, loving the way
everyone blurs into everyone else.
But if the train stops, the face
filling the window with hate
buckles my knees. *Must run.*
*I know this dream.*

*The shudder through my body is no orgasm.*
The man takes the seat next to mine
and he’s huge, his face a tunnel,
the eyes weirdly receding.
How did I get on this train?
There goes the ball park.
There goes the city line.
*Yeah, yeah, all my love in vain.*
CROSSING TEXAS BY BUS

I once heard a hospice nurse say that men, when dying, recall their first time, while women speak of their children.

I had none then, crossing Texas by bus, with a man who wanted none, it would ruin my figure, interfere with his sex life. Possibly those endless rows of cotton, all the white stuff erupting from pods, was what triggered his imagination. He was like that, a poet, a collector of experience: the time on a bus, the time on top of a ferry crossing Puget Sound, mist in my face, tears in his eyes, a memory like a jewel to carry with him into that violet sea.

_O build your ship of death, for you will need it._
The driver, was he bored, too, piloting his forsaken bus, going on Christmas, and if, distracted by what he saw in his overhead mirror, he had crashed the bus, what pearls would I be left with, fading into a bloody Texas highway, (no stanza break)
the man beside me in bed with his Phillipino whore,

so young she had no pubic hair, and cheap, less
than a dollar American. But we stepped off somewhere,

into the glare of any old terminal, and driven, always,
to seek a darkness approximating his heart, he found

a place to drink doubles, play pool. Boarding again,
four young Black men sat in the seats he insisted were ours,

the back seats, where you can stretch. Luckily for us,
I wore then, along with the water buffalo coat a rich girl

in Iowa City had given me, the perpetual stunned look
of one who’d been hit over the head and forgotten who she was.

It saved us, for after the first man said, I don’t see your name on it,
the second, glancing my way, had mercy. Be cool, man, we be moving,

stay cool, he said to the crazy white boy
determined to be what my Midwestern grandfather

would call, a hoodlum, in these parts, a desperado,
(no stanza break)
escorting his new girlfriend, the lamb in water buffalo clothing,
to Arizona, where his mother, her eyes the same
dark ones he drove through this world like a phantom,

would tell her, *In this family, we have nothing*
*against crazy women.* But years later, she would say

I was too much the prima donna to be a wife. And it's true.
My first time on stage, age five, I noticed how the footlights

blind, no faces out there, only darkness, and you realize
how truly alone you are, so you keep the count, you try not
to fall, you imagine the many, many threads
lifting from your solar plexus, from the area of the heart,

and that is how you turn, the body slowly revolving,
a blue, blue planet in black, black space, the pull from within

versus the pull from without, *Wait, wait, the little ship,*
the balancing of it, dear ex of all Xs.
MEAT AND POTATOES

My good German knife in hand, I begin
to peel the potatoes, and again, those Jews
of the Lodz ghetto come to mind, queued up

behind each communal kitchen, for peelings,
their doom fattening as the meat is cut
closer and closer to the skin.

In a Polish household, the man builds
into the bowels of his house, a special room
for the storage of winter potatoes, grown

on the extra acre, de-sprouted by the children
before they go soft. My chore, to fetch six
each night, and I was always afraid of the room

with no light, of the possibility hidden
beneath a mountain of potatoes: some man’s arm,
muscled and hairy, could reach out to grab me.

My father preached work as Rumkowski,
the Jewish godfather of the ghetto, preached it,
(no stanza break)
as salvation. The Germans need our fine tailoring,

he told them, Lodz, a textile center of Poland.
If you spoke against him, your name might appear
on the next list. My husband said, that's what was
depressing me, I read such books, The Chronicles
of the Lodz Ghetto, buried in a tin can
under the make-shift fire station, for future witness.

My husband said, for Christ's sake,
you're not even Jewish. But halfway through, what you
notice is the shift to a new norm. numbers take over

the story, details of suicides dwindle. Just death
increasing, deportations, births reduced to near zero.
It's the new arrivals keep the numbers up.

It means they are centralizing the population
for future efficient transport. But daily business goes on.
You go to work, keep off the list. You network

with friends and family for the privilege
of collecting scraps from the back doors of kitchens
(no stanza break)
like a dog. I can't imagine it, I really can't.

My father worked at a meat packing plant, for a Jew, where the huge and headless bodies of steers hung in a refrigerated room, from hooks,

like the failed assassins of Hitler, where blood was hosed in swirls from the cement floor into drains, and the smell, fleshy and musky, was always horrible. My father had nothing against Jews, he said, but thought the kosher killing cruel, to slit the throat of a poor beast, to bleed it to death like that.

