

[Note: A distaff is used in tandem with a spindle to render yarn or thread from wool or flax, but the term is not in common parlance, so the book begins with a definition preceded by a contents page shaped like a distaff.]

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Toile [I]

*All brought their distaffs, flax, spindles, standards, happles,
and all the agoubilles useful in their art.*

— *Les Évangiles des quenouilles* [Gospels of the Distaffs]
Anonymous, fifteenth century

Panel A

My mother couldn't sew a lick.
But that was a boast to her.
"I can't even sew on a button,"
she'd say at family gatherings
right in front of the females stitching
away: her mother-in-law, several nieces,
her daughter, her sisters-in-law.
Not her mother, although even Granny,
no button-sewer-onner, was reputed
to have attempted knitting for the troops.
Granny's sister Sara, however, excelled at
needle-point, petit-point, cross-stitch.
As I was saying, the wives and future
wives sat in the living room, a majority
of us with our distaffs, flax, spindles,
standards, happles, and all
the agoubilles useful in our art
while the men and boys watched
football on television in the den
(somehow, they knew
exactly when to whoop and
exactly when to groan, for they did
both in unison). Mother would light
another cigarette (deep drag, inhaled,
held, then smoke *sinuously* exhaled),
"I don't see how y'all can make
all those little bitty stitches!"

[Note: Panels B-J follow. Panel K is inserted as a reprise in another long
sequence toward the end of the book.]

Toile [II]

[Note: From context information elsewhere in the book, the reader is given to know that Katharine H. Privett was my mother.]

Watching My Daughter Sew

by

Katharine H. Privett

Her mouth is filled with silver pins.
Her hands move slippery through silk.
Together, in silence,
we listen to the whippoorwill
out there behind the moon behind the house.
 All night she'll sing the heartbreak blues
 and plait her nest
 where we will never find it.
 Her nest is woven of shadow and smoke
 and her children hide
 in the leaves of her song.

Then we turn on the lamp and talk again.
"What are you making?"
Cautiously, she takes the pins from her lips.
"A dress for the dance."
 Will you have a good time at the dance?
 I think but do not say out loud.
 The whippoorwill is surer in the dark
 than we are in the light.

Her needle goes in and out, in and out
of the shimmering cloth.
I also don't ask,
Why do you sew faster
when you're running out of thread?
 And, watching you, why do I want to cry?
 The whippoorwill is surer of her name
 than we are sure of anything.

Argument



I am tired of being accused of lack of seriousness when I feel the need to use wingdings as stitches in my poems. I put it to you:

the following ought to be compliments: Gimmicky, Girly, Fancy, Cheeky, Decorative, Frivolous, Labored, Fontish, Ornate.

I claim: to demonstrate alignment of poetry & needle-art is to say: I am among those historically not taught to read. I subpoena

the Renaissance “Embleme Books” whose each page shows an image (called a “devise” or “device”), a motto, then verses,

generally sententious. Very popular they were, not only in ruling-class homes but in merchant-class homes as well.

Rosemary Freeman’s book on them shows an example of one of the images worked in embroidery, illustrating that,

while only the men in the household would likely have been able to read the motto and verse, the women used the volumes too.

Her thought: *You know what? That’d make a nice throw pillow.*
Her quest for permission: *Oi, John! are you done with this book?*

When writing mimics needlework, you see *before* you read, pattern perceptible as: Beautiful, Meaningful, Expressive, Heart-

Breaking. I assert, after Philomel: cut out my tongue and then I will weave my information. . . but. . . Stop There — otherwise,

I get turned into a nightingale forced, suffering (my shame) to “sing” for the gratification of Shelley, Keats, et al. Maybe

I’d be, like her, adulated, but it seems to me such adulation means victory for the spear/sword side opposed to the distaff/spindle side.

For example, in “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats addresses her

*That I might drink and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim;
Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou amongst the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here. . .*

Excuse me? You don’t think rape by brother-in-law, mutilation,

being held in captivity involved weariness, fever, fret, here?
Not that Keats isn’t a splendid writer. He is. I get the muse thing.

The poet wants her for inspiration, then he’ll take it from there.
She is to speak a lost language, the tongue known as Nightingale,

while he is to speak the King’s. It makes me feel co-opted,
pre-empted. She’s my reason for putting windings in my poems.

