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Flesh, A Naked Dress

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FLESH, A NAKED DRESS

by

Susan Andrews Grace

Bachelor of Arts
University of Saskatchewan
1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2001**

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ABSTRACT

Flesh, A Naked Dress

by

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“Flesh, A Naked Dress” is a collection of five poems: “Joy of the Perfect Tool,” “Texas,” “Estuary,” “Flesh, A Naked Dress,” and “An Event in the World.” The form of the serial poem, adopted for this collection, is the one described by poet Jack Spicer. It is larger scaffolding for the poetry, which comes out of a meditative discipline or ‘dictation.’ The poem moves ahead, without looking back, in units that are somehow related, and which are chronological. The serial poem is written in order to understand: it is not understanding in order to write. To read units of the serial poem is like turning on lights in the rooms of a house, one at a time. Language in the poem acts as furniture for the rooms.

“Flesh, A Naked Dress” investigates notions of body and soul, and in particular philosophical heritage of the philosophy of Plotinus. This investigation takes place in various geographies.

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JOY OF THE PROPER TOOL

[1]
Eye of hawk
mouse in field.

Fecund earth
fetid water.

Fucking asshole
in a city: non-

identity, God's tool
perfect.

[2]
Newly-dead monks buried,
their work undone & agendas

underground with them.
The maze goes unmowed.

Chicadees chitter in the pines and spruce
alight on blue-green looking for a Francis,

dusk and time bullies
Benedictine magpies.

[3]
Eyeglasses bring the page home.
Sight sharpened. Awake!

Awake & listen: pages
and pages of grasses ahead:

plains, purple alfalfa
green wheat taking over

from fescue: wilderness
now weather.

[4]
God's palm opens to receive
foolish effort and perfect tools.

How to learn not to pick and choose:
listen to the South Dakota boy who says

at a farewell party near the airport
the Dakotas are a lot of nothing:

Sunday mornings people go to church
then out for caramel buns at the café

admire the neighbour's daughter's baby, go home
drive through grasses.

[5]
God's roughhousing: the homeless man
a shame he is shitting on Decatur,

openly like that- but he can't
use the toilet at the ARCO gas station.

*O tool me a story, a drive
over to crazy*

away from blunder: the perfect way.
Radio me in.

[6]

Life is round and blue

taking up precious space:

home and refuge

nests in sky's wooden arms.

Spruce trees listen to stories

shroud closer

man lost in the forest not homeless

no matter how naked.

[7]
Cholla and creosote bush punctuate
fierce desert

language
cicadas sing.

[8]

Now is a pale blue truck,
rusty, rattling

along the dusty road
unable

to make the trip
successfully.

Love a hollow oval
holy air

Siberian elm pushing
green upward, wild praise.

[9]
Buffalo bones ground
into china cups:

wilderness.
Buffalo were wild.

*

Wilderness is north
wild + *deer* with racks big as

a bear's reach
silent.

[10]
Gravity holds (it's a handy tool)
gas in the bottom of the rusty tank

hole in the top half
sloshes gas & fumes

these free-trade roads
also full of holes

a radio like me
at once empty and full

picks up the whine
of the motor.

[11]

Now you see how wrong:
turn the round corner

unlikely larch,
cedar maze leads to a clearing

the hermit's house, tiny glade
its yellow perfection, undone.

Nature's so often like this gap
unthinking itself, moving along

self-forgetful: it's all short-term.
Glaciers missed the Cypress Hills

bristle cone pines, beachy things
sand, gravel and shells up there.

[12]

Cactusquick pricks
prairie conscience

soft grasses heal, their sword-tips
flattened by wind.

*

Drink whiskey out of tea cups
never wine out of tumblers.

*

Crows caw a mottled sky
leaf-lace wings the blues.

*

Sun flattens heartache given to prayer:

 pray for holy endings
 give praise when they arrive

 pray for wise beginnings
give thanks.

[13]

The plain is the sentiment that exalts us

pushes blooded exaltation
perfect pump for oxygen.

Radio me in, said Jack
pick me up into radio's pump

shoot me quickly through heaven
and the quick back to California.

Radio pumps in Outside and
stars, in families, on the plain's roof

the firmament a spill of milk
splashed across night. The heart

spits and pours and breaks
oxygen stays without perfection

mystery a lie told as if we never die.

[14]

Was it right to surrender indulgences
language as if it mattered: it did: red

passages inhabited by daimons,
whispered Plotinus, you are lucky:

stars spill consciousness
in a desert evening: warm and dry

heals sinfulness, opens nightscents, delicate
and serried, infinite as the plains.

