

# PERFORMING ARTS

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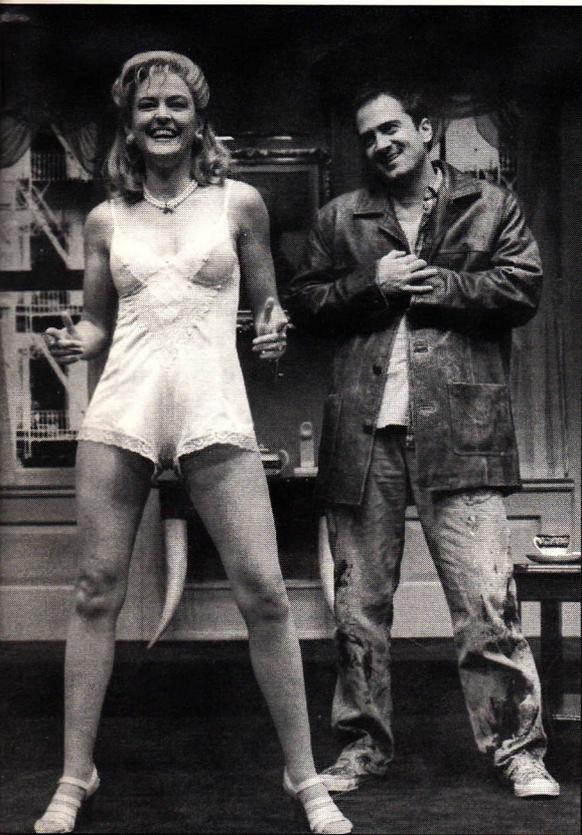
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# To Domesticate the Wild Unknown: A Fetish of Love

by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah



Park Overall and Matt Servitto.

The man who shares my life is obsessed with the preternatural power of a single dead rose gracing a woman's bedroom. It soothes him into surrender the way the petal-like softness of kisses subdues others into romance, with the sensual memory of pleasure. After night has fallen and the bridge between love and lust has been constructed, we greet one another with the breathless noise of passion. He covers me with a thick, quilted blanket, then he places the flower, alive with the consecrated spirit of his mother, the one woman he loves more than me, on the empty nightstand, like a family bible. This has become his way, his ritual. It is, I know, a fetish.

When we think of the word "fetish," we generally think of libidinal perversion. We imagine sick men with huge hungers and filthy fixations. I am starting, however, to question the accuracy of this association. After all, what more is a fetish than a ceremony, an objectified prayer to rise above our irrational, ordinary selves? In this light, it is hard to see the so-called abnormality or obscenity in fetishism. Certainly, nothing is more ordinary than sexual impulse, nothing more irrational than religion. In fact, religious doctrines and their societal by-products — better known as cultural values — are the backbones to a number of the explanations of supposedly deviant sexual conduct.

Long before Freud introduced his widely-accepted theory of psychosexual development, and even longer, before theological tenets were organized and labeled, primitive peoples possessed an innate soul, a divinity within them. Fetishes, such as an animal's tooth or a wood carving, were used to secure the assistance or protection of these individual deities. Devoting one's self to a fetish was akin to inheriting or honoring the strength of the soul that it symbolized. With the advent of one omnipotent God and a preordained path to earn His grace, fetishism, in its most basic styles, was viewed as wickedly uncivilized. The intersection between religion and sexual behavior occurred shortly thereafter. Intercourse was said to only be for the purposes of procreation. Exploitation of the act for any other reasons was immoral and, in many places, illegal. Early medical opinions adhered to these convictions; they labeled such transgressions as a form of psychopathology and determined them to be the cause of numerous mental disorders.

Times change, and opinions do too. Over the years, several classifications of what was once known as deviant sexual behavior have come to be regarded as normally adaptive expressions of sexuality. The category of homosexuality, for instance, has been permanently removed from recent editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders*. Fetishism still remains. In the overly intellectualized fear of sin, when my lover stands before me with a bouquet of fresh flowers, soft as whispers, I wonder if Freud was not correct after all with his structured diagnosis of the Oedipal complex. But when I look around me and notice my own array of fetishes — the candles, the amulets, the rosary and the crucifix — I tell him, "Leave them to dry. Leave them and come to bed." ■

*Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, a native of Ghana, is a poet and journalist.*