Her only recourse was to send to her sister a *textile* version
of an SOS. Was it woven? Was it embroidered? We don’t

have that detail straight. Some versions say she used red thread;
others say it was purple. This silent *text* of hers made her a *poet*,

an exemplar of performative language, every bit as much as
her later incarnation as a nightingale when, suffering from amnesia

like anyone with post-traumatic-stress syndrome, she had to lean
her breast into a thorn on her tree before the song would come out.

In other words, pain constitutes the condition precedent for poetry.
But I reject “Sublime.” I pick my entry into the foundational story.

I pick my tones. I decide on my own bird at least, the linnet (nod
to Yeats), stitcher of horizons, life between flax-seed and flax-tow.

Thus, pay attention when I make visual poems. Thereby I find
outlets for pleasure and defiance. Look for those things.

Consider this revealing detail from James Joyce's *Ulysses*: 'I have rebel blood in me too,' Mr Deasy said. 'On the spindle side.

But I am descended from sir John Blackwood who voted for the union. We are all Irish, all kings's sons.' 'Alas', Stephen said.

Gertrude Stein loved vests: knitted, or of woven material, sewn, embellished. But it's more, it's a vitality I have to have available,

the liminal and subliminal and liminal-just-rising, when I write, when I stitch. And the sinking, too. Not 'high' not 'low'

not some contest between the quotidian and the ecstatic, rather an eschewal of contest itself. Not high not low but at the meeting

of just-barely-on-the-surface and just-barely-underneath-it, there where the cloth provides the field for the action.

Sisters

Their circumstances were different, Mary's and Sara's, because the men they had married were different kinds of men. By the time the rest home became inevitable for both these widows, Mary had plenty of money and Sara was a pauper. Sara was seven years the elder, but they were built exactly alike; by then they looked the same age; they could be taken for twins, except that Sara was a romantic in that she would not even consider letting anyone cut her almost waist-length fine white hair while Mary, practical and also bolder, had long since kept her grayer and thicker hair a nonsense length. Sara went into the rest home first, and tried to keep her dignity by ignoring the staff and particularly by ignoring her roommate. Happy, happy was her day when, since Mary had to be put there too, they could be moved into the same room. Mary was depressed, though, and scarcely ate. Sara, on the other hand, rather came out of her shell, and even went to Crafts for a while. There, she made from a plastic detergent bottle and a styrofoam ball and a plastic face and a plastic wig, a doll, and made, though her sewing was rusty, a sweet prairie dress for the doll and a bonnet. Besides money, their family situations were different. Mary's children, one of whom was a doctor like his father, and especially Mary's daughter, treated their Aunt Sara as a second mother, and loved

and pitied her all the more for having no children of her own. Even so. When Mary's children saw their mother going downhill fast, they came to a decision: she would be taken, for now anyway, to a more expensive, much better rest home in the town where the doctor son lived. Aunt Sara? Well, it was welfare that paid for her care and that was as far as it went. Mary was in bad shape, and for some reason it was not day but night when they transferred her to a gurney and rolled her out of the room, down the hall, through the lobby, to the waiting ambulance. That was, in itself, an expensive way for her to be moved from one town to another. Sara stayed in her bed in their room. Mary's bed was mussed, empty. Mary had a cluster of people around her on the gurney as it rolled, her daughter and granddaughter carrying her belongings, a nurse's aid carrying the plastic ice bucket and strawed cup that she insisted had been paid for and should be taken, the ambulance guy pulling the railed gurney with one hand while holding the I.V. bag up with the other hand, the son signing papers at the desk, the R.N. passing the papers to him. Mary looked up at every face as it came into view in this parade. She nestled on her shoulder the doll, said to the nurse's aid "Isn't she pretty?" Adjusted the calico ruffle on the little dress, adjusted the matching calico bonnet. "Isn't she pretty?" to the ambulance guy. Patted the calico skirt, smoothed the calico over

the doll's flat chest. To the R.N.,
"Isn't she pretty?" To the second
ambulance guy, "Look at my dolly.
Isn't she pretty? My sister made her
for me." Every person she spoke to
smiled at her and nodded. No one,
no one was with Sara.

Section IV. Flamestitch

(to knit or crochet)

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