[15]

Lay out that intricately-woven lifetime,
its warp necessity, its weft circumstance:
and permeability
is like that: relentless in the way it undoes
argues unto death, a white silk ribbon
unfurling its narrow good.

[16]
Mistakes! Look to the jimson flower
 its shocking tawdriness
roadside vaginal throat
open
waves its panties at you
 as you drive by
 not making mistakes.

[17]

Lies in a state of betweenness:

fabrication but not to honour Fabricius

for whom mud is the dust of water. These lies

are spittle of the gods of houses, home

repeated transition made by blood.

Accusation at its oaken doorway.

[18]
A sweater of greenness
wear its blessed arms
to reach around
what's left.

[19]

Whatever it takes is what:
clouds shaped like flying saucers
cranes woven in red silk shoes
fat and good spectres, witches knots
lilacs sick with longing
the grasses of Parnassus
is what it takes
grograin winceyette nainsook flannelette
jacquard paisley stockingette jersey
duffel nankeen corduroy kersey
twill & moleskin dimity sharkskin
calico taffeta and moiré: foreskin—

as with all goodness, cloth leads the way.

[20]

Time to sing the psalms, their wraiths smoky chant.

A chicken killed by a fox, on the path to the water. Dawn

has been an hour already. The chicken's neck collapsed,
feathers clumped by blood and scattered in the night raid.

Don't look closely: you see nature better out
the corner of your eye.

[21]

Lies truth tells self-righteousness:
backward weaving.

Perfection is now's

rusty truck rattling down
the pot-holed highway.

TEXAS

i

Every once in a while on a long trip in the vast difference between desert and swamp and back again there will be fireworks: flowers and pin wheels arranging light's brilliant death in the sky perfect Oriental asymmetry, their prehistoric heritage, their wild dandelion puffs in unlikely blues, the periwinkle of sheets on the new bed. Swampy bayous keep secrets in their alligator trenches and voodoo streets but in Texas after the wild rains of a late spring afternoon two days into hurricane season there are fireworks. And children are reminded to look up. They too can't believe.

ii

The first of June Abilene is the prettiest town you ever seen. The town's women do what needs to be done at the palatial Women's Club on Willis Street so they can manage never to treat their menfolk mean. At Joe Allen's Pit Bar-B-Que or any other establishment that the institution of love might frequent. Let's use George Bush and his wife who are in the picture at the entrance to Joe Allen's as an example. She's in a pink dress, coifed hair, looking nice. He wrote the note to say he and Barbara surely enjoyed their steaks and thanked Joe Allen and Sharon for staying open late just for them. On a rant in Texas, one has to ask *Whose Abilene it is, anyway?*

iii

She chose to mess with Texas at a rest stop. She said they should give it back to Mexico. Its politics and crime (one and the same she implied) were third world and she could hardly wait to get back to the States. An a-steamed (it was 104 degrees after rain and humid) respondent wrote on the cubicle wall next to this urinary treatise that she ought to be shot and then hung and besides didn't she know Texas joined the States a long time ago? It was relief Little Miss Mess-with-Texas needed— not a history lesson.

iv

What happened to women in Texas when we first start talking about the *planet*, that idea of the wholeness of a blue sphere in space, when that man took a giant step for *mankind*, before the time when he should have said *humanity* instead was— Tang and Tupperware and Tencel. That was what happened to women in Texas, and everywhere else.

ESTUARY

**Ocean salt draws water from the St. Laurence
beckons murderous dissolution in the estuary.
The Laurentide range bristles green and purple
blue distance. Sailboats white fractions.**

He says, the blue man of Burundi,
coffee grows well in his homeland now. Human
fertilizer he says. Black humour,
adds colour to any party.
Language something beaten

into him, he appreciates a well-turned phrase. In Belgian Congo
the god of lightening is so lost
there is no hope he will be found.
The man from Burundi is tired

walks all day, every night, up and down
the safe sidewalk to escape imagination's
screen of murder, his voice forest-deep
his hands night-empty.

Pines, firs, and slender maples
bow over the table of the garden party. Language

floats over vegetables and flowers
their *eachness* each as

cosmos, daisies, marigolds, dianthus, verbena:
function in joy: do nothing.

A man from Peru kisses the hand of a charming American woman. He asks her in French, does she speak English. She says, "Oui." He says he doesn't. And asks her again, does she speak English. His Canadian wife, used to such peril, introduces herself as his fourth wife but he, she says, is only her second husband. The Chilean wine is good, they all agree. The lamb on the spit is turned and the garden parties.