Better a quick shot to the head, he said.
And as August, 1944, drew near, no potatoes, no flour, come into the ghetto. Only cabbage and kohlrabi arrived on the trucks. *What does it mean*, questioned *The Chronicles*. On the last train to Auschwitz rode Rumkowski and family, the letter

from a high German official finally useless.
The troops in rags, the shops shut down. (no stanza break)
My father, in the end, believed he was a dog,
not a breadwinner. But I am still standing
over a stainless steel sink in the kitchen
of this apartment like a treehouse, high above
the commotion of transport, and from
the precise blade of the knife in my hand
dangles one long and unbroken peel.

I have done it, escaped the bad marriage.
I will eat potatoes forever. Always, the price,
I hear my friend say, as I drop the brown spiral
into the disposal and grind it to mush.
With the flip of a switch, a certain relish.
How quick, the blades. Just noise.
THE MADONNA, LOOKING AHEAD

My son worries aloud
how he will get to my funeral. I guess dad
could give me a ride. My face, now frozen, inspires him
to add, but first I'll stay in my room
a long time and be sad.

I study him closely, the marble figure
in a museum’s steady light. He is no longer
that thick-thighed cherub
turning, full face, from the toilet. I don't want you to die
like my brother's other mother did. The real one.

It begins, he is stepping out
from the composition, but like the serious child
of the Bruges Madonna, holds on tightly
to a mother’s thumb
while testing the smoky air with his toes.

How Michelangelo, a motherless son,
sculpted the Madonna's face
as mask, as response
to the abysmal fear of what suffering
(no stanza break)
lay ahead for her son, is astonishing.

And it is precisely because
we are so human, that I take up the tools
and build, into the roofbeams of his house, a memory
of the fierce love between us
so that one day, pressing

a weary forehead to the cool stone, he will know
the secret of water
pooled at the foot of the rock, timeless,
the body of the mother
become a stone church, a glass

and concrete museum, a spacious place,
the cathedral of light, sweet and vain,
falling through a window's
colored membrane.
Then, the candles smoking their grit

toward the ceiling, my form prone
between them, I will remain
in the lining of his mind, finished, a shape
familiar as the Rodin
(no stanza break)
he so admired at the Institute

we must always stop before it, his
chubby hand reaching out
from the red stroller
toward a dark and frozen movement
he recognized.
THE GREAT DIVIDE

Some of us get across.
Now rivers run the other way
The towns are filled with casinos, pawn shops.
Now I don’t buy, I sell.
My grandmother’s fire opal
for thirty-five dollars. A blonde boy
once told me, jumping a fence,
(me in a bikini, he in jeans and cowboy boots)
(it was bad luck
wearing an opal when it wasn’t your stone.
We tore up the dusty road
in his light blue convertible
but made it to Happy Hour on time.
Already half drunk, and the bikini
drove them mad. I know.
Forgive me.

Oh, Jeffrey. Each evening I walk out the door
of my little house here
in Missoula, to see if the world is still there.
Half drunk on stars, the moon
fixed above Mount Jumbo.
(no stanza break)
Inside, a boy sprawled on the floor
before a TV, a dog asleep
on the couch, love me very much.
Still a boy, jumping the fence
with a grin, arguing the merits of Tanqueray
gin. I watch you striding down the road
in jeans unwashed for weeks.
Southern Iowa steamed.
Sexy as hell
from behind.

The men dumping you on a stretcher
didn’t think so. One,
looking down, unlike
the moon, said, you junkie
piece of shit.
Or so I was told, later,
by faces blank as moons,
gathered in a room
hushed as that evening in the mountains
when I stopped at a rest area
near the Divide
to pee and let the dog run,
when a bird hovered
(no stanza break)
just over my head.
My son said, *don’t move.*
The mountains grew bluer,
the moon a gracious
white sphere. Only the wind
knows us.
NORTH AVENUE EAST

for my son

Opening the front door of this cottage-like house
to find the sky full of stars and clouds streaming by
startles me every time, like falling in love,
when suddenly you see just how deep and wide

the man is. A day of snow melting in Minnesota,
an occasion for checking the oil. Glancing up from under
the hood of my old Thunderbird, I saw in the green
eyes of your future father, a passion strong as you have become.

