

Marsh End Priestess

It was an ordinary morning.
I parked my red Corvette outside her studio
and drank a bottle of Pepsi from the Quick Seven.

I lowered the windows,
let the lawnmower's buzz, the radio's drone
massage me back to life after leaving the club,

the streets crowded with A-list party people
fleeing in sports cars, limos, taxis,
running from eleven kinds of loneliness,

from Godzillas, Motheras, and Ghideras,
all heads and arms and legs, mythological
creatures materializing, swooping

down to claw the contours of the human skull.
Still, I like to think I owned the night,
the part of it no one wants, the hours

between two and five, but night had dwindled,
chameleons were blending onto dry leaves
when I rang the doorbell and saw her rise from hiding

into sight like the moon, like a high priestess,
like light falling onto the sheets when you are sleeping.
I wanted a movie screen kiss,

asked if she'd elope. She laughed and let me in.
Her skin smelled like fresh bread.
She was smoking the butt of a cigarette,

its glowing red circle of ash grazing
her chipped fingernails. Her paintings conjured
visions of exotica, of electric blue and pink

seashells beneath a sky raining metal.
She showed me her latest work: man and woman
sitting on a white curtained bed. In the background,

a window through which a tree is seen,
a window through which everything begins
which has no meaning, only sound,

shrouded whispering in a wild tongue.

I compiled individual lines for the cento "Marsh End Priestess." The poem was written by the members of *Special Topics: Trends in Contemporary Poetry—Literary Collaboration and Collage*, a graduate seminar taught by Denise Duhamel at Florida International University in 2001. Mitch Alderman, Terri Carrion, Andréé Conrad, Kendra Dwelley Guimaraes, Wayne Loshusan, Abigail Martin, Estee Mazor, Astrid Parrish, Stacy Richardson, Sandy Rodriguez, Jay Snodgrass, Richard Toumey, George Tucker, Jennifer Welch, William Whitehurst, and I wrote

individual lines. This cento is also one of my *Jane Eyre* poems. Charlotte Brontë's classic novel briefly discusses Jane's art. I've always wanted to "see" more of Jane's watercolors and sketches. Compiling *Marsh End Priestess* provided an opportunity to create a new Jane poem and a new "Jane painting". In Brontë's novel, Jane seeks refuge at Marsh End or Moor House, the home of her three cousins, the Rivers.

Jane Eyre Thinks of Tarzan's Jane at Canton's

—*His stay in the West Indies has changed him out of all knowledge. He has grey in his hair and misery in his eyes.* (from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys)

We eat here because it is quick, cheap, and delicious.
Underneath the table your fingers touch the almost nakedness

of my sandaled feet. Fried noodles in a bamboo bowl
resemble chopped vines, remind me of Sunday afternoons

squandered watching old Tarzan flicks while munching
on noodles from takeout. Johnny Weissmuller

swung fearlessly from vines, bare feet dangling in mid-flight,
then traipsing through dirt and mud. Johnny once chased

women on the studio lot sans loincloth.
I think of loincloths and love in the tree house,

of Tarzan caressing the soles of Jane's feet
the way you caress mine, of Jane wrapping

the vines of her legs around the ape man's waist
in the jungle night as he buries his face

in her curly hair, strong as vines and dark as night,
as mine, which you tug and often envision billowing

underwater, though I know you are not immersed
in the jungle recreating scenes from *Tarzan and His Mate*.

The jungle, *that green menace*, too much like Jamaica: dusty,
reminiscent of sunburns, of feverish nights spent swatting mosquitoes

that boldly alighted on your neck. No tree house for you.
Nix the vines. Ditto on the refined Maureen O' Sullivan.

I've usually lost you to a concrete jungle, to *Splash*
and Daryl Hannah when you part my drenched hair

and fan each half over a neighboring breast.

I'm a classic film buff. One of the exhibits in *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* is a striking altar by Amelia Mesa-Bains titled *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*. The exhibit keeps the Mexican actress' legacy alive and incorporates photos from some of her films. *Jane Eyre Dreams of Tarzan's Jane at Canton's* also borrows from America's cinematic history. I'm a fan of actress Maureen O Hara, who played Jane in many Tarzan movies. Featuring two different Janes in one poem was great fun. I'm also a fan of New York School poet Frank O' Hara, so allusions to various actors reflects my esteem for his work. The phrase "that green menace" originally appears in Jean Rhys's postcolonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), considered a prequel to *Jane Eyre*.

Please visit Rita Maria Martinez's website at http://comeonhome.org/wordpress_development/ to learn more about her poetry and her chapbook, *Jane-in-Box*, which takes a character from classic English literature, Jane Eyre, and revamps her with tattoos, fishnets, and modern feminism.