

Negligee and the Art of Poetry

Victoria's got a secret. Well, actually two.

Secret Number One: Sex sells. The company pulls in about 4 billion dollars a year in total sales.

Secret Number Two: A little lingerie goes a long way. Regardless what's underneath the silk robes and garter belts, that glimpse of flimsy red lace or thick straps of black leather lets the imagination meander in a myriad of mysterious, delicious ways.

"When men think sexy, they think about us," says a Victoria's Secret spokeswoman. "Men are visual creatures, and they seem wide-eyed when they walk into a Victoria's Secret store. They don't know where to start."

Poets, take note.

Regarding Secret Number One: Last I checked, there was not much money funneling into the poet's trough. Even sex poetry has a hard time selling (although I did get a check for \$10 for a poem that was accepted into a book of erotica—and yes, Mom, I used a pen name). Folks, if you're in poetry for the money, quit writing, borrow some money while interest rates are low and invest in a Victoria's Secret franchise.

Just for kicks, I Googled "poetry" and "income" and came up with www.funnypoets.com, a website owned by Arcadia Flynn. There you'll find her hawking her book, *Earn a Full-time Income With Part-Time Poetry!* It costs, as she says, "just a modest \$19.97." She promises you'll be able to stay home with the kids and earn a decent buck or ten just for flipping a few rhymes! You be the judge.

Regarding Secret Number Two: The spokeswoman was only partially right when she said that men are visual creatures. So are women. We rely on our eyes more than any other sense to get us through the day. And this is what makes lingerie like tactile poetry. Silk slips, fishnet stockings and baby-doll tops are to the body what poetry is to the real world. The salespeople call it "mystery." Poets call it "metaphor." We're talking the same talk. When we slightly disguise a thing instead of depicting it literally and meticulously, we invite the imagination to play. The mind will fill in the gaps of what it can't see, and often it arrives at something much more exciting and magical than the thing itself.

Ahh, poetry.

The suggestive power of metaphor thrusts wildly in the love poems of Pablo Neruda, as in these opening lines to "Sonnet XII" from *100 Love Poems*, translated by Stephen Tapscott (University of Texas Press, 1986):

Full woman, flesh-apple, hot moon,
thick smell of seaweed, mud and light in masquerade,
what secret clarity opens through your columns?

What ancient night does a man touch with his senses?

Here, by invoking forbidden fruit, a celestial body, ocean scent, rain-soaked earth and shadow, Neruda does in fact create a masquerade for Matilde, his wife. It's a mask that transcends her specific body, a satin robe that could fit almost any woman. It's as close to one size fits all as a poem gets, inviting many people to share in the art of it.

(As an aside, the one-size-fits-all approach is also practical for would-be lingerie shoppers. According to Charles Washington, co-director of the two-story, 25,000-square-foot Victoria's Secret flagship store in midtown Manhattan, one of the hottest selling items is the baby doll, a basic lacy negligee top and underwear. "It's very popular because it's a loose-fitting slip and men don't have to worry about knowing the exact size," he said.)

Back to Neruda. By not painting his lover exactly as she is—specifying the inches of her bosom, numbering the freckles on her right arm—the poet paints a woman exactly as she is—secret and inexplicable, something unsolved and evolving.

When we write, like Neruda, beyond the purely physical appearance, then we as poets draw on magical, even spiritual parallels that allow us to get to the quintessence of a thing. With a simple metaphor—an apple, the moon—the poet can attract a host of associations, evoking tastes, temperatures, odors, fear, beauty, fullness. The marvelous irony is that in doing so, we come much closer to approximating what it means to be alive than we can when we try to painstakingly repaint a scene or dissect an emotion in perfect vivid detail. Life is constantly sifting through the crags, escaping definition.

In a broad sense, metaphor is what distinguishes poetry from the news. The news gives us facts from which we can deduce truths and ideas about the world around us. Poetry may give us facts, too, but because the poet doesn't tell us the whole story—merely offers a snatch of image here and a slip of detail there—the reader is left with gaps into which he or she can fit personal experiences. The reader is allowed to engage, and this is where the fun and the meaning making begins. This is the reason why we can read a well-written poem again and again and again and still find something that interests us and surprises us with each reading. Connotation is the mother of imagination. It fuels poetry so that the words can eddy off the page in a new way every time.

To illustrate, consider this last stanza from Jim Tipton's poem "These Awkward Efforts to be Alive," found in *Letters to a Stranger* (Conundrum Press, 1998). He combines fact and metaphor to create a multitude of meanings:

The sea, not the ship, is our mother.
The waves are never clumsy.
They know when to break,
to give up, to go back.

The thrill of these words is in how they baptize us into the realm of metaphor. Though Tipton gives us a visual image to hold onto, the lines are also sieve-like, allowing us to fall through them

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Word Woman

and look for what else might be there. What personal experiences and emotions can we draw on to understand him? The poem doesn't lecture at us, it asks us to engage in a larger conversation.

Beyond the page, could we use this colander metaphor method to engage differently with the world? Could we transcend for a while the real, physical, material world and in the mysterious, magical, spiritual universe at the same time?

Absolutely. It's called day dreaming. Call it a trance or a meditation. Whatever name, this stepping beyond the surface of things opens the door to creativity. What a marvelous, healthy thing to do—to tumble temporarily through the cracks of our to-do lists and let our imaginations rule. This is how we turn everyday life into an art form.

We live in a world of seen objects—a small gray feather on the snow, a cloth doll with one arm sitting on a park bench, an unhatched blue robin's egg lying in the grass, plastic hangers strewn across the highway, a woman in a scalloped bustier pouting behind a door. In each of these scenes lie many stories, many places for us to enter and discover.

It begins with simply noticing the real details of things—something we often forget to do while with our heads down we pursue our daily duties. But once we take the time to notice things, it's just one more step to let them go off in their own direction—perhaps even softening our gaze, letting our eyes go slightly out of focus so that we can rely not on our senses, but on the intuition that awakens below our awareness. In this way, we can unleash the wild mind, releasing the wonder.

It's a marvelous place to inhabit—valuable unreal estate—and it's available for no rent.

Billy Collins has a poem, "Victoria's Secret," from *Picnic, Lightning* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998) in which the poet laureate spends eight stanzas and presumably quite a bit of time taking in the catalogue models', ahem, metaphors. He ends the poem with a question, "Who has the time to linger on these delicate/ lures, these once unmentionable things?" After all, he says, "Life is rushing by like a mad, swollen river." As if rudely awakening from the miraculous world of metaphor where chiffon-shirred sweethearts stretch out "catlike on a couch," he is all at once inundated with pesky details of the real: the ringing phone, a whining dog, the beating rain, his list of things to do.

Ah, but how appropriate that Collins winds up his busy day to come and leaves us with a metaphor for sleep in which "the little doors of the body swing shut."

Who has time to linger on these delicate lures? I pray that we all do, opening all the little doors of awareness, draping the world with sheer lingerie, imagining all the voluptuous wonder, fear, beauty and delight the world has to offer us, and then smiling as the slip drops to the floor.

Poet and presenter Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer lives near Telluride, Colorado. Visit her at www.word-woman.com.