

*Ars Poetica · Sharon Cumberland*

1

A young woman with orange hair,  
wearing white anklets,  
tight skirt  
with black and red zig-zags,  
is walking down fifth avenue.  
You wouldn't know she was there  
if I didn't tell you,  
or about the five-inch spikes  
on her heels, and the tiny-footed  
dog with the chinese face  
she leads on a yellow string.  
You wouldn't see the businessmen  
swing their heads involuntarily  
to see her breasts bounce  
under the white ribbed tee shirt.  
"Why should I know that?" you say.  
"Will it find me a job  
or make my lover take me back?  
Will it buy me a burger  
and a big fries?"  
And then I say: You ask  
the wrong questions.  
Better to ask:  
Could you see her nipples?  
Was she smiling?

2

There is a madman standing on the corner of fifty-seventh and fifth.  
He believes he is clad in barbed wire from head to foot.  
He takes tiny steps so he won't feel the barbs too deeply.  
He talks funny so his cheeks won't bleed.

The people hurry by and don't look:  
they have their own worries.  
He cries for help, gives detailed directions to a hardware store,  
but he can't move his mouth, so they don't understand  
what he's shouting: "Buy me some wire clippers! I promise  
to pay you back!" But only Tiffany's and Saks  
and fancy shops are near—fine scissors for cutting  
gold links don't work on barbed wire.  
He works his way down fifth, weeping and mumbling.  
He sees a yellow string from the edge of his eye—  
a dog leading a girl—neither one the type  
a guy like him ever got near to,  
even before—when he was young, and not wired.  
"So what's the point," you say. "Should I  
be glad I'm not crazy?" I point  
the way my mother taught me not to—See? See?  
See him, barbed and unbarbed.

3

A man in a suit, a fine suit,  
not a loud or obvious stripe,  
a fine stripe, but not too  
dignified—just right, the suit  
stripe matching the shirt stripe—  
not precisely, but just enough  
to look fine, clean—a stylish  
combination—with french cuffs,  
gold cufflinks and tie tack;  
a rep tie with broad blue  
stripe—silk, maroon background  
(the tie is central—everything  
depends upon the right tie);  
a man in a fine suit strides  
toward lunch at Rumplemeyer's.  
He sees himself reflected  
in the window at Tiffany's—

sees his face in the window-  
dressing: Indian king, a diamond  
in his forehead, gilded elephant,  
*mahout* with a ruby prod—he likes  
what he sees: his hairline  
is holding its own. He smiles,  
a match for the elegant crowd  
around him, and the girls,  
girls with circus hips that swing  
like a trapeze in a Big Top:  
breasts jounce and bow. There goes  
a freakish dog with a spike-heeled  
showgirl in the lead. There goes  
a screaming Tom O’Bedlam—a side-  
show for the man in a fine suit,  
on a great street at lunchtime.  
“OK,” you say, “I see him,  
and so what?” That’s enough,  
I say. Seeing is enough.