Balanced astride his bike, there on the sidewalk
in front of his house, like an apparition. How can I explain:
I see him as if through water now. What catches your breath
is the swiftness, becoming a stranger to what you knew

as the natural order. The night you were born, the world
was reduced to the metal buckle of your father's belt.
I could endure the pain only by hanging on to what I knew
Eye level, the belt loop of his jeans, as the current swept me
toward oblivion. I understood no words until he repeated
(no stanza break)
what the doctor said, what the nurse said. Now the words
lie deep within the blue Spruce that looms from our neighbor’s
yard. You tell me you remember watching us bend
toward each other and kiss, one Fourth of July,m
as fireworks over the Mississippi flared
in the window behind us. What else
can we do, against the black window, but shine?
TO THE MOON OVER THE MOUNTAIN

They say you are old hat.
On TV tonight, they claim you were conquered
by the men sitting there, white-haired now,
lightly bouncing off your body
in their thick-soled boots
like boys on a trampoline.

Twenty five years ago
and what do we know about the nature of anything?
There was a saint, once, claimed
more demons work between us and the moon
than move through the entire rest of the cosmos.
St. Jerome, I think it was.

But what I know is
when you let loose your fullness
and allow me no sleep, I must leave my house.
I must walk around and around
the door of the beloved
for mystics have said

it is most foolish
(no stanza break)
to presume entry: a ferocious, white fire.
That shadow on the wall
was once a person
walking forward, hand outstretched.
Once a person coming toward you.
SCANNING FOR CHRIST

It seems
everyone is scanning for Christ
of late, in the laundromat, on the next
subway seat, behind fresh seafood at Safeway.
Is that him,
a parcel tucked under his arm, crossing
the bridge? Look how the light
envelops his head, how he continues
through fields of unbroken snow,
leaving no prints.

Beware the man who claims
to be enlightened. He will distress you,
fault your housekeeping, call that child of yours
unruly. Beware the man
claiming ethics for his father, as if he would inherit
a genetic trait. I dream of the fathers,
heavier, now, around the middle,
their wives still pulling out the scrapbooks
to show those World War II photos: here he is
in uniform, lean, smiling.

(stanza break)
I should have been his daughter
by marriage, offered my son to the clan.
Severely, he says, it's about time
I saw you again. It must be Sunday morning.
He's gone to make pancakes as usual.
But I am a Venus in sackcloth.
I am the Magdalene
finding her other body parts
just as useful. Did he tell you, that together,
we have seen the evening's far places?

Besides, it's the pissed-off Christ I like, the red-faced
young man throwing the money changers out.
He sits down to consider the elm.
I know who he is
and he is no hero. It's such a relief
between us. And if I smoke a cigarette, here,
under the elm's green awning, waiting
his intention, he won't mind.
You know what I mean.
We give ground.
ON THE WAY TO LOLO HOT SPRINGS

If I wrapped myself in some animal’s skin, wore one silver earring and smoked opium, it would embarrass him. If I wandered over the desert, whirling and whirling until my spirit broke through the veil of the actual, he would say he wants a traditional mother, lingering over the word with a nostalgia incredible for his ten years.

He finds the trees boring. The mountains don’t move him, nor does my account of Lewis and Clark threading their way through this canyon. He is thoroughly engaged in moving a miniscule blue hedgehog over a two inch screen by pushing buttons, collecting rings of power, exploding boxes. The desert would be quiet.

(stanza break)
In the photograph
I keep thinking of, a Pakistani woman
leans against the brick wall
opposite a saint's tomb, her long, black hair
splayed over the crumbling surface
as if electrified. Thin as sin, and deep
into the trance, while a child
beside her sleeps, his round rump
barely covered. I could live
on locusts and honey
SLEEPLESS EVERYWHERE

Who are those clouds flying by, the doves,
the doves at their windows?
Ezekiel said. (something like that)

And Crazy Horse supposedly said
it's a good day to die, or someone did.
He went for days without sleep, without food,
to enter his vision. A horseman came,
rode on. Soldiers fell out of the sky
for another. They kept falling,

the horses, the soldiers,
though the window stayed open
and stepping through it was confusing

said the brother who betrayed him,
as Judas would agree. There was a man
worked for God and the Borgia devil

by turns, Leonardo da Vinci, sleeping
fifteen minutes every four hours,
(no stanza break)
rising to attach paper wings

to small, green lizards. Nowhere
in his voluminous notebooks
is there mention of human affection.

How can you not love the man?
Salvador Dali napped sitting upright,
a spoon balanced on his palm.

The noise of its dropping woke him.
None of it works for me.
An ordinary sort of insomniac,

I watch out the window.
Who are those stars twirling by
in their white, white dresses?

Weren't we pretty then?
Except for the Smith girl.
An angel, my father said she looked like,

laid out in her white dress and veil.
O Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
(no stanza break)
if you came back

in your white dress with wings,
would I stop being afraid at night?
If you came to the swings of St. Theodore’s

black-topped playground
after First Communion class, we could tell
secrets again (I like your panties)

as the wind passes, cool
and pleasing, between our thighs.
And to show how I love you,

I would pump harder
over the hills of air, I would hang
upside down in the posture of St. Peter

on his cross, my feet pointed
to heaven: a slow crucifixion
the most glorious.

O Ezekiel, strangled by your wheel,
and grandpa, drunk on 7 Crown,
(no stanza break)
these fierce old men,

I don’t want them.
Give me a hand, a soft one,
to place on the forehead of fever.

A man like a mother
Let the dove go.
Let the angel fall silent.

Surrounding Leonardo’s
effeminate St. John the Baptist
is a darkness you’ve never seen,

out of which the boy-prophet
smiles. The final gesture,
his signature,

a finger pointing up and away
from the slight self.
His cross, a slender thing.
BURNING THE FAKE WOMAN

On 1 June 1310 in Paris at the Place de Greve
a beguine, referred to as a ‘pseudo-mulier,’
was burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic,
having written a book ‘filled with errors and heresies.’¹

She won’t apologize
for running loose in the world,
claims a direct line to God.
Thus, the crusty old farts
become peripheral, their blueprint
for salvation, inferior, the old boy
network, irrelevant. Jesus
on that mainline - -
all you need is love.

They burn her alive.
But they warn you first,
don’t they? The Bishop of Cambrai,
burning her book in public,
forced her to watch.
The book won’t die.
(no stanza break)

¹ Ellen L. Babinsky, Introduction to *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by Marguerite Porete.
It lives on, underground,
passed from hand to hand.

Call in William

of Paris, the Dominican inquisitor,
who throws her in jail
with Guiard de Cressonessart,
a beghard pledged himself
to her defense.

O what happens to the man
supposed to be your bulwark?

A year and a half
under major excommunication,

he breaks,
confessing to his mission
as the Angel of Philadelphia,
trading the flames
for life in prison. The woman
still won't talk, suspected of heresy,
in rebellion and insubordination
. . . would not respond before the inquisitor
to those things pertaining to the office of inquisitor.2

(stanza break)

2 Second deliberation against Marguerite Porete, 9 May 1310.
Silence or confession,  
either way, she’s fucked.  
Like the Templars before her,  
she must roast, but this time,  
in the middle of town,  
no suburban field for her,  
so all can watch, and learn  
the formidable power of  
the office over the woman.

And here we sit, all these  
centuries later, at the edge  
of Missoula, Montana,  
watching a pseudo-mulier,  
a truly fake woman,  
being passed around the bar.  
Filled with air, undressed,  
a black garter and stockings  
painted onto her vinyl body

Two slits in the crotch,  
a vagina and an anus.  
How nice to have a choice,  
Judy says, as we gaze past our beers,  
(no stanza break)
witness to Herod, or Jared and Duane,
drunk and singing karaoke
from the stage. A big screen
to their right plays out the scene.
a cowgirl lassoing

her too-handsome cowboy
in the fairyland corral.
A perfectly round ball
bouncing up there on the screen
rests a moment
over each word
I'm supposed to sing - -
lies, lies, flashing by so fast
I think they may be flames, yes, flames.
VIOLETS

For if you are alone you are completely yourself
but if you are accompanied by a single companion
you are only half yourself.

Leonardo da Vinci

Possibly you saw him standing alone,
drink in hand, eyes shot through with a hunger
men never lose. So you take him home, though
you don’t really mean it, you tell yourself
Soon enough, you navigate the blizzard
toward his house, cars in the ditch, each covered
with a thick shroud. O haven’t you yet learned,
travelling through the cold country for ten
thousand years, the key is to keep moving,
to never, but never stop, to refute

the wool shawl his dead wife left, to resist
picking up that first violet, lonely
in the supermarket, stuck there among
fruits and vegetables, inconsolable
in the stark light. Soon, you are depending
upon a purple chorus, they shine so,
the blossoms, deep and fluted, rather like
(no stanza break)
vaginal lips, the leaves thrusting upwards, 
thick-veined, reaching for the filigreed light 
lace curtains allow. Erasmus Darwin

understood this sexual property
of flowers, his book eroticizing
their functions thought to have influenced Blake’s 
treatise on Female Ruin. The Lilly
speaks to Thel, but to no avail, for when
the Virgin hears a voice breathe the endless
why from her own grave, she jumps up and flees.
And if Darwin’s grandson, Charles, saw it
always in terms of warfare, wasn’t this
the essential difference between us?
THE JUNKYARD

I constructed a family
from second-hand items: baby
 carriage wheels, adding machines,
things gathering dust in back rooms.
Make the best of it, they told me.

