

Published in *Rockhurst Review*, Vol. 19, Spring 2006

### Picasso and Zita

Picasso writes poems for a dollar. He sits on the marketplace curb wearing his old army jacket, blue notebook in hand. His thin, graying ponytail trails off his smooth brow. Beside him rests a cane plastered with peace signs.

In the early morning you might see him at the Jazz Depot washing glasses and cleaning tables. At night, you might hear him at the piano.

Picasso got his name during a tour in Vietnam, where a little shrapnel got lodged in his knee; never mind the Agent Orange that took his manhood. His buddies dubbed him “Picasso the Poet” because the poems he wrote made as much sense to them as Picasso’s paintings.

Zita got her name from her mother, a hooker who went AWOL when Zita was six. At fifteen, Zita ran away from her third foster home. She hitchhiked to New York, to Chicago, to San Francisco.

In New York, she cleaned a fabric store on lower Broadway. She loved the different textiles, embroidery and especially the quilt patterns.

In Chicago, she worked nights in an Italian bakery. She filled sheet cakes with raspberry or pineapple and swirled coconut icing over them.

In San Francisco she also worked nights – this time as a stripper. After the joint closed one October night, a customer followed her all the way from Big Al’s to the Trans Bay Terminal. She ended up in a Greyhound headed for Seattle with just the clothes on her back and half a pack of Kools.

\* \* \*

Two days before Halloween, she perched like a robin on the low rusty railing across from Seattle’s Pike Place Market. Beside her, pigeons and gulls fought for a scone in the weeds while people slept on wooden benches. Highway 99, only a jump away, rumbled and shook with rush-hour traffic. As Zita teetered on the railing, two bicycling policemen wearing yellow jackets rode up. Zita looked down at the cars and turned toward the policemen and yelled, “If you come any fucking closer, I’ll jump.”

Hobbling up Western Avenue, Picasso spotted Zita crouched on the railing. He walked up very slowly and, with his cane, signaled the cops to back off. He sat on the bench to her left and pretended to write in his blue notebook. Actually, his eyes were fixed on her matted red curls, her white skin, her small shoulders and back. She seemed as fragile as a porcelain doll. But her voice alone could shatter porcelain.

“What the fuck you writing?” she snarled, her fists red from clenching the railing.

Despite her piercing voice, Picasso smiled. “A poem about you.”

“You don’t fuckin’ know me,” she said.

“I write what I see, that’s all.”

“What do you fucking see?”

“Red hair, snowy-white skin, green eyes.”

“So what’s the fucking poem?” Zita shouted.

“Do you say anything without using the word ‘fuck?’”

“Fuck, no. Show me the poem.”

Picasso held up his hand. “Wait, I’m still writing it.”

Zita climbed down the railing, marched up to Picasso and grabbed the notebook from his hands.

“There’s nothing here but scribbles,” she said, throwing the book in the weeds.

“You ain’t no poet; you’re a crazy derelict, just like all the mother fuckers here.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Picasso, retrieving his journal.

With that, Zita hurried off. She lit a cigarette and kicked away pigeons with her pointed boots. Picasso followed her down the worn bricks of the market, punting himself forward with his cane. It was getting cold. He caught up and draped his fatigue jacket around her small shoulders. As he did, he couldn’t help but notice the white scars on her wrist.

On the corner, he bought a bunch of light purple mums. He presented them to Zita with a slight bow. At first, she didn’t accept or reject them. She just stood there, gaping at him. Finally, Picasso took his handkerchief and wiped splotches of dirt from her face. She accepted the flowers, brought them to her nose and smiled. “Thanks,” she said, as she stomped out another cigarette.

That night she slept at the Noel House for women. But afterwards she followed Picasso. They often crashed in his buddy’s loft above the Alibi Room, cuddled up on the

floor. To keep warm, she'd try to put her hand inside his jacket but Picasso would gently move it away.

In May, Picasso's application for low income housing had moved to the top of the list. Zita joined him at his apartment on First and Bell, made curtains by hand and got a rug from the Greek next door. She put up mirrors on every wall. Mirrors of all shapes, except round. She hated round mirrors, cuckoo clocks, black lingerie, the rustle of taffeta and the feel of chenille. She wasn't sure why. She just knew they were reminders of her mother.

Once in while, Picasso's screams would wake Zita. "There's a gook," he'd yell. "He's got a grenade! Hit the ground!" He'd jump out of bed and head for the door until Zita shook him awake. He'd be sweaty and cold.

"Don't ever leave me," he'd say, trembling.

"Don't worry. If I do, I'll come back," Zita would always say.

\* \* \*

Zita painted the living room walls orange.

"Hmm," said Picasso. "Now we got orange walls and a pink bathroom."

Zita glared at him, hands on her hips. "Whatsa matter with that?"

"Nothing, I just . . ."

The next morning, Zita rolled chartreuse enamel on the bathroom walls.

\* \* \*

As they settled in the apartment, Picasso practiced jazz on a beat-up keyboard. Zita bought a sewing machine from the Salvation Army and learned how to put an inset of paisley print into the legs of blue jeans. She machine-embroidered apples, pears and cherries on sweaters, made overalls for children, reversible vests for men and women. She even got a stall in the arcade. Just before Christmas, Picasso made his debut at the Jazz Depot and put his poetry to music.

\* \* \*

That spring, Zita was continually on the move. She trooped down First Avenue past the Lusty Lady, past Pioneer Square to the baseball stadium. Hours later when she got home, Picasso would wash her feet with jasmine soap. Afterwards, he'd light patchouli incense and hum *Unforgettable* as he tucked her into bed. As he bent down, she offered a kiss, but he barely brushed her cheek.

\* \* \*

One night, Zita was preparing her bath. Picasso came into the bathroom and opened a bar of soap called Rose Geranium to lather Zita's feet.

Zita stood naked and still, except for the twitch of her nose.

"What's the matter?" Picasso asked.

Zita stood very still, sniffed the air like a startled dog. "Forget washing my feet tonight," she said.

“What’s the matter?” Picasso asked, rewrapping the soap.

“Nothing,” said Zita. “But I think you better go.”

“What happened? You were fine until I opened the . . .”

“Just leave me alone. Please.”

Suddenly her body stiffened. She stood like a marble statue with red curls.

Against her whiter-than-white skin, her eyes seemed greener and the veins in her breasts bluer.

“Zita!” said Picasso, setting the bar of soap on the sink. “What the hell is wrong?”

“Get out,” said the marble statue.

“Let me help, for God’s sake, Zita.”

“Get out,” repeated the statue.

Picasso put his hands to his head in exasperation, turned around and shut the door behind him. Zita locked it. When Picasso heard the lock click, he stationed himself in the hall right behind the door.

\* \* \*

Zita took Picasso’s razor from the medicine cabinet. She slowly unscrewed it until she could get the blade out. Moving like a mechanical doll, she set the blade on the edge of the tub next to her pack of Kools, matches and a small candle. She then turned on the faucet to fill the tub. Before reaching for the light, she set a match to the candle. She took the soap from the sink and tore off the wrapper. The bathroom filled with the scent of rose geraniums. With the soap in her hands, she sat in the tub, lathering her face, her

arms, her breasts, her thighs, her pubic hair. When she finished, she rinsed off the razor and held it above her right ankle.

The candlelight gave the chartreuse walls a yellowish cast.

Zita set the razor back on the edge of the tub, picked up a cigarette and lit it with the candle.

Picasso knocked. "Zita, you all right?"

Zita drowned the cigarette, picked up the blade again and held it above her wrist, keeping it steady while the water streamed from the faucet.

Her mother's fragrance seeped in like gas. Zita set the blade down. The bathtub spun. She held on held on the best she could and screamed.

"Zita! Zita!" yelled Picasso from behind the door.

Zita gripped the sides of the tub and straightened herself. Seizing the blade, she pointed it at just the right angle, paused for only a second, squeezed her eyes shut and sliced into the artery above her wrist.

Picasso kicked open the door and flicked on the light. Zita seemed not to notice, as if she were hypnotized by the blood making rivulets around the white scars on her wrist. Picasso snatched the blade from Zita's hand, tore off his t-shirt and made a tourniquet around her wrist. She shook like a frightened puppy as he lifted her out of the tub.

"Shhh," he whispered. "Shhh. Everything's going to be okay."

He wrapped her in a big towel and carried her out of the bathroom. He yanked the blankets off the bed and laid her on the futon. He pressed his hand against her wrist and spooned his body next to her.

When he was sure the bleeding had stopped and Zita was asleep, he covered her with a blanket from the floor, returned to the bathroom, stashed the blade in his blue notebook and put the matches in his jeans' pocket.

For weeks afterwards Zita sat hunched in a chair, as if she were studying the cracks in the floor. Picasso checked her eyes, her breathing for signs of life. Zita wasn't alive or dead, but somewhere in between.

\* \* \*

After weeks of sitting in the same chair, following the same cracks in the floor, Zita left abruptly. Picasso arrived home to an empty apartment. He searched the bathroom first, the kitchen, the living room, under the futon covers, even behind her sewing machine table.

Hours later, he heard her key in the lock. "Zita!" he said, when she came through the door carrying two paper bags. "Where were you?"

"Western Grocery. I'm makin' some cakes."

"What for?"

"I promised Noel House months ago I'd make some. Anything wrong with that?"

“No, but why now? I was worried.”

“Would I off myself on my way home from the grocery store?” Zita asked, setting some bags on the kitchen counter. “Gimme a break.”

Picasso lifted the flour and sugar from the bags. “Well, no, but how was I supposed to know where you were?”

“Well, now you know,” said Zita.

“But . . .” said Picasso.

