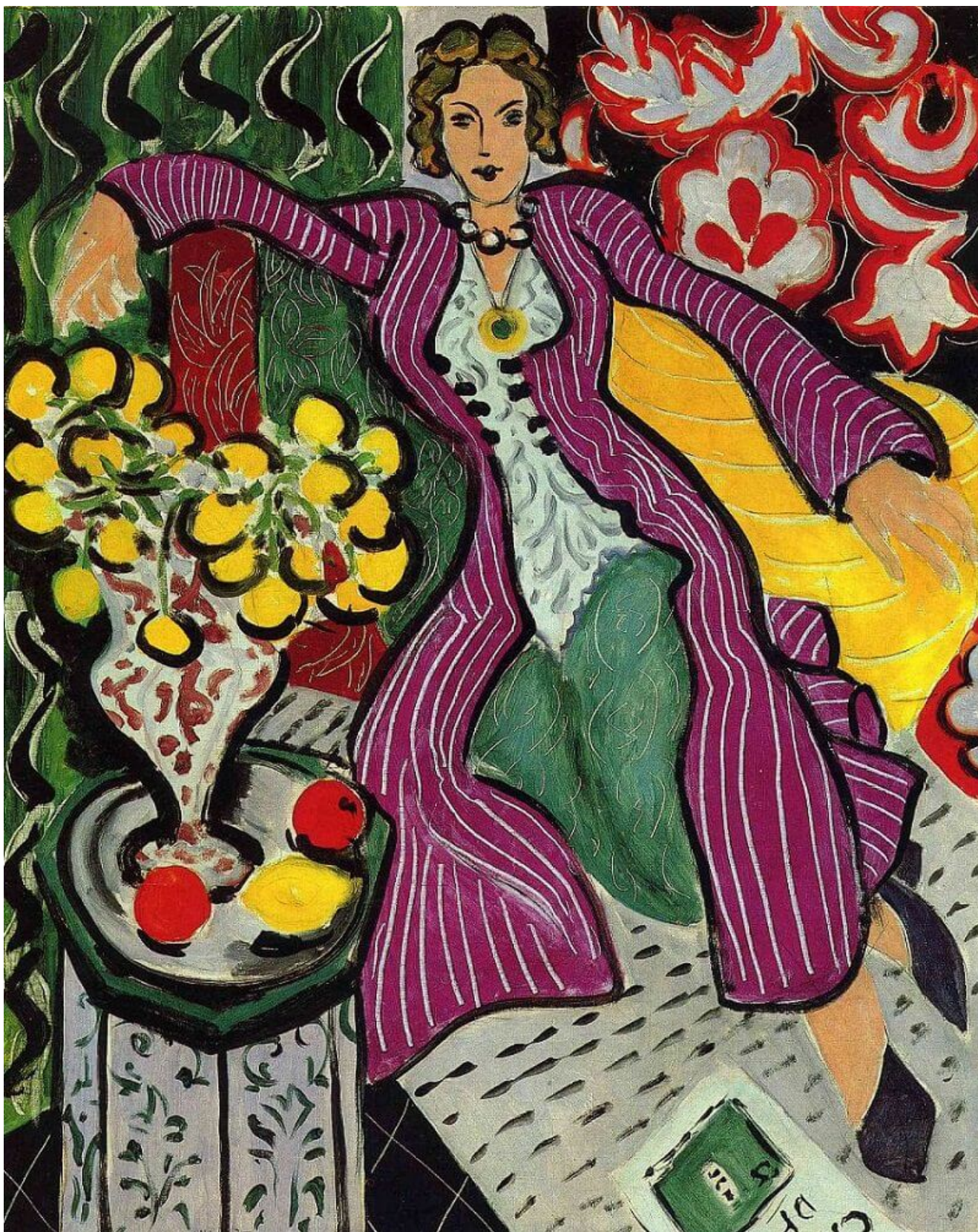


# Joseph's Coat: A Soliloquy



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.