

KATHRYN RHETT

Book of Hours

Leaves like miniature red scythes or boomerangs scattered.
A yellow peel spirals off the blade.
The tears of Republican women as they clutch in gold-buttoned suits.
The you of you coming home, smoke out of the scorched air.
A sheet corner sprouts like a fleur-de-lis into the room.
The touching, the folding like a triptych shut, the sightless pleasure.
The child growing larger by the hour, as if birth were endless.
She traps her small flying hand with her mouth.

My daughter is eight now—
she won't be taken from me.
She is solid, real.
With Botticelli hair she swims in the forest still.
Once, morphine flew her through the dark.
Her eyes closed against the dark wood of the world.
(Here, this is what you must enter through—
a long blackness of harsh breathing,
being summoned to a far, daylit field.)
The forest is attached to her.
Sometimes she falls back in—
succumbing to convulsions,
her limbs in a filmy, suffocating garment.
Mother, father,
don't make me come out
with wide hazel eyes
and a panicked, sideways glance—

As if she could vanish into a hazel wood
from which sticks are cut
for beating or divining.
As if she might be flattened there,
in a perpetual suggestive inaction
in which flowers had just streamed
from her lips
into the forest turning brown or green,
between a winter and fertility
all motion suspended
before, in a violent burst of consciousness
(How *did* Persephone return to earth?)
she slammed into the world again.

The world wanted her.
I cradled her across my lap.
The world wanted her
to stay in its rough circumstance:
but her breath fell, and her color fell away
as if something had taken
and turned her, the way a wind
reverses leaves,
to the verdigris unconsciousness
of before, before, before.
Awkwardly I carried her
up the hill to home.
Her legs dangled down.
Ungainly and tired from giving birth
to her brother,
I wished that I were stronger
to carry my girl in my arms
with a measure of dignity,
or shelter.

When her eyes open
as we kneel
time starts again; time starts
again for us,
vigilant at a birth.
We might be statues, stilled
in the twirl of dust.
Her eyes flick, side to side;
she can't remember where
she's come from.
Once it was morning on the beige sofa—
her skin and the light
had a pale celery cast.
Once it was Christmas, amidst
the crumpled wrappings.
All the roses gone,
and a long, whitefaced journey back.
As an infant, her eyes were like a seer's—
a glassy indigo, still of the dark
unphysical dream—
We dimmed the lights.
We would entice her to us.
To our cycles of planting seeds,
cutting flowers, tending
our gardens made
dormant and lustrous by ice.

Trompe l'oeil
is what the region's famous for—
Madonna in a niche on
the cathedral facade
being actually flat paint, or
stone window frames that aren't.
The children disappearing
around corners
of the crooked-packed medieval
houses, with a flash
of white sock or blue shoulder,
pale squeak of sneaker.
Or they come out, preceded by
an orange plastic arrow,
shouts, a fusillade of steps—
they're here, dimensional
until the stones and feline shadows
take their places.

We saw a painted Mary,
not holding her son
but waiting to.
In the dim upstairs exhibit
of carved, dwarf-sized statuary
made of fruitwood
three centuries before,
this is what I wanted:
stories that lasted.
As to why this was the story
of our lives
people believed in
I could not tell her.
In a darkness so gathered, enfolding
and old, beneath the cathedral ceiling;
in a darkness so deliberate
it seemed scripted,
dusted with the residue of ink, and smoke.
The dead Christ polychrome with blood.
Diminutive Mary, hands pinned to her sides
as if she would be helpless
even to receive him.

You have to know that I am older now—
my camera in a case,
the kids' school pictures
in my wallet.

I came to see the “Primavera,” or
“Allegory of Spring,” to be precise,
in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

I hadn't seen it for a long time,
except in books
and so I stood near
for a while, ignoring tour groups.
I'd paid my money, and just to see
the one painting, so I looked and looked
as if to store it, and still,

as before, the figure of the girl
arrested me—not Flora with her flowers
or Venus or the Graces, who all seem
bored, including Mercury—but the girl,
panicked, being lifted by the blueish
angel in the trees, who isn't
an angel but the wind.