Once started, there is no stopping it.
Always, the unseen variable.
So I gave the firemen the okay,

go in with your axes.

Stop it at any cost.

Looming, for a glorious instant, white
against the evergreens
massed together like a prayer,
their roots secret, and wet,
it went down.

The orchestra played on.
Our pleas went ignored.
We drifted on dark water.

(stanza break)
Sometimes, I think it is done.
Then I think of the next man.
Serenely, in the evening, I stroll with my dog
through rusted shapes
as the sun drops down.

But where is the junkyard man
who asks no questions,
who knows better
than to mess with a lady’s poison?
Listen, the three low notes

which never stop sounding.
Over an elegant line
of horizon, like hellhounds, they keep coming.

Draw near, my shadow, be steel.
THE WAY OF THE MOTH II: AT AN AMTRAK STATION

Behind glass, a large man stands, smoking, 
waiting for a train, for a son, for Christmas.

_Biologists studying an orange and black moth_ 
found that a female will mate with more than one male

and then actively select from the various offerings
_the sperm of the biggest male she has dallied with._

He won’t see us, the windows tinted blue 
against the glare. He never smoked when we were

married. _Female moths engage in promiscuous sex_ 
to gather the desirable defense chemicals and nutrients

_that accompany the male’s sperm during intercourse._

We pass through the glass. The boy waits for a sign

from this large man. They stand together awkwardly, 
without a purpose. _To demonstrate that he is endowed_

_with a generous spermatophore, the courting male_ 
(no stanza break)
will extrude from his head brushes scented with a whiff of the defensive alkaloid, and lightly whisk the little brushes against the female. I watch them disappear, in search of a Coke machine, and I know the boy won’t dare speak his heart for two weeks, already he accommodates the longer stride. If she agrees he is properly furnished, the female allows the male to mount her and ejaculate the spermatophore, a considerable feat. I suppose I expected more: the strength of a giant, the courage of a hero. The spermatophore in these moths is huge. It’s 11 percent of the male’s body mass. The man’s immigrant grandfather, Slovenian, wore a handle bar mustache. To prove his manliness, to stand up to the miners’ jeers, those Finns, those Italians, he went down with the men. It’s equivalent to a 180-pound man having a 20-pound ejaculate. (no stanza break)
Two weeks later, the mine collapsed, leaving
a woman with eight children, no survivors’
benefits, a ham at Christmas. *The female*

detects the largest male because the largest
male also makes the largest spermatophore.

The boy, walking away, his stride lengthening,
(the man won't slow) will grow to be large also.

The hefty packet in turn stretches the genital
canal, a distention that is in a sense memorized
by the female. Knowing the relative mass
of her paramours, the female can choose

which sperm to channel toward her eggs
by appropriate squeezing of the muscles,

diverting unsavory sperm toward side chambers
along the way. When they return to me, waiting

at the glass door with the luggage, smoking,
(no stanza break)
the boy is remote. *Dr. X, who was the first to suggest that females might engage in post-copulatory selection of sperm,*

said the strategy was likely to be widespread in the animal kingdom. The boy is struggling with a heavy suitcase, while the man carries two, three, easily. I'm following in their wake, free of weight. In the cold air, I can almost hear a symphony of twitching brushes.

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LAKE WINNIBIGOSHISH

The trees, so white and so many.
I don’t remember it this way.
Their slender trunks a comfort.

You surrender, that’s all.
To a man, to a drug, to wall after wall
of birch. It’s not unpleasant.

Winnie, steel-gray in October.
White-caps. This is where
nostalgia will take you: a mean wind,
a sleety snow pricking your face.
Turn the car around,
head west.

A thin snow already covers the ground
of the clearing. Two small buildings,
WOMEN and MEN, on the far side.

I stop and look up.
I don’t know why.

(no stanza break)
The tops of the trees are spinning.

How does the wind manage this?
How do I hear my name
when no one is here?

This much I know: a skinny, white woman
stands in the snow
Tell me the rest.

At the Cass Lake E Z Stop, I find
a T shirt pinned to the wall.

*Where Eagles Soar*

I don't remember eagles here,
just my father saying, *God,*

*look how they live*

as we passed through,
four kids and a dog
in the back seat of a Buick.

Eagles, hawks, doves.
I never quite understood the stories.

(no stanza break)
From around here, the Bear Clan.

Like the bear, we scare people.
Scared ourselves, we turn
and run into the woods.

I buy the T shirt with its awful
green lettering. It's what I know.
Purchase. Surrender.