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Susan Firer

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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.