And what I'd never noticed were his wings.
Four long feathers gleaming
through the olive leaves.
They resembled bean pods, or catalpas
that rattle in a breeze when they dry up.
Or four blue swords shining,
taking the girl to her fate.

How could I not have seen?
(The younger me, that is,
with my hip cocked, pausing for an

intellectual moment, headed for Greece
 where I'd eat honey on the coast—
 is the future real, my son once asked—
 oh yes, oh yes)

This time I turned at last
 to find my husband in the crowd,
 and I squinted at the opposite wall.
 A new painting hung there, or
 rather, an old one, restored in the years
 between my visits, an “Annunciation”
 (there are so many), but in this one

the angel has green wings, green
 as infant grass or a lily's
 elongated bud, holding all that
 shimmers inside—

I told my husband of the wings,
 the death wings, and the birth wings
 that reminded me of Hopkins' line
 “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”—
 but in those moments of waking
 it's just as if an angel comes to you
 because no one else can hear.

I meant to speak only of angels,
yet they resemble so much else

(& of course it is expected that I see them,
being visionary)

white sails approaching port, or
migratory birds returning

sheets shook out on a balcony,
two hands, a swan,

the snowy cape
of a plague inspector, his paper

beak stuffed full of flowers,
knocking at houses

for the hidden blackened ones.
I meant to speak only of fortune—

I once was sure and certain
as a stone

(or the way that sounds)

my body yet to multiply
and wander.

Green thorns
in ground-tied clouds
thicken the woods.
Running on the fire road,
I see water-filled depressions
struck with chalk, or milk.
The still gray pools unapparent
at first, below
sand shoulders
glazed with snow
at the bottom of the green
particle-storm of woods.
I run away from the box-house
and back again
on tangents.

Green thorns in clouds insects fly through
some mornings seem part of a dream
in an ahistorical Bohemia,
ground-tied weightless needles.
Other days they lash the trees,
bind the woods back
like the stark limitations of hours.

A flesh-giving sun
lit the white-gold branches.
They were the color of weightless
pistachio shells, tossed up into blue.
We climbed the stairs for breakfast
into a skylit room.
In the woods, brushed silver along the tree roots
lit up distances.

The worn-through t-shirts
of old snow persisted.
Red-washed silks of cardinals
skimmed half-winged across and
were gone into thorns.
My husband and daughter
played hide-and-seek in the yard.
Last week our selves flashed in and out
of a mean obscurity
but now we seemed laid open and mild.
Our necks bending to fit.

This morning, motion—
two brown fur-feathered ducks
in the bottom-water
make abrupt directional turns,
the tails hinging around,
steering through links between ponds.
Their beaks of polished wood.
The water now virginally fluid.
The air runs thicker with birds and buds,
chalky claws on the branch ends.
The past is hardly past.
Our child replaces herself over time
and is more than accumulation.
The red ground-leaves,
iced and blown, are
breaking down to soil.
The night sky dry and boned with branches.

They are sleeping,
finally stilled
when I check them
one last time.
My nightgown in the nightlight's
golden seeded glow
swings into shadows
as if a fire
jumps in the room.
In the room made small
by the small light:
a fire in the cave.

Freight cars creak by in the dark
behind the yard.
Our son snuffles with a first cold.
One a.m. I've finished work.
Waking up these days, I lapse
back, as with one arm
flung for the first backstroke
to the water of dreams, whole stories.
A color orange, an urge to kiss you—
it's too soft,
a remnant; shaken off.

The horse against the sun
is lined with fire.
My daughter rides her
western-style,
heels down,
hips easy in the saddle.
She used to toss her head
when she kicked that reddish horse—
a flourish, an italic
emphasis.
Now she tilts her face
up steadily, and the sun
gilds her laughing,
wheeling around the ring
in figure eights.
The sun sinks on spindles.
A white goose
cranks from the far field.
I see the body radiant
as a November day shuts its gate—
girl and horse a thin corona
before the fence.
Before the twilight cold
begins, and
banks and fractures us.