

# "Songs to JOANNES"

Mina Loy (1882–1966)

Born in England, Loy studied art in Germany, France, and Britain, and continued to paint thereafter. She moved to Florence and became deeply involved with the futurist movement, though she gave its politics and cultural ambitions a feminist inflection, as her 1919 "Aphorisms on Futurism" suggests. Eventually she abandoned the movement as its patriarchal bias evolved into an emergent sympathy for fascism. Although she did not move permanently to the United States until 1936—first living in New York and then in Aspen, Colorado—and take up U.S. citizenship until late in her life, her work is often considered part of American modernism because some of her most important work was written while she was here for several years in the second decade of the century and because it was often American journals that published and championed her poetry.

In her "Feminist Manifesto," unpublished but probably written shortly before the 1915–1917 "Songs to Joannes," Loy argues that "woman must destroy in herself the desire to be loved" and urges that "honor, grief, sentimentality, pride and consequently jealousy must be detached from sex." The "Songs" accomplish that and more. Loy concludes that all the values embedded in masculinity and femininity are perilous and destructive. Idealization of female purity and virtue, for example, is "the principle instrument of her subjugation."

The "Songs" display only elliptical and minimalist vestiges of narrative. As it begins, the speaker has already failed at conventional romance—steeped in all the drama of stereotyped emotions—and opts instead not for unreflective animal sexuality but for something like a verbally inventive biological union. The sequence repeatedly offers up the illusory dramas of gender ("I am the jealous store-house of the candle-ends / That lit your adolescent learning") only to reject them; repeatedly, in their place, Loy offers us versions of intercourse that invent figures for bodily fluids and anatomy: "laughing honey," "spermatozoa . . . in the milk of the Moon," "Shuttle-cock and battle-door." Some critics have concluded that these are images of degraded lust; they seem instead to be antiromantic but celebratory. Moreover, their variety and surprising capacity to recode the rhetoric of romance ("honey," "the milk of the Moon," "pink-love," and "feathers" above all reposition romance tropes) demonstrate that a degendered human sexuality—one freed of cultural clichés about men and women—need not be impoverished. Published in the American journal *Others*, "Songs to Joannes" is a major contribution to experimental modernism. Readers interested in Loy should be sure to consult *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (1996), which is the only accurate edition of her poems.

## Songs to Joannes°

## I

Spawn of Fantasies  
 Silting the appraisable  
 Pig Cupid° his rosy snout  
 Rooting erotic garbage  
 5 "Once upon a time"  
 Pulls a weed white star-topped  
 Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane

I would an eye in a Bengal light°  
 Eternity in a sky-rocket°  
 10 Constellations in an ocean  
 Whose rivers run no fresher  
 Than a trickle of saliva

These are suspect places

I must live in my lantern  
 15 Trimming subliminal flicker  
 Virginal to the bellows  
 Of Experience  
 Coloured glass

## II

The skin-sack°  
 20 In which a wanton duality  
 Packed  
 All the completion of my infructuous° impulses  
 Something the shape of a man  
 To the casual vulgarity of the merely observant  
 25 More of a clock-work mechanism  
 Running down against time  
 To which I am not paced  
 My finger-tips are numb from fretting your hair  
 A God's door-mat°  
 30 On the threshold of your mind

**poem title:** "Joannes" simultaneously identifies and disguises the name of Giovanni Papini (1881-1956), the Italian writer with whom Loy had a difficult relationship, but memories of other lovers are no doubt woven into the dedication as well.

3 **Cupid:** the Roman god of love, depicted as a naked winged boy with bow and arrows; here he is a "Pig Cupid," a mortal with animal instincts burrowing in the body's erotic sites.

8 **Bengal light:** blue flare used for signaling or illumination.

9 **sky-rocket:** partly an orgiastic image.

19 **skin-sack . . . shape of a man:** a reference to male genitals, to the entire body, and to the principle of masculinity.

22 **infructuous:** fruitless, unfruitful.

29 **God's door-mat:** the hair fretted in the previous line.

