

# Folio



*Supporters of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo at a demonstration in front of a church where the people involved in the "Disappearances" were attending mass.*

*Photo: Gerardo dell'Orto*

## Editor's Notes

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It's a great pleasure to feature Kathryn Rhett's "Book of Hours" for this issue of Folio. In this richly textured sequence of poems, the poet meditates on singular, evanescent moments to capture the vibrant passage of the seasons and the stark grace of embodied knowledge: "I once was sure and certain/ as a stone/(or the way that sounds)/," she writes, "my body yet to multiply/and wander."

Composed against the backdrop of a Civil War battlefield where the poet's family makes their home, a mother weathers a daughter's terrifying convulsions and fainting spells, a deeply felt individual drama with vivid archetypal resonance. Rhett's attention to detail is uncannily precise and painterly, recalling the dailiness of medieval texts where lush imagery accrues to compose place, time, and endeavor. Entering the hushed space of these poems, we encounter "leaves like miniature red scythes"; a newborn who "traps her small flying hand with her mouth"; "red-washed silks of cardinals"; "worn-through t-shirts/of old snow," and "gardens made/dormant and lustrous by ice." Each time the daughter convulses and faints ("eyes closed against the dark wood of the world"), her mother is drawn back, through memory ("the verdigris unconsciousness/of before, before, before") to the difficult birth her child barely survived.

Rhett considers this troubling experience through the lens of art and myth: the daughter vanished "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" before she re-emerges "in a violent burst of consciousness," prompting the poet to ask "(How did Persephone return to earth?)/she slammed into the world again."

While the beauty of the natural world affords wonder, the poet/mother navigates a reality where "green thorns in clouds insects fly through" will "some mornings seem part of a dream/in an ahistorical Bohemia" and on others will "lash the trees,/bind the woods back/like the stark limitations of hours." The dangers of living and loving stand out in sharp relief: an infant son's cold is a reminder of the nearness of physical extinction; elsewhere, divisions form among family members whose "selves flashed in and out/of a mean obscurity." Epiphanies arrive unasked for and must be honored before "the twilight cold/begins, and/banks and fractures us."

Kathryn Rhett is the author of *Near Breathing: A Memoir of a Difficult Birth*. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Harvard Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *the New York Times*, and elsewhere. An associate professor at Gettysburg College and as a faculty member of the low-residency MFA program at Queens University in Charlotte, Rhett is currently at work on a memoir about living in Barcelona.

Describing her process, Rhett recalls learning about books of hours in a college art history survey class. “In a dark auditorium,” she says, “we saw bright slides of ‘The Very Rich Hours of the Duc de Berry,’ made by the Flemish painters known as the Limbourg Brothers in 1416. The calendar pages, an addition to the standard prayer pages, struck me most, highly detailed miniature paintings of ordinary people engaged in seasonal activities.” In her own “Book of Hours” the poet’s temporal journey reflects a consciousness vividly shaped by art and motherhood. Time’s passing is its own reward: where a younger self breezes through a gallery, “hip cocked, pausing for an/ intellectual moment,” the older one has trained her eye to find the visionary in the ordinary.

—Jane Satterfield

