

Commonplace Nightmares

Holly Welker

Most likely it was an act of God that
the cathedral caught fire even before
the hangman put the mask on my head
and all my executioners ran in search of water
and left me gasping, brittle with fright,
until an old woman cut my noose and let me down,
retreating into the hood of her cape so no one could see
the malicious smile sticking to her tarry lips.

It must have been all the malevolent forces of the universe
pursuing me to that place so old
that even the moment I got there it felt like
500 years ago. Thirteen loaves of bread were held up
against the light of the stained glass windows,
and the choir tower thrust itself into the mottled sky.
The hag sent me home to bathe in herbs as penance;
I've done it but now I can't swallow,
my whole life is in my throat,
all the joy and misery I'll ever feel is
condensed in a lump the size of my fist
and wrapped around my brain stem.

My dreams are full of petticoats.
I can never own enough lingerie but I don't
mess with garters, they just falter and my stockings fall
below the fringed hem of my skirt
embroidered with a border of pomegranates and bells.
I wonder what I've sacrificed and what
I could have done differently,
sometimes I lie back and think
this is punishment for everything I've ever done wrong:
to dream of escape, blank sheets of stationery,
cups full of coffee, lipstick, tall men,
of mirrors and escape,
of petticoats, portraits, cabinets and keys.
And I worry that if I don't get ahold soon
of something full of whimsy,
full of the odd fancy of capricious notion,
I will someday have gray hair and
very thick ankles and wear a dress
that used to be sort of brownish,
shuddering out of that nightmare
where all I do is take care of a baby and someone old.