

THE OPENING RITUAL

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I HAVE TOUCHED HIS WEALTH
WITH THE CERTAINTY OF EXPERIENCE

—*Simone Weil*

Body of a young hare quite dead lying in a corner
of the pasture. It wasn't there yesterday.
A magpie alights, worries it a bit. The magpie's head
in quick shakes, left & right, its sharp beak
performing the opening ritual. It does this five or six
times before flying away. The first thing the dead
lose are their eyes, failed prophets
with the élan of things that only happen twice.
Love always uses us as if we were infinite, it seems,
although it must know, by now, that we're not.

WATCHING THE FLOWER-ARRANGERS IN RIPON CATHEDRAL

Let's be strict about what mercy is. It's asking everyone to STAY WHERE YOU ARE for approximately three minutes ("Thank you for your time"). It's the one woman holding carnations in her hands & handing them one by one to the other woman on the stepladder. From somewhere in the choir a baby wails. We were strangers here, we continue to be strangers here, a sustained articulation, as of space constrained. The decision which surfaces light should be permitted to sluice across—likewise one of the stricter signatures of mercy. It seems the first woman will never run out of flowers. Perhaps there is a bucket at her feet. We were empire. A spear passed through the stippled flank of our animal dreams, our rhythmic reason. Did you say "the cruelty of animals" or "an animal cruelty," I no longer recall. Now stand back & admire the result, little suns chasing a dog down a narrow street at dusk. Adjust as necessary. Music has washed down the pavements & this is enough for one day. Unfortunately, there are other days. A model of a model of a model once again, inside a church, the ancient sacristy. Did I mention I was a stranger? The same three steps upward, now both women trying to add more blossoms, one on the stepladder, one on the ground. Blind heat, a branding iron that heals (though it leaves a cauterized scar). Standing & holding not a piece of inflamed silk, knowing that someone else is present to lift lightning from your grasp. The empty hand that hovers over the hour & just under the lidded eye. With what scrutiny do the vestments of others enter our lives, scaffolds the thieves climb up & down, continuously. Now the flowers come thicker, faster,

carnations, roses, daisies—all yellow, some obviously dyed.
I fail to locate the retablo showing the saint in the act
of cauterizing (the guidebook does not specify whether his own
flesh or the flesh of some other). Would you apply fire
to your own flesh, to the flesh of someone you love,
to the flesh of a stranger? If you thought it would heal, or if
you thought it would wound? Because I am standing right here.
I have had some ideas about war, & about the pity of war.
My long bones have decided to acknowledge gravity,
to grin at it. Throw the bouquet, madonna of the underlying
gypsum strata. A little water & anything, everything
could disappear into the void. When I say “void”
I mean deixis, the act of pointing, three steps up to the plane
where mercy is reconstituting itself (with a little help).
This may or may not be a building in which no one has died,
I can’t know. I sketch the year in which my patrimony
was taken from me. It looks almost like a hospital. —Well.
It *is* a hospital! I thought it was just a sketch. The afflicted
lurch into & out of it in miniature while I watch. One by one
the wreaths are hoisted. The wreaths cast no shadows,
is this some trick of the light? There is no sense in anger
as there is no “sense” in prophecy, as such. Prophecy, as such,
led me here. I sweep the birds from the worn flags,
they ring like struck brass & then break into microscopic
fragments. How I coveted a bright, bright tongue.
Or a painting of a tongue. Nations slept through the film
of God’s indifference. Let’s decorate the hospital with artworks
by children, their sly dissimulations. Map me, three
steps up, three steps back down. A man in a sky-blue cassock

places a book just so, among all the other books.
Everything ceases to be real only when you pay for it:
this is why nations go to war. I admit I did not care for war,
or so I thought (I was naive about this, as about so many things).
More flowers brought from a back room—this goes on & on.
It must be the eve of some festival, some commemoration.
The difference between a prophet & a martyr
has to do with war, perhaps. And nations. To set a fire
in this holy place, to film someone setting a fire: an idea,
I mean, that one could have. A still from the montage.
Let's say it's the nation's combust having been left behind
in a forest clearing. It was carried there. It was (or wasn't)
very small. It looked charred like a break in a song.
Poor song! Poor plenitude, you are dismissed—no, sorry,
I can't help you. Always the same woman on the stepladder,
always the same woman on the ground, handing up flowers.
Green, green, & gold, famished passage of the octaves.
The parchment of treachery, carelessly pricked
by the apprentice's stylus: what will you record here
with your thunder & your debts? Will you tape it to your biceps,
to your forehead, like a target to the small of your back.
Invite the men to admire the work, yes (the women do).
Force them down on all fours, to pick up any leftover flowers
I presume. I presume a great deal, I know. This could
be something else, a rite, a dance, a sacrifice. An accident.
The time I fell into the keeping of the state, & of its knives.
The machine they forced upon me. It was not a dance,
I remember thinking that much. No one filmed,

