

EMILY BLUDWORTH DE BARRIOS

*excerpt from Rich Wife*

The rich wife is not really a rich wife

If richness is something you carry in your mind

Her mind is more like a shopping mall

There are “rich people’s secrets” and the rich wife doesn’t know them

She remembers lip gloss and hallways lined with lockers

And “sucking in”

(And a boy who said in science class, of a girl who wasn’t there,

“Opening her legs was like opening a book”)

She remembers puka shell necklaces

Gelled hair with bleached tips

(Carefully combed from back to front)

The rich wife was one boring shell of a person among 1,200 boring shells

Can’t you tell?

Can’t you tell from reading her thoughts now?

The rich wife was never a boy in science class announcing

“Opening her legs was like opening a book”

The rich wife was assessed, like a book

Discarded, stolen, perused

The rich wife was a stupid girl

She layered eyeshadow on her eyelids

(Like light glittering on the ocean at night)

She lined her lips in lip liner

If she had had an imagination, she would have dreamed of ocean liners slicing the dark sea

She imagined—nothing

She imagined being looked at and felt cold ice pour down the back of her neck

The rich wife felt cold ice pour down the back of her neck

At swim class among the nannies and mothers stamping like thoroughbreds

If richness is something you carry in your mind

If richness is immoral

If richness is immortal

The statues of the ancient rich thrust their shoulders back like

White creamy marble

Marble that looks like hard milk

Or

Sandstone flecked with wind

Nefertiti was a rich wife

And Lavinia was a rich wife

(Her head in statues frothy with hard round curls)

(Her slender neck improbably supporting a tall cylindrical crown)

Mary Delany, rich wife and dependent widow, her chubby old face framed with a white bonnet

As a widow cutting thousands of pieces of minuscule colored papers to compose photorealistic “mosaiks” of flowers

In the 18th century

Red poppies burn from inside a black square

The tangled mind of a passion fruit flower waves its tendrils in Mary Delany’s depiction of it

“the story starts when the artist was 72”

The rich wife bides her time

Cultivates some skills

Within some constraints, a life

The rich wife picks up shoes

The rich wife lines up the shoes on the shelf above the labels of the children’s names

(Yellow shoes, blue shoes, strawberry-red shoes)

She puts a cheesecake in the refrigerator to chill

She lays out 5 dinner plates 5 forks 5 glasses large and small

The rich wife enters a children’s birthday party into her calendar

Enters a dentist appt into her calendar

Enters “bring two pumpkins to school” into her calendar

Hangs the homework bag on the doorknob

Puts a container of sliced cucumbers into the snack drawer

Tilts back the blinds to shed sunlight onto the children's aloe vera

Some true stories

One

A rich wife is made into a widow

And is made destitute by the ineptitude of her sons

Two

A rich wife is made into a widow

And makes an empire of her dead husband's company

(Faces death, conquers debts)

Three

A rich wife    Now a widow

Dedicates her life to preserving her face    Donating to charities in her own honor

Four

A rich wife    Now a widow

Writes her third or fourth book

About how the 19th century grips the rich wife

(Her vapid deadened life)

In her book Madame Pontellier touches her own bare arms in a borrowed room in  
a little house

In a bright fresh hot afternoon on the Gulf Coast in 1899

Kate Chopin writes

*Edna, left alone in the little side room, loosened her clothes, removing the greater part of them. She bathed her face, her neck and arms in the basin that stood between the windows. She took off her shoes and stockings and stretched herself in the very center of the high, white bed. How luxurious it felt to rest thus in a strange, quaint bed, with its sweet country odor of laurel lingering about the sheets and mattress! She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the firm, firm quality and texture of her flesh. She clasped her hands easily above her head, and it was thus she fell asleep.*

The rich wife stretches in the very center of the bed

In a stolen moment, in a borrowed bed

Edna carrying her hair like a rich burden

Edna carrying her hair like a burdensome beauty

Health wealth youth

The arms of the rich wife belong to her children

Who love her and clamber upon her

The burdensome beauty of her children

Her children are glaring miracles shining in her face

She is lucky to have such rich burdens

She was once herself her mother's sweet burden

Etc

Back and back throughout time

The little girl sleeps in the crib  
Her long hair clotting her face  
The rich wife reels Without moving  
In the little hours she could find  
On one end of sleep a child was crying  
On the other end of sleep a child was crying  
The rich wife stretches a nest between these two points of time  
The children of the rich wife peel back the rim of her brain  
To feed on what she grew there herself  
The rich wife is an archetype without a shred of humanity  
Like a cow who is also a pet  
The animal whose fur will be brushed but whose flesh we will not eat  
The barn a little cube of comfort  
The animal's shoulders will never lean into the kind of work that matters  
At which point the metaphor breaks  
What kind of work matters  
Whose pain  
Edna's arms reach upward through time  
Her children's nanny does not reach her arms upward through time  
She is struggling to get Etienne and Raoul into bed when they would prefer to  
continue sword fighting with sticks

In other words her time is occupied, edge to edge

At 17 the rich wife is a nurse to her husband who is 60 and sick from drinking

At 43 the rich wife

At 72 the rich wife

Mary Delany's layers of paper flowers burst from the dark