## III

We might have coupled  
 In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment  
 Or broken flesh with one another  
 At the profane communion table  
 35 Where wine is spill'd on promiscuous lips

We might have given birth to a butterfly  
 With the daily news  
 Printed in blood on its wings

## IV

Once in a mezzanino°  
 40 The starry ceiling  
 Vaulted an unimaginable family  
 Bird-like abortions  
 With human throats  
 And Wisdom's eyes  
 45 Who wore lamp-shade red dresses  
 And woolen hair

One bore a baby  
 In a padded porte-enfant°  
 Tied with a sarsenet° ribbon  
 50 To her goose's wings

But for the abominable shadows  
 I would have lived  
 Among their fearful furniture  
 To teach them to tell me their secrets  
 55 Before I guessed  
 —Sweeping the brood clean out

## V

Midnight empties the street  
 Of all but us  
 Three  
 60 I am undecided which way back  
                   To the left a boy  
 —One wing has been washed in the rain  
           The other will never be clean any more—  
 Pulling door-bells to remind  
 65 Those that are snug  
                   To the right a haloed ascetic  
                   Threading houses  
 Probes wounds for souls

39 *mezzanino*: (Italian) an apartment one-half story up from the ground floor.

48 *porte-enfant*: (French) "baby carriage."

49 *sarsenet*: soft, thin, Oriental silk.

70 —The poor can't wash in hot water—  
And I don't know which turning to take  
Since you got home to yourself—first

## VI

75 I know the Wire-Puller<sup>o</sup> intimately  
And if it were not for the people  
On whom you keep one eye  
You could look straight at me  
And Time would be set back

## VII

80 My pair of feet  
Smack the flag-stones  
That are something left over from your walking  
The wind stuffs the scum of the white street  
Into my lungs and my nostrils  
Exhilarated birds  
Prolonging flight into the night  
Never reaching— — — — —

## VIII

85 I am the jealous store-house of the candle-ends  
That lit your adolescent learning  
-----  
Behind God's eyes  
There might  
Be other lights

## IX

90 When we lifted  
Our eye-lids on Love  
A cosmos  
Of coloured voices  
And laughing honey

95 And spermatozoa  
At the core of Nothing  
In the milk of the Moon

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<sup>72</sup> *Wire-Puller*: one who uses secret or underhanded means to influence a person's or an institution's actions.

## X

Shuttle-cock and battle-door°  
 A little pink-love  
 100 And feathers are strewn

## XI

Dear one at your mercy  
 Our Universe  
 Is only  
 A colorless onion  
 105 You derobe  
 Sheath by sheath  
                   Remaining  
 A disheartening odour  
 About your nervy hands

## XII

110 Voices break on the confines of passion  
 Desire Suspicion Man Woman  
 Solve in the humid carnage°

Flesh from flesh  
 Draws the inseparable delight  
 115 Kissing at gasps to catch it

Is it true  
 That I have set you apart  
 Inviolate in an utter crystallization  
 Of all the jolting of the crowd  
 120 Taught me willingly to live to share

Or are you  
 Only the other half  
 Of an ego's necessity  
 Scourging pride with compassion  
 125 To the shallow sound of dissonance  
 And boom of escaping breath

98 *Shuttle-cock and battle-door*: the male and female genitals in sexual intercourse; Loy has adapted the name of a game that evolved into badminton (*battledore* and *shuttlecock*), where the *battledore* is the paddle that strikes the *shuttlecock*, to refer to sexual foreplay, contest, and intercourse. In badminton the shuttlecock is a ball with feathers attached that is batted back and forth across a net; Loy's "feathers are strewn" carries the shuttlecock/sexuality analogy along by suggesting pillow feathers, hair, and clothes.

112 *humid carnage*: as Loy's biographer Carolyn Burke points out, both an image of sex and an allusion to the large-scale slaughter of World War I.

## XIII

- 130 Come to me There is something  
I have got to tell you and I can't tell  
Something taking shape  
Something that has a new name  
A new dimension  
A new use  
A new illusion
- 135 It is ambient And it is in your eyes  
Something shiny Something only for you  
Something that I must not see
- It is in my ears Something very resonant  
Something that you must not hear  
Something only for me
- 140 Let us be very jealous  
Very suspicious  
Very conservative  
Very cruel  
Or we might make an end of the jostling of aspirations  
Disorb° inviolate egos
- 145 Where two or three are welded together  
They shall become god  
-----  
Oh that's right  
Keep away from me Please give me a push  
Don't let me understand you Don't realise me  
150 Or we might tumble together  
Depersonalized  
Identical  
Into the terrific Nirvana°  
Me you — you — me

## XIV

- 155 Today  
Everlasting passing apparent imperceptible  
To you  
I bring the nascent° virginity of  
—Myself for the moment  
160 No love or the other thing  
Only the impact of lighted bodies  
Knocking sparks off each other  
In chaos

144 *disorb*: to throw something out of its normal orbit; sometimes applied to a comet, which connotation continues the cosmic metaphors of sections IX and XI.  
153 *Nirvana*: in Hinduism, the extinction of all attachment; in Buddhism, the ultimate state of disinterested wisdom and compassion; more generally, an ideal of bliss and harmony.  
158 *nascent*: emergent, coming into existence.

