

Rose Kamel: On "The Bee Meeting"

Given the problematic quality of both personal and collective existence, the persona moves toward death amid attempts to evade it. In "The Bee Meeting," she tries to evade a social milieu that moves in on her relentlessly. Her flight takes the form first of social disguise and then of stasis. The poem introduces us to villager-beekeepers who present a frightening picture of social sham:

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? they are the villagers?

The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees

In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,

And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?

They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.

In contrast to the heavily veiled, protective disguises of the villagers, the persona wears only a sleeveless dress, and her separation from them is emphasized by the juxtaposition of "I" and "they": "I have no protection?they are all gloved and covered"; "why did nobody tell me??They are smiling." The repetition of sibilants?"sleeveless," "summery," "smiling," "hats"?in a diction with clearly wholesome connotations gives us an eerie, nightmarish feeling and a sense of something familiar gone awry.

The persona?s dominant impulse is to resist her exposure to an expansive and threatening milieu that encompasses the natural world as well.

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The secretary of bees tries to turn her into an officially costumed beekeeper, but this attempt only increases the persona?s terror. She assumes the disguise of "milkweed silk," an inanimate and consequently a safer means of evading both the rigidity of village social life and the aggressive power of the bees. Yet even in such evasions reversals of order augment her sense of nightmare. One reversal involves the menacing animation of inanimate objects: the winking tinfoil, feather dusters with hands, black-eyed bean-flowers, and "leaves like bored hearts." Another reversal occurs in the violation of the bees? natural domestic pattern when the villagers smoke the bees out of the snug hive:

[?.]

The bees react hysterically and become the "outriders" of such poems as "Stings" and "The Swarm," while the speaker disguises herself as a passive vegetable?"cow parsley." Plath reinforces this resistance to exposure in the depiction of the old queen bee for whom the villagers are searching:

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Although she identifies with the queen, the persona differs in a fundamental respect. Despite the fact that she must inevitably be supplanted by a new queen, the old bee remains secure in the pattern of the hive; her role within the natural hierarchy defines her being. The persona's terror, on the other hand, cannot be assuaged in the ritual of nature and her surreal ceremonial interplay with the villagers only whittles away at a nebulous sense of identity. Her sole recourse lies in yet another disguise, ultimately that of the "magician's girl who does not flinch" from the shower of knives that threatens her with extinction

"The Bee Meeting"'s questions are really ontological ones, reaffirmed through link verbs such as "They are," "I am," "it is," and "is it?" For Plath "being" and "female being" are virtually the same, and for the persona, to be female is to be manipulated by nature, history, and inevitably by contemporary politics?and either openly or more obliquely to be threatened with death. To succumb to the terror of extinction means self-annihilation. To resist it makes for the dramatic tension that permeates the poems. The persona constantly resists the impulse to flee or to retreat into psychic stasis. Given the state of extremity in the poems, she resists in three basic ways: through flight, through counter-aggression that is both sexual and political, and through a stoic endurance of horror.

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