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Io Saturnalia

Petra Kuppers

Io Saturnalia,
festival of lead
heavy foot thump deep on asphalt street
desert track
rain dark tannin pine nude dead
in abeyance

wait now for the whole.
Just wait, eat, drink, and fall into the gutters
a yoyo, a dreidel, the carnival of flesh,
abundance shimmies around the hips
guttural moans as you heave it up with your servant
as you bawl it out with the cats.

The sullied garment of the soul, oh pine
shrink bark and shoot against the heavy load.
The dead in the retort, dragon corpse, burnt in industrial fires.
The nucleus reclines darkly, tired, tired to the earth, the earth, so tired.
Watch from the tiny window hidden, ask yourself,
which servants do not get to swing it low
which slaves have to sleep in the day?
Factory foremen let the office matron cut their ties from their throats
The matron has fire in her eyes
Do you dream of the matron or the foreman?
Or of the sewing wheel, other side of the seam,
endless piston that drives the needle into the skin?

What makes a model? Shape the clay and glass, puppet master
when you dress, in the light,
you pull on the history of women
whirr of the sewing machine in my grandmother's room made its way through
the pine boards the walls the floor and the duvet
listen to the hands and the eyes
factory floor waxed daily so you can skate on it
the casket of remnants: when no one is looking, you dive your hands right into
the dark grove
feel suede and silk
uneven pieces scraped from the sides
chemical glue smell
bones rendered down, ashes, the salt of form
in the production line, quick swipe, heave up, left, insert, smear as the plastic
handle wedges into place, wipe the glue, tuck the plastic, cut along the seam
and discard the extra, be quick or you burn.
breathe, you, and me, and you, model, as we stand in our line our line our line
the new smell of cars and garments
warehouse smell autopsy boutique
beneath your fingers, worker, is your fantasy and your redemption,
meet my eyes, beloved, turn around
in the line
turn around

Garment maker, border crosser,
tailoress of the clicking wheel, the tender button,
stitch an armor of skin for yourself
a thousand years and years have past.
Dead dragon skin lies tattered on your feet, resplendent one.

Dance in this dirt, let it rain
shine the skin tattooed with the maps of a country
never yours, and claim it back
from the borders, from the earth
from the aura outline of your form

Notes

Some of these lines resurface from the 80s, when I was working as a shift worker at Fibrit, a German manufacturer of interior car doors and instrument panels. We assembled doors on huge machines in work gangs, plastic and metal shaped through heating, suction and gluing, our fingers right in there. Hour after hour, I would sing to myself.

During my childhood in Germany, some of my family members worked in large fabric factories, and my writing remembers playing at the base of giant mechanized looms, and delving into buckets of fabric remnants in order to get away with small items of pilferage, little icons, forbidden textures.

The writing here is part of the song cycle *Spherical*, and in it, I rework, substitute, reconstitute, reference and reshape much material from other sources, including various alchemical texts, the fashion pages of the Los Angeles Times, *Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein, material from Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, Luce Irigaray's *The Sex That is Not One*, quotes from Carl Jung, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and Lucille Clifton

About the author

Petra Kuppers is a disability culture activist, a community artist, and Artistic Director of The Olimpias (www.olimpias.org). She is a Professor of English at the University of Michigan. Her most recent book is *Disability Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape* (Palgrave, 2011). Spherical emerged out of a residency with the SFSU Poetry Center's Poetics of Healing series; from a summer-long performance residency at the Subterranean Arthouse in Berkeley; and from community practice-as-research work funded by the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan.