

CHARLES RAMMELKAMP

Beautiful Dancers

I. The Bronze Venus

To the tune of *Eleanor Rigby*
my mind idly sang to itself:
Josephine Baker, picks up the rice in a church...

The pandemic still raged, November 2021,
when I read in the newspaper about
the French honoring the famous dancer,
who'd died in 1975, buried in Monaco,
with an honorary burial at the Panthéon,
a symbolic casket with soil from Saint Louis,
her birthplace, Paris, the city she loved,
the south of France, Monaco,
the ceremony preceded by a parade through Paris,
the first black woman honored
in the sacred temple of the French Republic.
As they wrote in *Le Monde*,
elle est devenue la première femme noire
à trouver sa place dans ce temple républicain, à Paris.

Born Freda Josephine McDonald in 1906,
by 1927 she'd swept Paris, headlining revues
at the Folies Bergère, including *Un vent de folie*,
having fled Saint Louis for New York
during the Harlem Renaissance, in the chorus line
of *Shuffle Along*, before sailing for Paris in 1925.
Her “Danse Sauvage,” wearing a skirt with a string
of artificial bananas, made her an instant star.
Hemingway called her “the most sensational woman
anyone ever saw”; Picasso painted her.

Marrying French industrialist Jean Lion,
Baker became a French citizen in 1937, horrified
by the violent racism in the United States.
Who can blame her? As a child, she'd seen
the destruction of whole neighborhoods
in East Saint Louis, rampaging white men
burning businesses and homes.

Ah, but she was gorgeous!
Josephine Baker danced on the stage
wearing a skirt and not very much more...
So, there she was, a casket in the Panthéon.
Buried along with her name.
Everyone came...

II. Nudity Just Isn't Sexy

My parents didn't approve of my profession,
but in 1930 you had to make a buck any way you could.
But I changed my name from Ann Coiro to Ann Corio,
switching up the letters the way I switched up my costumes,
for stage purposes, but also
to placate some of my relatives in Hartford
who didn't want to be associated with me.

I was one of twelve kids born to Italian immigrants.
Life wasn't easy, money scarce as a stripper's clothes.
I started dancing in the chorus at fifteen,
left for Scollay Square and the Old Howard
as soon as I could get away.

The Boston Watch and Ward hovered around like vampires,
always ready to report us for "indecentcy."
But the ticket man always recognized them coming in,
turned on the red light in the footlights,
and the girls would cool it on the bumps and grinds.

One time when the police raided,
the mayor, Joe Tumulty, whisked me away in his limo.
I was dancing with hizzoner on the Roof of the Ritz
while the whistles blew at the Old Howard.

But I always wore a body stocking.
I didn't use pasties, though I had brilliants
sewn on at all the strategic places.
I always draped a chemise over my shoulder,
and only at the last possible moment,
way upstage, flung my arms wide,
flashed for the audience.

There was always a big roar.
They knew that was all
they were going to get.

III. The Chinese Sally Rand

Unlike so many of my colleagues,
I only married once, for love.
I met Carleton in 1945, when I was dancing
at the Latin Quarter nightclub in New York.
Known for my fan dance and bubble dance,
made popular by Sally, a large balloon between
the audience and the naked dancer,
I swept Carleton Young off his feet.

It was love at first sight; at least, when Carleton saw *me*!
We stayed married nearly forty years,
until he died in 1994.
He'd been married twice before,
brief marriages like Sally's and Gypsy's and all the rest,
but ours was the real thing.

We once sold cans of L.A. smog as souvenirs
to tourists, marketing the polluted air
as an "authentic" slice of Hollywood
they could treasure back home in Davenport, Iowa!

A soldier and actor,
Carleton appeared in *Reefer Madness*,
among lots of other films and television shows.
He had that deep, sexy voice that made him a hit
on radio shows like *The Adventures of Ellery Queen*.

Me? I headlined at Forbidden City in San Francisco for years
but also performed at the Stork Club and other venues
before I got into acting, too,
small parts in films and television –
frequently as a Korean villager on M.A.S.H.

But I'm most proud of my marriage to Carleton.
Look at Candy Barr, four marriages;
look at Lili St. Cyr, half a dozen.
Sally – four brief, unfulfilling wedlocks.
Instead of calling me the Chinese Sally Rand,
they should have called her the Noel Toy wannabe.

IV. Bubbles Rhymes with Troubles

You can use a postage stamp only once.
I guess that about describes me.
By the time I got to Hollywood,
my past was as dead as my old name,
Imogene “Bubbles” Wilson, given to me
by Florenz Ziegfeld when he discovered me,
because my personality was so effervescent.
I was just a teenager then, come to New York
via Louisville, Kentucky, where my mom,
just sixteen herself, raised me without a dad,
to model and dance in the chorus.

“Only two people in America would bring
every reporter in New York to the docks,”
they said, “the President and Bubbles Wilson.”
My last name? It was really Robertson.

But then I got mixed up with Frank Tinney,
the comedian, an older married man.
Frank beat me black and blue.
Once he hurled an ashtray at my head.
“This girl looks like she was struck by an automobile,”
Mister Ziegfeld’s doctor testified in court.
Then Ziegfeld fired me for the negative publicity,
and like the dope I was I followed Frank to Europe,
a dumb kid convinced she was in love.

Frank continued to beat me up,
then he fell into bankruptcy, his wife left him,
his house burned down, and he had a nervous breakdown.
That’s when I changed my name to Mary Nolan,
tried to break into Hollywood –
landed in a film opposite Edward G. Robinson.

In LA I had another affair with an abusive married man,
Ed Minnix, story of my life.
Ed beat me so bad I wound up
in the hospital, where I got addicted to morphine.

Is it any wonder I OD’d, dead at 42?

V. America's Most Beautiful Dancer

Still in my teens when I became a dancer in Paris,
I starred in Maurice Chevalier's revue in the 1920's.
That's where I invented the fan dance, but also
used flowers and bubbles to conceal my nudity.
They called me, Faith Bacon,
"America's Most Beautiful Dancer."

I sued Sally Rand for \$375,000 after the bitch
stole my fan dance idea. We were in Chicago
performing at the 1933 World's Fair.
Sally claimed I was just jealous;
the audience seemed to like her better.
"The fan idea is as old as Cleopatra,"
Sally sneered. I didn't get the settlement.

That was just the first of my lawsuits.
When I was working the Lake Theater in Chicago,
in a show we called *Temptations*, 1936,
I fell through a glass drum
on which I was posing nude,
lacerated my thighs, leaving ugly scars.
I sued the Lake Theater Corporation for \$100,000,
but I had to settle for five thousand,
which I spent on a ten-carat diamond.

Though I preferred women to men,
I married Sanford Hunt, the songwriter.
When we separated in 1956, I came back to Chicago –
we'd been in Erie, Pennsylvania.

I was depressed as hell and broke.
All I had besides my clothes was a train ticket
back to Erie and eighty-five cents,
such a fall for America's most beautiful dancer.
The window of our room at the Alan Hotel
on Lincoln Park West called my name.

My roommate, Ruth Bishop, a grocery clerk –
what a lovely woman Ruthie was! –
tried to grab my skirt as I went out the window.
It was a long way down, but it seemed like
I'd been falling for almost twenty years by then.

Author Biography

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore. His latest poetry collection, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, poems about Harry Houdini, is a 2022 Blue Light Press Poetry winner and has just been published. Another poetry collection entitled *Transcendence* has also just been published by BlazeVOX Books. A collection of flash fiction, *Presto!*, will be published in 2023 by Bamboo Dart Press.