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# Madonnas, Whores and Other Pilgrims

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

MADONNAS, WHORES AND OTHER PILGRIMS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Barbara Swan

2016

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Barbara Swan, entitled *Madonnas, Whores and Other Pilgrims*, and having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Julie M. Wade

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Meri-Jane Rochelson

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Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 8, 2016

The thesis of Barbara Swan is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2016

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
MADONNAS, WHORES AND OTHER PILGRIMS

by

Barbara Swan

Florida International University, 2016

Miami, Florida

Professor Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

This group of poems spans the life of the author. The three sections of the book address each part of the title: the visceral and sensory memories of a child; the physical passions and romantic visions of a young to pre-menopausal woman; and finally the reflective wisdom that comes with age.

“Madonnas,” speaks to the fairy tale that is childhood, both the dream and the nightmare aspects. Through the senses and the acquisition of language, these poems speak to the innocence and trust of a child before knowledge and experience show her otherwise.

“Whores,” speaks to the material American dream of wealth, sex, motherhood and heartbreak.

“Other Pilgrims,” is a reflection of what has been lived, expressed in a manner that comes with time and contemplation. Themes include travel, menopause, religion, and philosophy.

MADONNAS, WHORES AND OTHER PILGRIMS casts the experience of the feminine, challenging the madonna/whore dichotomy.

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Part One  
MADONNAS

## **Father's Day**

From the time my parents got divorced  
I did my best to have my dad over once a year on Father's Day.  
Ten years after the split, when he was eighty,  
he and his thirty-nine year old wife  
whose name I can't recall  
showed up late for Sunday brunch in separate cars.  
They were polite to me but not really speaking to each other.  
Actually, my father was pretty damn quiet  
which was unusual and unnerving  
like watching a live performance of a symphony without sound.

By the age of ten I'd learned not to ask personal questions  
because I already knew I wouldn't want to know the answers  
so we'd talk about Demosthenes or Jean Paul Sartre or Pablo Neruda.

But my live in boyfriend, Philip, Sicilian through and through  
couldn't bear the silence, or the lack of what he considered  
normal familial curiosity, and asked,  
"Why didn't you two come together?"  
Michele or Mary or Marcy replied,  
"Because our divorce was final on Friday."



For a while the only sound was careful closed mouth smacking,  
but then, again, Philip simply had to know,  
“Why, what happened?”  
She shrugged, “I was tired of his cheating.”  
I said, “Pass the cream cheese please.”

I watched the afternoon sun make its way across the room  
and stretch like a cat on the dining table, and then  
my father’s voice suddenly filled the Sunday silence.

“It’s time for you to know you’re not an only child.

All those years I worked for Sharp and traveled each month  
to Asia, I met someone Taiwanese and had three kids,  
but that never meant I didn’t love you and your mother.”

Philip choked and blurted, “What?”

I reached out my hand and said,

“Please pass the smoked salmon.”

As the light began to fade my father seemed to shrink  
like an immense Macy’s Day balloon which had forever blocked  
the view of sky and stars and in which time had finally stuck a pin.

My dad died twelve years later choking on lunch,

which was ironic, since he was a health nut  
and always said, "Food can kill you."

It happened to be my birthday, and for once he was alone,  
because his new thirty-two-year-old Korean wife was shopping.

Now I often think about those siblings in far off China  
and wonder how much they look like me.

## **Where I am From**

I am from books, from the boardwalk and bright light from the sea.

I am from the lilac bush, the wind-swept bay and crunch of autumn leaves.

I'm from pussy willows, and roller skates, safety and the feeling of free.

I'm from graceful, three-tiered fruit-treed houses.

I'm from family gathered on a backyard beach.

I'm from the subway to the city that meant Chinese food or shiny shoes or

Macy's Thanksgiving Parade or a hundred foot twinkling tree.

I'm from the last stop on Stillwell near Nathan's and the Cyclone,

the candy store and tenements, and the abandoned carousel.