no one took any photographs. What I am recording now could be false even though I witnessed it. You have placed yourself in the hands of a stranger, hands that are strung with wire like some musical instrument. They measure you. They measure the width of the display our piety exerts. I would get down on all fours myself, but my spine no longer permits that particular obeisance. Instead let's talk about doors. Some of the doors are hung with wreaths, others are blocked entirely by floral displays. Isn't this how it is, always, with the doors. Some of them may not be doors at all, like the ghostly link between *participle* & *participate*. I am reminded again of the fable in which the fox is deceived into addressing a hedge of roses. "My friends, my friends" the fox keeps saying, but somehow he can't go any further. He had even washed his paws for the occasion. Once more I consider the etymology of *glisten*. I've broken the ark of sleep into so many pieces I can no longer tell them apart. I'd like to think they sing at dusk. But this isn't that, this is about what's real, what I'm watching right now, what I'm not making up: the women & men, the flowers, all I'm capable of apprehending. When one's altar is a flame one either worships the flame or one measures it. I dream in pain & I wake in pain. Pain is a mineral. We store it in our bodies. I hand mine to the next man, his foot already on the rung.

HOUSES BUILT FROM THE BODIES OF LIONS OR OF DOGS

I went to an island off the coast of a continent two islands actually almost neighbors.
On one it was summer on the other winter (snow blowing rain sleet etc.).
Either way the weather was my confession I must have signed for it with my other name.
What was my other name I can't recall but perhaps it was Time.
Very early rising on either island the sun like a thousand beds (somebody else's) on fire.
On the one island I read Augustine on the other I read Mechthild.
On the one island I saw the spare bones whitening on the other I did not.
This was to be a poem of creatures but creatures merely inspire a desire to photograph.
And yes we are so tired of hearing about photography in poems.
It has become the 20th-century equivalent of the soul (in poems) only now it's the 21st.
Easy enough to consider photography an evolution of the soul especially photos of animals.
You have seen these before close-up of a pigeon faded sepia of sheep milling about.
Silhouette of a dog (and a man) above a rock presumably on the one island both long dead now.
I think of dogs the same way as I think of the law i.e. something we've domesticated.
Or not quite but when we call it comes especially if it is hungry and we seem kind.
Then we can make the law (the dog) do less kind things to others once we've fed it satisfied
its lusts.
So I fed law on one of the islands (can't recall which) and then I was at a loss.
I read Augustine on one of the islands (the first) and disliked him more with every page.
It is one thing to think of language as shiny another to palpate it like a cankered tongue.
Mechthild on the other hand is obsessed with courtly love and counting often at the same time.

She says things like The bride has a crimson silk cloth which is hope.
She writes chapter titles like God's Singing Response to the Soul in Five Things.
She asserts Then the sweet wounds shall heal as though a rose petal had been placed on the
spot of the wound.
Vanity takes such diverse forms I thought on the second island watching it snow.
I tried to take photographs of the snow in the same way I try to take photographs of my body.
But God builds His house with His mouth says Mechthild who should know.
Well that is better than God building His house from the bodies of lions or of dogs.
It is not difficult to remember when the doctor first suggested shock therapy.
A possibility he said polishing his glasses with care then he said it again A possibility.
Possibilities are what make you stand still suddenly in the snow letting it rest on your exposed
flesh.
That is possibilities are a moment of perception of realizing God is watching (you).
That is possibilities require the perceiver to put the camera down.
You are at the center of something and language is suddenly a flashing milk.
Breath is your companion you pet it you stroke its matted fur affectionately.
You can see this in the photograph Mechthild peeking shyly from behind the damaged lens.
She has gotten the exposure right she has captured on film God's mouth building.
My breath rushes joyfully to greet her places its paws on her narrow shoulders.
This is how I tell the islands apart on one I am dreaming on the other I make mistakes.
On one I could see the sea from my bed on the other I simply knew it was there.

ON THE SENSES

Mount Desert

Mechthild says
the senses
are where anyone
may speak:
God, the devil,
& all creatures.

I stood
in the garden
of my soul
& closed my eyes.

Men toiled
to grade roads
for the carriages
of the wealthy
here. Their works
last awhile.

I strode
in silence, a stiff
breeze whipping
whitecaps
on the surface
of the clear pond.

I rejoiced, at last,
in the decrepitude
of my body.

Concerning
burned love,
Mechthild wrote.

Concerning
the hunger cloth.

Speak then,
Mercator. Shake
the ash
from your lips,
like ground pearls
mixed with oil.

The freshness.
I watched a maple
steam gently
in the dawnlight.

Sip
from the fossil
threading the
temple's shadow.

The wind chalks it
up, & then
back down again—

recidivist,
skeined as
though for psalm.