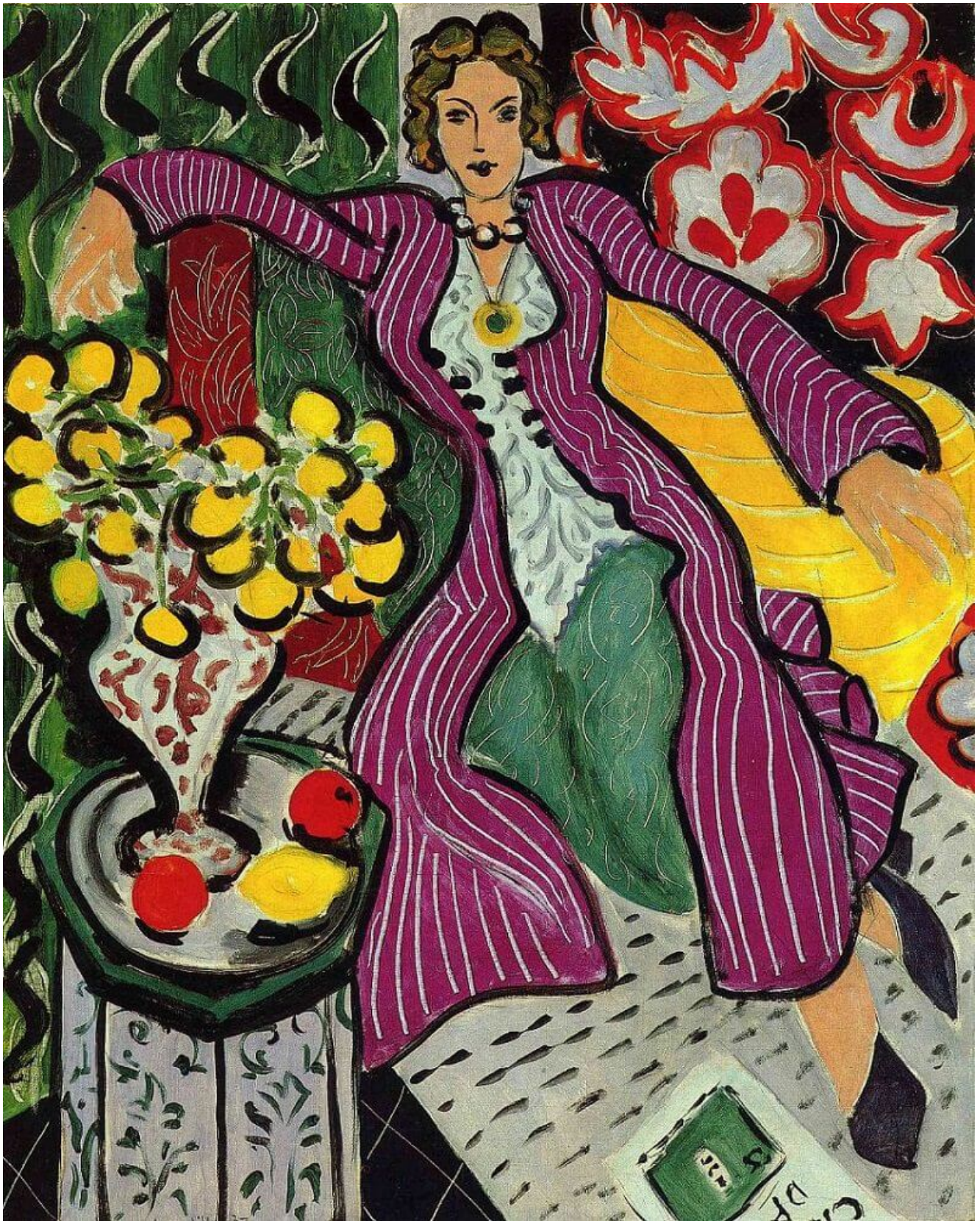


Joseph's Coat: A Soliloquy



Woman in a Purple Coat, Henri Matisse, 1937

Let's go shopping, just mother and daughter,

*A new season, your birthday,
And we both need coats.
Is there something specific you'd like?
I may have a fashion magazine somewhere.*

Without hesitation—*Joseph's* coat,
A dream-coat, warm,
Interwoven with unexpected silken threads.
A lucky coat—
Its special colors are like inscriptions
Because he was loved.

Ungrateful girl!
Nothing at all. Make the old one do.

I was twelve and outgrowing my clothes.
All that winter, I tugged at sleeves,
Struggled with newly misaligned buttons,
And a hemline that would not cover.
I didn't know yet that I needed
A protective coat,
Partly as guardian against her.
Much later on,
Re-reading Kafka for a project,
I came upon a familiar passage
As though for the first time,
"A book should serve as an axe
For the frozen sea within ... "
I could feel the grief of punishment
For having replied with a deeply personal wish—
Reprisal for even having such a wish.

Those years ago it mattered not at all
That my answer was my own—
That it did not correspond
To *her* wish was all.
Such indifference to the fact of me
Seemed frightful.

Those futile repetitions,
Though customary
Were never without pain.

I began to understand myths—
Their way of reaching far inside.
No use wishing for The Frog Prince
Who befriends you
If only you don't find him ugly.
What reached me most was Sisyphus.
I felt his stone as my own.
You roll it up the hill,
Down it comes again and always.
Each time you're a little less hopeful.

I sensed that I had chosen
The most difficult persons
And encounters,
Some propelled less by mutual liking
Than a hope of surmounting indifference
Or void—
I felt condemned to overcome
Resistance, even dislike—
Never free to welcome or to seek love.
Among those I've befriended
It's so hard if something goes wrong
To make amends.
Nothing's ever enough.
A few were too needy
Or melancholy even to notice.
All exacted strenuous,
Unrequited labor—
Futility my constant companion.
Was I beginning to fall in love
With the stone
Perversely reliable
On its thankless hill?

Does its never abandoning one
Imply pledge and lastingness?

By what I'll call a blessed process
I began to envision the close
Of unacknowledged labor
Through some metamorphosis,
As though some stranger benign,
Unsummoned,
Helped me to enter freely
A realm of my own.
If it happened gradually,
The stages of change
Have not been clear.
I began to move away
From the thankless hill.
Customary effort turns into quest
And pilgrimage,
Fruits of labor likely as blight or hail.
Conclusions are not foregone—
Even an arduous quest
Is abundantly plentifully
Welcome as my own.

Today is my twenty-third birthday—
Winter's child.
I'm now waiting for the slight
Alteration of my new, warm coat—
Lifting it from the ground
Until it grazes the ankle.
I'll look for a long
Special-threaded scarf—
Even without *magical* protection,
Protection enough.