Caught in the Act by James B. Rosenberg
Inspired by Judith Slaying Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi

Virtuous widow.
Judith, Yehudit, Jewess.
Removes the sackcloth of her mourning.
Sheds the garments of her widowhood.
Bathes her pure body with water.
Anoints her head with oil.
Adorns herself, as if for her long dead husband.
With anklets, bracelets, earrings.
Jeweled tiara upon her head.

Thus armed for battle.
She approaches her enemy.
The enemy of her people.
Softens him with wine
And the promise of more to come.
Enter his chamber
And awaits his wine-drunk sleep.
The sleep of death.

Seventeen hundred years after the telling,
An artist of the Italian Renaissance
Catches Judith and her handmaid Abra
In the act of cutting off the head
Of Holofernes the Assyrian,
Enemy of the Jewish people –
Military victory in the bedroom.

The painter, her biographer suggests,
Has expressed her repressed rage
At her living rapist
By filling the foreground,
The white sheets of Holofernes’ bed,
With the gushing blood
Of his partially severed neck.

Summoning a strength beyond their strength
Judith and Abra, femmes fatales,
Join hands to wield the dagger of death,
The dagger of liberation.

Note: The first stanza is based upon the Apocryphal Book of Judith, Chapter 10, verses 3-4. The two lines in italics are taken from Lori Hope Lefkowitz’s discussion of the Book of Judith in her book, In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities, Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, pp. 121-122