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An NEA Fellow, Martha Modena Vertreace is associate professor of English and poet-in-residence at Kennedy-King College, Chicago. Her books of poetry include Second House from the Corner, Under A Cat's-Eye Moon, and Oracle Bones, which placed Honourable Mention with White Eagle Coffee Store Press Chapbook Contest. Cinnabar is published by Flume Press, 1995, the first prize winner in its chapbook contest. That volume also placed Honourable Mention with Alms House Press Chapbook Competition.

Vertreace has earned four Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards and an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, clay, protection for her sacred soul? Dunes walked over her secrets. In the blue night of Egypt, who waited where mattered. Archaeologist outside her door called in vain, they who bore no offerings of grain, lotus, honey, to this woman—

they who saw no woman as sacred, nor bore her songs, her blue rattles, nor learned to dance their waiting as she opened the door.

Shawabti
(African women who carry heavy loads on their heads with apparent ease mastered a walking technique that conserves energy)

From timeless dark of royal tombs, archaeologists draw forth hundreds of stone statuettes carved like mummies. Their afterworld: to awaken as slaves whose labor for the king buys his salvation. Nubian,

one figurine, broad nose, thick lips, resembles the woman whose photo I find among my father's things,

whose black skin fits his description of my grandmother.

On her wooden porch, open Bible on her lap, she dozes in her rocker. The shutter catches her before gravity pulls her through my father's face as if he gives birth to her; as if the creak of stars blazes into memory: the way rains comes—first the thick smell of silver, a grey cool of clouds falling as she tells stories of floods my father will tell me—of buffalo fish on the ceiling, work horses listening through their shivering skins.

Chantress for Dead Queens
A final salute in hieroglyphics: Hathor, goddess of women, love, queens, beneath the sycamore sacred to herself, while seventeen male servants bore wine jars, beef, geese, baskets in ecstatic blue... on the white limestone tablet at Sakkara, the door through which Nadjet-m-Peet, lady-in-waiting,
came to receive her boon from devotees awaiting her favours, this favourite of Pharaoh Teti, this woman. Peet, the nicknamed her. Come through the pale door and kiss your earthly lovers. Duty sacred to the dead, she stepped beyond blue shadow, accepted prayers of supplicants, bore away the essence of the gifts they bore to her, the chantress, to await her magic— songs she crafted of blue ibis feathers, crocodile teeth; dances spun for women who walked like the Nile in flood, writhing sand; sacred rattles she shook to make Earth's door quiver to her own heartbeat. Near the door to his own pyramid, the pharaoh bore her body, where Queens Khuit and Iput, sacred to himself, also awaited the mating of Isis and Osiris. For a small woman, a small tomb, thirteen feet long, seven feet wide blue chamber in death's womb. Mystery, wrapped in blue, veiled her, as delta sand hid her door centuries ago—a lesser queen? or common woman steeped in regal power who bore the dignity of her own waiting cave, protection for her sacred
as well as an award for Excellence in Professional Writing, from the Illinois Association to Teachers of English. Gwendolyn Brooks presented her with the award ‘Significant Illinois Poet’, which Brooks has established. She was a Fellow at the Hawthorden International Writers’ Retreat, in Lasswade, Midlothian, Scotland; Eastern Washington University, Cheney, chose her as Poetry Fellow, when she was in residence at the Writers Centre Dublin, Ireland. Her poem, Song of God’s People, was set to music by Tom Weisflog and performed at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church’s Quasquicentennial Celebration, with choir and organ. These are Martha’s first set of poems to be printed in Africa.

Another find—an alabaster jar, viscera of a queen inside, its fragile lid chiseled like her head. What dreams did my grandmother weave into her plaits? What dreams scrubbed raw forward as if into a storm, the burden steadied by a strap which loops across their foreheads, becoming more perfect pendulums, he says, as if that is all there is to it—learning to balance so they can bear more.

Buying Talismans on Custer Street

No mammy dolls anywhere; stalls of Ashanti fertility dolls, to leave for forest spirits, with silver coins and food in trade for missing children, lost daughters of plantain wandering among the trees; palm rugs woven with a hole to free evil spirits; Zulu love beads. Twilight mixing with rain, under a paisley umbrella, a Nigerian women nods as I choose from a teak box a leather bracelet, its wide band top-stitched with cowries. To get a good man, she says, walking toward me in a cloud of blue cotton, her dress and headwrap embroidered with red hibiscus. Darker than I am, hips, breasts rounder, sexier than mine, she smiles as if she owns me, touching my arm as my five-dollar bill slips down her front. Near her chair, sandalwood curls from a brass burner. She gives me her story, as if that is why I came: from her fertile cave, a river of black babies. In the heart of the house, the centre of the room, on a throne-stool, she sits in a double-ring of children. Earth yields a nanny goat, a hen as sacrifice; water, a giant round fish, a snail, azu-ntu fish. To bless the womb which opened to ten, women came, keepers of the rite, who smear her pelvis, feet, under her seat, a libation of blood. Then a meal of a snail, chicken, azu-ntu fish. Four times she is seated, four times lifted up, then receives the children’s blessings of good health, long life, music for her husband. She ties on the bracelet, to please your ancestors, she says, then holds my hand while she reads my future as a thunderstorm catches fire, as night becomes a lion, my very breath, its roar.

When the Time Is Right

At river’s crossing, the train slows—something to do with switches. Sitting next to me, a man lifts his glasses to his forehead, marks a page in Migratory Birds, grosbeak: black wings, rose shield afloat on its white breast, from color plates to me, to living birds. What will that farmhouse in the distance, painted with hex-circles, lure to such brown flatness? Tornadoes whose acrid bite of lemon-scented fear roll midsummer sky. For now, fizzled heads of dandelions cluster in new grass, gold coins scattered for a child’s party, Wood barns of corn-fed cows seem like pictures from kitchen calendars of yearling bulls without blemish,
white churches with real steeples.

The train jerks me from a dream—
my mother bends over me. Touching
black ground, her braids root
like willow branches. A forest
shoots up, oaks taller than mountains
where female bodies melt into the Earth,
rise on leathery wings—
then pulls its load past fields
where leaves are weeks green,
not yet warm enough for seed.

A modern seer-jade earring, bluebird
tattooed on his wrist—
says my future is worth the dollar
I can afford to trade to what he knows.
I know seven years have passed
since my mother died.

Where shadows stalk the edge,
water changes from green to blue.

In the backwash, herons stilt
into the one-legged trance they hold
before the view-slits
of the hunters’ blinds—the question:
Whether random motion reveals
more than a beaver lodge, a muskrat den,
the silver smell of a gun barrel
when God has neither gossamer wings
nor bearded face.

Lightning rakes the furrows as if a phoenix
claws ashen sky spilling
the sand-painted glyph for storm.
From a case of smuggled samples, the man
pulls out Stone Age animal bones:
carved with double-pointed blades—
barbs, single points ridged to fit
spear shafts which pinned giant catfish
spawning in the Semliki River,
Central Africa.

Then he urges a bangle in my hand,
stone sets carved in runes, oghams;
instead, I choose two leather bracelets
trimmed in copper and bronze, the sun face
of a sun god at least half-African,
he tells my black face, angling for a sale
as I fasten the clasps.

Forehead to the floor, at last at home,
I pray at my household shrine
of old photos, palm branches retted,
shaped as rosettes, to Charles Lwanga
whose Ugandan first-class relic, a bone chip,
rests in its silk straw box—
that my father still remembers me,
that my mother will herself comfort me,
come for me when the time is right. GR

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