Ars Poetica

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Ars Poetica · Sharon Cumberland

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?

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.

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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.