“But nothing. I’m fine. Relax.”

\* \* \*

Zita finished four cakes -- two with raspberry filling, two with pineapple, all swirled with coconut icing. She kept a raspberry one for Picasso and delivered the other three to Noel House.

The next day Zita went to the Salvation Army and found a book on quilt making. She bought bushels of clothes, washed them all at the coin-op laundry and began to cut up the material into quilt pieces.

Before a month had passed, she’d completed a nine patch and started on a fan quilt, followed by a dragon fly and golden dahlia. Her queen-size kaleidoscope design turned out to be her masterpiece.

“I love the way the pieces seem to move in their own orbit, sort of the way you do, Picasso said with a grin, as he lightly ran his hand over the pattern. “You going to sell this one?”

Zita knew it would bring \$500 at the market, but she unfolded it and delicately spread it on their bed. “It’s ours, baby” she said.

By now Picasso was playing two nights a week at the Jazz Depot. On the mornings he washed dishes; Zita would tramp past the fish and flowers and skip down the steps to the Jazz Depot to meet him. He’d play *Unforgettable* while she nuzzled next to him on the piano bench. Afterwards they’d eat breakfast upstairs at Lowell’s and watch the ferries cross Puget Sound.

But Zita became more restless than ever. She grew impatient when Picasso laid on the futon all morning listening to Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, or Django Reinhardt.

Once she slipped in bed next to him and said, “C’mon, hold me, Picasso.”

“Tighter,” she demanded.

“C’mon, Zita, give me a break.”

“What the fuck do you mean, ‘break’?” Zita lashed at him, sitting up in bed. “Am I that disgusting?”

“Zita, don’t be ridiculous,” Picasso sighed. “You know better than that. It’s just that . . .”

“Just what?” Zita snapped.

“Well . . .”

Zita looked straight at him. “You think I’m dirty or something?”

“I think you’re beautiful,” said Picasso.

He took the hairbrush from the night table and began to brush her hair.

“Stop it!” Zita shouted.

Picasso set the brush on the nightstand. “Look, Zita. I would love nothing better than to . . .”

“Oh, I get it. I get it. You think I’m a slut.”

“I’d never think that,” said Picasso, setting the brush on the bed. He paused, and then began to twirl her curls around his finger. “Do you know how much I love your hair?”

In a flash, Zita yanked his hand away. “Enough with the fucking hair already,” she blustered. “What’s the problem? You think I’m ugly? Not good enough? Too fuckin’ crazy? Or just want me outta here? C’mon tell me for God’s sake! What the hell is it?”

“Please, Zita. Don’t make me feel any worse than I do. It’s hard enough . . . Can’t you understand that? It has nothing to do with you.”

“Zita jumped out of bed, stood and glared at him. “You think I’m a whore, don’t you! Just like my mother.”

Picasso quickly looked up at her. “Your mother? What the hell are you talking about?”

“That’s what everybody said about her.”

“I don’t care what they said about your mother! Why would I? It doesn’t make the least bit of difference.”

Zita took a step closer, shook her finger in his face. “I don’t need questions. I want answers. Now.”

“All right, then. Sit down.”

“Okay! I’m sitting.”

“Now listen.”

“Okay, I’m listening, for Christ’s sake.”

“Look at me.”

“Okay,” said Zita, shoving her face next to his. “Is this close enough?”

Picasso stood up. “Forget it,” he said.

“No, tell me. I have to know.”

“All right,” said Picasso, sitting back down. “Ever heard of Agent Orange?”

“Not really.”

“Agent Orange was a defoliant used in Vietnam.”

“So?”

“It causes cancer.”

“So?”

“I had surgery.”

“On your knee?”

“No, here.” Picasso put his hand on his crotch.

“You have to be kidding. You mean you lost . . .”

“Both.”

Zita grabbed the hairbrush and tossed it across the room. “I gotta go,” she said.

“Where?” asked Picasso.

“Just somewhere else.”

“For how long?”

“Don’t know,” said Zita.

\* \* \*

Picasso waited for Zita to return for weeks, limping up and down First Avenue. He searched every stall and shop in the upper and lower market arcades. He asked the bicycle policemen with yellow jackets to look out for her. He knocked on all the doors of his building and talked with the Greek next door. No one had seen her.

Three months went by. He waited in the apartment. He waited on the marketplace curb. He wrote poems for a dollar. He kept his blue notebook by his side, the blade long since destroyed.

\* \* \*

Zita came home the day before Halloween while Picasso was playing at the Jazz Depot. Her red hair was matted, her jacket and pants dirty. She dragged a large plastic trash bag in which she had balled up all her belongings.

She found the apartment clean and neat. Yellow mums sat on the kitchen table, purple ones on the night stand.

Filling the tub with jasmine bubble bath, Zita lit a cigarette and sank into the warm water. Afterwards, she crawled under the kaleidoscope quilt and waited for Picasso.