Those Various Scalpels

By Marianne Moore

Those various sounds, consistently indistinct, like intermingled echoes
struck from thin glasses successively at random—
the inflection disguised: your hair, the tails of two
fighting-cocks head to head in stone—
like sculptured scimitars repeating the curve of your
ears in reverse order:
your eyes,

flowers of ice and snow

sown by tearing winds on the cordage of disabled ships: your
raised hand
an ambiguous signature: your cheeks, those rosettes
of blood on the stone floors of French châteaux,
with regard to which the guides are so affirmative—
your other hand

a bundle of lances all alike, partly hid by emeralds from Persia
and the fractional magnificence of Florentine
goldwork—a collection of little objects—
sapphires set with emeralds, and pears with a moonstone, made fine
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragonfly blue;
a lemon, a pear

and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver: your dress, a magnificent square
cathedral tower of uniform
and at the same time diverse appearance—a
species of vertical vineyard, rustling in the storm
of conventional opinion—are they weapons or scalpels?
Whetted to brilliance

by the hard majesty of that sophistication which is superior to opportunity,
these things are rich instruments with which to experiment.
But why dissect destiny with instruments
more highly specialized than the components of destiny
itself?

Considered “a poet’s poet” for the subtlety of her thought and glittering verse technique, Marianne Moore was also a fascinating character who in later life became a literary celebrity — she was recognized for her cape, three-cornered hat, and baseball fanaticism as for anything she wrote. Wide renown did not come until 1951, when Moore’s Collected Poems won the National Book and Bollingen Awards and the Pulitzer Prize.

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