

Two Poems · *Sharon Cumberland*

ARS POETICA

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?" Mom
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.

UNREASONABLE WOMAN

Sometimes, alone at home, I say into the air
“Bastard! Thieves!” or sometimes,
“I love you” to nobody, in order to hear
my voice, and to address the people
who ought to have been here, fighting
with me, whom I could resent for hemming
me in so that I could never have
this solitude. For not loving me enough,
or not appreciating my feelings.
“I love you” I say to the one
who did not believe me, who never came here,
that thief, who let my hair grow gray
without him, that bastard.