

The Jewel Casket

On a moonlight night in the winter of 1835 the carriage of Marie Taglioni was halted by a Russian highwayman, and that enchanting creature commanded to dance for this audience of one upon a panther's skin spread over the snow beneath the stars. From this actuality arose the legend that to keep alive the memory of this adventure so precious to her, Taglioni formed the habit of placing a piece of artificial ice in her jewel casket or dressing table where, melting among the sparkling stones, there was evoked a hint of the atmosphere of the starlit heavens over the ice-covered landscape.

Label to Joseph Cornell's
Taglioni's Jewel Casket

Slowly melting over precious stones,
This ice reminds me
Of that snowy moonlit night when I was asked
To dance upon a panther's skin
Spread over snow.

I did not know the man, nor think
That he knew me. Yet,
I've often paused, as I do now, to wonder
What our little audience
Might mean for him

That means, has meant, so much to me.
He could have asked for
Anything, and got it. No one would know. The snow,
New-fallen, soft, filled in the outline
Of the trees like flesh

Upon the bare bones of the dark.
He sent the driver away.
My naked flesh was all alive that night.
I loved to let him watch, his eyes
So soft, so bright,

The panther skin beneath my feet
So soft. He stood, his arms
Crossed, his face almost averted, the way
I turn my eyes from these few jewels
When light catches them.

I danced for him, or for myself,
As if I saw myself
From some huge distance, or in some great hall,
At a ball where I was all alone
In circled center

Place and no one knew my name—
Or knew it all too well.
And when my dance was done, he bowed and thanked
Me with a smile, and then rode quick
Away. The snow

Continued all that night and no one
Ever asked why I
Was late arriving. No one has ever known,
Just as they do not know that I
Spread cubes of ice

Upon my jewels and keep a panther
Pelt upon the floor
Beneath the open window, and lay awake
Each starry moonlit night to think
Him back again.

—William Virgil Davis