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Botticelli: From Bryher's Imagined Notes

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Two Poems · *Kathleen Fraser*

BOTTICELLI: FROM BRYHER'S IMAGINED NOTES

To write it (you or I)

this plan
something like a dress you didn't choose

or tore out of newsprint
imagining a day clear enough

for simple exchanges
a red wallet

flattened, geometric, leather
and formal with its deep snow

That face you love opening before you
Someone historical in puffy satin

Svelto does not mean svelte
The language crosses over and is wet

In Venice we said Venezia

In any small town the beat flew
to a middle syllable

but you were near your future
I had been drinking little wakeful gulps

only yesterday and close by
(gelato)

in the heat. Bodies standing
in pools of sound with their tongues

buried so, crushed ice around cannisters

If

a city is an invention
why are we not there

We divide time into little containable parcels
which can fit on one page

You write in the heat
but I continue to draw

a fresh calendar for each month
I begin with clear white space

and follow with sharpened divisions
For one evening I can sleep

unarmed before the desired
eventfulness

I remember the more than hundred
flowers in "Primavera"

or rather that Botticelli wanted

each singleness
his pleasure

cleared by restoration
to petals finally visible

through varnish the botanical detail

About "Botticelli: from Bryher's imagined notes"

Looking at Botticelli's "Primavera," again, in the summer of 1984, immediately after the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence had cleaned and restored it, I was struck by the entirely new multiplicity of detail, the discrimination present in each petal, leaf, insect antenna and delicacy of color that was suddenly available. We'd been given new access to what had always been there, detailed botanic evidence and stunning brushwork beneath the protective layers of varnish now removed. This project—to delicately move into and through accumulated layers of cultural preservation—made a natural bridge in my mind to the quest shared by H.D. and Bryher. It was their collaboration—their separate and shared attention to visual detail and their receptiveness to the visionary moment, the palimpsest evidence shimmering out of earlier accountings—that helped to make possible, finally, H.D.'s compelling clarity of language and its ability to seize the moment, superimposed on history, and make it matter urgently.

H.D.'s poetry shows us both to trust and mistrust language, that each word must be suspected and tested in the independently governed mind *and* in the ear. It confirms for us that the narrative of female sensibility is not necessarily a "logical" progression nor a single dimension but is experienced in multiplicity of knowledge rather than in its hierarchy.

In this poem, I was also imagining Bryher and H.D. in Italy, on one of their many trips, and thinking that Bryher's financial and emotional support of H.D. may have tended to dominate our sense of Bryher, obscuring her own gifts as witness and "seer." Women often provide this support for each other's sense of "how it is." I wanted to celebrate this struggle for clarity.

ELECTRIC RAILWAY, 1922, TWO WOMEN

—for Susan Gevirtz

Cielo magnifico!

"Az-zu-ro"

"Ce-les-te"

Always cypress floating the dead outside Sicilian towns
(thin blue fabric where her knees press through).