## XV

165 Seldom Trying for Love  
 Fantasy dealt them out as gods  
 Two or three men looked only human

But you alone  
 Superhuman apparently  
 I had to be caught in the weak eddy  
 170 Of your drivelling humanity  
 To love you most

## XVI

We might have lived together  
 In the lights of the Arno°  
 Or gone apple stealing under the sea  
 175 Or played  
 Hide and seek in love and cob-webs  
 And a lullaby on a tin-pan

And talked till there were no more tongues  
 To talk with  
 180 And never have known any better

## XVII

I don't care  
 Where the legs of the legs of the furniture are walking to  
 Or what is hidden in the shadows they stride  
 Or what would look at me  
 185 If the shutters were not shut

Red a warm colour on the battle-field°  
 Heavy on my knees as a counterpane  
 Count counter  
 I counted the fringe of the towel  
 190 Till two tassels clinging together  
 Let the square room fall away  
 From a round vacuum  
 Dilating with my breath

## XVIII

195 Out of the severing  
 Of hill from hill  
 The interim  
 Of star from star  
 The nascent  
 Static  
 200 Of night

173 Arno: river of central Italy.

186 Red . . . battle-field: both love and war are invoked.

## XIX

Nothing so conserving  
 As cool cleaving  
 Note of the Q H U°  
 Clear carving  
 205 Breath-giving  
 Pollen smelling  
 Space

White telling  
 Of slaking  
 210 Drinkable  
 Through fingers  
 Running water  
 Grass haulms°  
 Grow to  
 215 Leading astray  
 Of fireflies  
 Aerial quadrille°  
 Bouncing  
 Off one another  
 220 Again conjoining  
 In recaptured pulses  
 Of light

You too  
 Had something  
 225 At that time  
 Of a green-lit glow-worm  
 -----  
 Yet slowly drenched  
 To raylessness  
 In rain

## XX

230 Let Joy go solace-winged  
 To flutter whom she may concern

## XXI

I store up nights against you  
 Heavy with shut-flower's nightmares  
 -----  
 235 Stack noons  
 Curled to the solitaire  
 Core of the  
 Sun

203 QHU: unidentified reference.

213 haulms: the stalks or stems of cultivated plants.

217 quadrille: patterned group dancing.



## XXII

Green things grow  
 Salads  
 240 For the cerebral  
 Forager's revival  
 Upon bossed<sup>o</sup> bellies  
 Of mountains  
 Rolling in the sun  
 245 And flowered flummery<sup>o</sup>  
 Breaks  
 To my silly shoes

In ways without you  
 I go  
 250 Gracelessly  
 As things go

## XXIII

Laughter in solution  
 Stars in a stare  
 Irredeemable pledges  
 255 Of pubescent consummations  
 Rot  
 To the recurrent moon  
 Bleach  
 To the pure white  
 260 Wickedness of pain

## XXIV

The procreative truth of Me  
 Petered out  
 In pestilent  
 Tear drops  
 265 Little lusts and lucidities  
 And prayerful lies  
 Muddled with the heinous acerbity<sup>o</sup>  
 Of your street-corner smile

## XXV

Licking the Arno  
 270 The little rosy  
 Tongue of Dawn  
 Interferes with our eyelashes

-----  
 We twiddle to it

242 *bossed*: carries the sense of both rounded and ornamented.

245 *flummery*: an empty compliment; also a sweet dessert.

267 *heinous acerbity*: hateful sharpness of manner.

