

Cherchez la Femme

Enoch Pratt Poetry Contest Runner-up

There never was the hysterical woman
locked in an attic, an animal on all fours
tearing out her hair or threading a loom
and unthreading it every night so she'd never
have to bed her believed-to-be-dead husband's friends.

There never was the angry woman wailing
over a kitchen sink rubbing her hands raw
trying to cleanse herself of death or a group
of women banded together denying men sex
as if they weren't already assumed plundered.

There never was a black or red dress,
a smoking gun, la femme fatale, *cherchez la femme!*

There never was a willing muse. Never a bruise,
a blemish, a scar. There never was the woman
sacrificed on an altar with goats to sanctify a city
who thought she had it coming and they,
they would be saved. There never was the woman
who drowned herself mysteriously in a lake as if
there was no cause for her nightmares. Never
the scarlet A, the prison break, the abortion clinic bust,
a mob wielding pitchforks, the missed rent,
stolen paycheck, burning pyres, the chant
of *lock her up!* There never was that tower
with a key, long strands of braided hair she could cut
herself free from. There was the walk home,
and every day the gauntlet of howlers, hollers,
hoopla, the construction worker whistles,
the *can I get some fries with that shake,*
daddy's girl, teacher's pet, stank liquor breath,
unmerciful panic, unheard prayer. The silence
after a thousand doors slammed shut. *Slut!*

There was a blunt instrument. Her body.

There was an accident. Her mouth.

There never was the hysterical woman.

There was the man, and he would not die
no matter how many times we cried father.

No matter how many times he was swallowed
in dirt, the earth just spit him back out.