In this blue house
above the Irish cemetery, names rise
almost to God, bells peal high
above the St. Laurence
staircase estuary.

The blue-eyed God's verticality
demanded Mohawks convert
French conquer.

In case there is any doubt, the grass on the highway verge is green and bends in the wind. It is the green of many rains, roots which know survival's juicy tricks. You never know what might happen in an airport: thundering carts: people in the air. Babies cry here, as they do everywhere, when woken from dream. Surely the grass must still be green.

Unfriendly old man
long time between *flights*

same as *thefts*
the other language.

Midnight intersection:
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
corner of St. Pierre and St. Jean Baptiste.
Furs, fish, timber, driven down the river
rafts of young wood and immigrant
men who danced the logs to get here
spent silver to sing in taverns and pubs
giddy cobblestones jump up
get in their way back from whiskey.

**Red-coats advance on New France
results this century:
three cornered hat, straw and simple:
4.95\$ *Canadien***

FLESH, A NAKED DRESS

The perfect tool shoots utterly clean
into the cosmic mixing bowl
sound circles round
broken wing mended
tinctures of music
mulberry shoots tied against failure.
Something is gone forever, yet
communion is desert bright.
The bowl tips
as above circles so below traffic.

Orogenesis of these mountains:
vermilion blankets dropped behind hugely opened

doors, squeezed, bent, wrapped and broken.
The drive toward Paradise

down Sunset.
This day you shall be with me

The desert burns
rocks black with its varnish

a grapevine canyon waits
for a curled herd of sheep.

Inside airplanes
Ascending souls

cherish earth,
paradise.

Meanwhile in California
where it must be God loves people more and better

purple morning glory holds
the white wall

flower-delicate necks push
heart leaves

half arcs
sharpened chiaroscuro.

It's easy when you've self-righteously scraped ice from windshields
brushed thick layers of snow from the roof
letting wind take care of the rest to think

Californians only think God loves them more
but when you go to California via the near Arctic
and see bright pink strumpet flowers

climb a corner wall in an outdoor breakfast room
and night-flowering jasmine wafts the evening away
you know, finally, God

is a miserable bastard or it would be the same everywhere.
And because of that thought you know
God will never send you to California again.

Sands and nakedness would be misunderstood
as he shat on Decatur, the desert father in search of adiaphoria

starvation accompanied by ravenous greed
and temptation to know.

Scientia falls
trapped by a web

bluish light, anonymous televisions.

Greed in famine-ridden worlds is different.
This mere velleity: daydreams of a homeless monk

on Decatur Boulevard, facing white tigers
escaped and hungry. She cannot answer questions

his indignity asks, her purpose in a body, starved
and burned by sun. She's no good with tigers either .

A holy man could take the thorn from a large cat's paw
and receive loyalty forever, but that is a man's story,

man's God, and man's desert. She must deal with this
braid of rivers, real and unwet. She's what goes

back and forth. She's him, she's sun
she's not him, she leaves often.

Where buffets rise high
oranges, their leaves and green peppers

ruched tablecloths from a linen supply:
people hunger:

something green from a sinning God tempts
withholding and she must be here too.

It's her job to chastise God.

Someone else sins in paradise.
Stones picked up, ready to pitch

from a wall of precision at God.
Stone nestled into stone, balanced

art of ancestors:
holy blunders in a field

urged through the crust of mantle
earth's confession.

In the gleaming house she sings Monte Circeo
the walls' thick plaster smooth as cut flour

waxy grace of laurel and rosemary outside
thick and thin shadow, blue flowers shy in deep foliage.

Her feet are bare
dusty sandals at the marble

door open
to birds who sing back.

It does seem too perfect, the day not likely
to live up to itself, she let it go on alone untouched

by her singing, summer fog rolling in.
The island hers alone, she sails

to the mainland when she must.

As prisons are temporary
she is a guest

whether she needs it
or not: three meals a day

in a strange land, succulence
useful invention against hunger.

This is not a portion
it is one.

He knows she wants out but
it's not something he can help

he can't think her out
she wears it: her heavy prison

muscles wrap bone, dendrite trees,
branches crazy to make synapses, laced

capillaries: organic mystery. Eyes in another
holey space

mortal thought
self-conscious, blue-eyed questions:

the desert
will not let go of her tongue

its spiny succulence, thick water-holding tissue,
loves her fluency, flattening it

into bayonets, round
sound rolls out.

Flesh, a naked dress
tissues sewn with bloody threads

swims in air, frantic
sinks and gives back to the sun

dry drowning. All flesh
is as grass

wildflower wool
burdened overlay.

Pain splints pleasure
extra and unnatural

around her desert bed:
air filled with four o'clock's perfume

red purple stakes her
arms and legs tied to clouts.

Driven deep into desert pavement
aeolian force over water and time productive

air's density less than water or ice
a blessing. She is made of the smallest

particles and is therefore cohesive, presents
a smooth surface to the wind.

She is a Joshua tree, parched
in fierce wind
its red root ends
spidery trace
on the desert floor.

She leaves the mountain
in a flurry of heavy clothing: him.

He is her ethereal
casing, her aerodynamic
clothing, her idea of here.

Feet cut by cinders from
a burnt century

remind her
she is without All and One.

He will get into the boat and
she will wave to him from the sky,

impeccably naked.

Oh, don't worry,
she is a lake
blue and weak and he is

a mountain of heaven. He can take it
as he shelters his eyes with his forearm
to watch her. He is treading, holding
his mirror, her
perfect conduct. And she

makes her tent in the space a lake takes
clouts anchored to something fiery.

A tiger wilts with hunger at the forest threshold.
A stumbly father may soon come over
the delicious embankment.

She can see the tiger.

This all takes place below the desert
and behind the tiger.

A horse and wagon trudge through the talus
not to the rise, not at the beginning yet.

She can see this. He cannot— he's looking at her.
He can see the thunder clouds piling up behind

her ascent— she cannot. The wagoner wonders
at all sentient beings: the grasshopper's copper body

the tiger, the man. The wagoner sees her in the sky
thunder clouds behind her and says to himself: "Bloody Hell

how did she do that?" and urges his horse into
the difficult footing of a fallen mountain.

Thunder's presence joyful prescience
sky splits open. The horse breaks away
failure laden with a wagon, a desire to see her

come down. She's wet and shaken by the terrible.

A blade of grass struggles to sprout
against an obstacle
a broken blue tea cup, buried.

If she can make it, she thinks to herself, she will wait

five decades. Enough to push aside, grow
around this earthy blue curve.

Five decades and the wagoner, his wagon,
and horse are horizon.

Thunder and lightening success.

She has an abundance or wetness
which dries often and returns to the clear desert below.

The tiger circles the region with a hunger
unacknowledged.

**Tree on the mountain grows gradually
spruce in the Laurentides
shoots blue inches into the cosmos, penetrates
mountain's stillness, tolerates greedy roots**

AN EVENT IN THE WORLD

How to live in the body, comprehend God's rains
the ignored cornea registers:

a pansy's purple and yellow
play off green in the brain.

How to understand the clit, its sublime orchestration
buttocks hinging the legs and paradise at once.

How to appreciate the belly's geography, its housing
new countries in seminal dribs, amniotic sacs.

This is the problem of the body, how not to grieve
inevitable loss: faith's too soon: a closed door
the world won't open.

*

Listen to the one who says: *Why have they done this to me?*
embodiment's paradox
hunger.

*

Tree on the mountain grows gradually
spruce in the Laurentides
shoots blue inches into the cosmos
penetrates mountain's stillness.

*

Egyptian women of the fourth century and all since:
know your mountains! You are wind and wood, eldest daughters

in separate booths. Your growing wood penetrates. You are the apple
the tree, the problem, its knowledge

chaste or no, the same desert. Christ's coming a kiss
given or withheld the same: you are guilty.

Small strengths the body knows hide
from God's jealousy: leap into non-being.

This is for sure: things have not changed:
my neighbour hungers.

*

Yellow falls into the eye like a book
from a high shelf, its brightness splayed
proper in its use of an event in the world: right action.

*

This clinging brightness attaches to the All and One
like flame to poplar in a kitchen stove, burning poorly

after oxygen nothing

brightness buried in charcoal: porous result
imperfect combustion: perfect rising from earth.

★

If God only knew the trouble he's in:

the mind when it is looking out of itself to God
 makes a simple vow, loves each cell into life
 the Mind of All, loves it like a nursing mother the babe
 whose mouth is greedy for goodness, its own, the milk
 and hunger perfect chain of being

so the mind should be kept free
 humbled as a mountain with a lake at its summit
 stimulated by liquidity to know rain

★

Gentle judgement: jolly her, make her laugh a happy daughter
 shame on her embodied soul to judge and sweep the sky blue
 tip the cosmic mixing bowl, pour and pour, begin
 the ceaseless power of rain to prepare ground:
 desert
 purifies her, teaches the body: the heart a book possible to read
 when appetite for the Divine compels happy action. Small. Begin.
 Say it.

VITA

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