

My Coat of Flowers · Susan Firer

This is the black velvet coat of my mother's
debutante balls. She had it recut for me.
"Cut the end of the sleeves pointy,
like the coat sleeves on the witch
in SNOW WHITE," my mother told
the kneeling, red-pincushion-braceleted dressmaker.
I was 15 and already on the runway
in a coat patterned after an apple-carrying murderer.

The sashes held me in the coat.
The milky satin lining looked like a summer planet,
a slab of freshly cut tree rings, going on
forever; it smelled like a coffin's lining.
When I put that coat on, I knew
I would invite my friends over to play
slip & slide in Tanqueray Sterling vodka.

Here was "*Un manteau de guerre.*"
I scared my boyfriend half to death
in that coat. "Touch it," I told him.
"Then I will tell you what it is.
It's like nothing else. Touch it."

"The rabat of a monsignor is purple,
that of a cardinal is red, and the Pope has
a white rabat." Me, I wore a full-dress, black coat.
The coat was a sail. On the bed, in a black puddle
you'd never imagine the stir it could create.
It was enough to make my friends forget
the Triduum of prayer celebrated on the occasion
of Saint Francis Xavier's touring right arm,
visiting the Church of Gesu on Wisconsin Avenue.

When I put on that coat, I was all 7 dancing
princesses off in the trade winds. The coat was
a passport, a jail cell, an inky humid forest
where you knew parrotfever was prevalent.

In that coat, I could hear
every piece of galactic noise.
Diamond tiaras windchimed in trees.
Spells were being cast;
white cats were mumblety-peg dying.
Selves were unlatching. Girls with snouts
danced in the rain, in pistachio-green cutoffs.
Old men, carrying wax-paper-covered trays
of cannoli, hawked their wares and midnight
danced with black, fishnet stockinged women
half their age, without dropping
one cream-stuffed cannoli.

Are you brave enough for visions?
Concertina-barbed-wire-velvet cut hands?
Cannoli? Trade secrets?
Once I wore a coat that made you believe
in The Virgin Birth and all the other detentions
of light with their accompanying saints'
touring arms, papal bulls, and lunate bones.

In that coat I recognized that I was
the tourist of all, and I would refuse
nothing: oysters, intemperate temperatures,
aphrodisiac artichokes, and nights of knowing
nothing, no one, of course, not even
my own beautifully soft, dark-coated self.