275 Round and round  
Faster  
And turn into machines

280 Till the sun  
Subsides in shining  
Melts some of us  
Into abysmal pigeon-holes  
Passion has bored  
In warmth

285 Some few of us  
Grow to the level of cool plains  
Cutting our foot-hold  
With steel eyes

## XXVI

Shedding our petty pruderies  
From slit eyes

290 We sidle up  
To Nature  
— — — that irate pornographer

## XXVII

Nucleus Nothing  
Inconceivable concept

295 Insentient repose  
The hands of races  
Drop off from  
Immodifiable plastic

300 The contents  
Of our ephemeral conjunction  
In aloofness from Much  
Flowed to approachment of — — — —  
NOTHING  
There was a man and a woman  
In the way  
305 While the Irresolvable  
Rubbed with our daily deaths  
Impossible eyes

## XXVIII

310 The steps go up for ever  
And they are white  
And the first step is the last white  
Forever  
Coloured conclusions

Smelt to synthetic  
 Whiteness  
 315 Of my  
 Emergence  
 And I am burnt quite white  
 In the climacteric  
 Withdrawal of your sun  
 320 And wills and words all white  
 Suffuse  
 Illimitable monotone  
  
 White where there is nothing to see  
 But a white towel  
 325 Wipes the cymophanous° sweat  
 —Mist rise of living—  
 From your  
 Etiolate° body  
 And the white dawn  
 330 Of your New Day  
 Shuts down on me  
  
 Unthinkable that white over there  
 — — — Is smoke from your house

## XXIX

Evolution fall foul of  
 335 Sexual equality  
 Prettily miscalculate  
 Similitude  
  
 Unnatural selection  
 Breed such sons and daughters  
 340 As shall jibber° at each other  
 Uninterpretable cryptonyms°  
 Under the moon  
  
 Give them some way of braying brassily  
 For caressive calling  
 345 Or to homophonous° hiccoughs  
 Transpose the laugh  
 Let them suppose that tears  
 Are snowdrops or molasses  
 Or anything

325 *cymophanous*: displaying a wavy, floating light; opalescent.

328 *etiolate*: colorless, pale.

340 *jibber*: to speak rapidly and unintelligibly.

341 *cryptonyms*: secret names.

345 *homophonous*: having the same sound.

350 Than human insufficiencies  
 Begging dorsal vertebrae°  
 Let meeting be the turning  
 To the antipodean°  
 And Form a blurr  
 355 Anything

Than seduce them  
 To the one  
 As simple satisfaction  
 For the other

360 Let them clash together  
 From their incognitoes  
 In seismic orgasm

For far further  
 Differentiation  
 365 Rather than watch  
 Own-self distortion  
 Wince in the alien ego

## XXX

In some  
 Prenatal plagiarism  
 370 Foetal buffoons  
 Caught tricks  
 -----

From archetypal pantomime  
 Stringing emotions  
 Looped aloft  
 -----

375 For the blind eyes  
 That Nature knows us with  
 And the most of Nature is green  
 -----

What guaranty  
 For the proto-form  
 380 We fumble  
 Our souvenir ethics to  
 -----

351 *dorsal vertebrae*: those situated between the cervical (neck) and lumbar (above the pelvis) vertebrae.

353 *antipodean*: diametrically opposite, opposed.

## XXXI

Crucifixion  
 Of a busy-body  
 Longing to interfere so  
 385 With the intimacies  
 Of your insolent isolation

Crucifixion  
 Of an illegal ego's  
 Eclosion°  
 390 On your equilibrium  
 Caryatid° of an idea

Crucifixion  
 Wracked arms  
 Index extremities  
 395 In vacuum  
 To the unbroken fall

## XXXII

The moon is cold  
 Joannes  
 Where the Mediterranean° — — — — —

## XXXIII

400 The prig of passion — — — —  
 To your professorial paucity  
 Proto-plasm was raving mad  
 Evolving us — — —

## XXXIV

Love — — — the preeminent litterateur°

1915-1917

389 *eclosion*: hatching out, as in hatching out of an egg or emerging (like an insect) from a pupus.

391 *caryatid*: a supporting column sculpted in the form of a draped female figure. Virginia Kouidis cites a line from French critic Rémy de Gourmont's (1858-1915) "Women and Language" (1901): "The role of women in the work of civilization is so great that it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the structure is built on the shoulders of these frail caryatids."

399 *Mediterranean*: the inland sea surrounded by Europe, the Middle East, and Africa; also the region surrounding the sea.

404 *litterateur*: (French) "author," "man of letters."