

SC

Ritual: I

*thinking about ritual : : the ritual of thinking
confusing ritual with ritualistic
inside noise is a space where I am the bodiment
of resistance to ritual (understood as mindless
devotion to a set of gestures embedded in stone)
embodiment : : impediment
the embedment of noise
when extracted from the habitat also known as
natural
the dénouement is also natural : a denouncement
of gesture congealed by mindlessness into
an unthinking thing
devoid of beauty
embedded in noise*

but when the gesture vanishes from lack of use
(or overuse)

what remains?

a lack :

the something missing thing that hovers

at the edges of expectation

just a few inches above the waiting toes

expecting to be touched by brushing fingers

the curve of back the swift dip of practised

youth bending to take the dust off their elders' feet

the sage-old certainty of the thing to be done the moment

you enter the grandparental room

where obeisance wasn't even a word that crossed your mind

much less the cusp of your connection with the old

which comprised simply of the certainty of being

loved.

there were but four sets of feet worthy of being touched

in that manner prayerful and otherwise so entirely reprehensible

if to be executed in the line of duty

perfunctory function in which mechanical alignment was all

and so entirely empty :

disdainful

conformity to form.

I learned to unlearn the embedded act. Age was not enough to make me conduct the fluid choreography of bending, touching, bringing my fingers up to my forehead and down to my heart (so many small supple subtleties). A ritual handshake would suffice. Or a Namasté also

known as Nomoshkar : : both palms pressed together arcing fluidly from chest to chin, no other body but mine acknowledged, saving myself any contact with the recipient of my respect from afar. After Dadu Thama Dadu Didima died I had no use for *pronaam* anymore. I saved myself. I hugged the ones I loved, close, very close, the embodiment of my love, separating family from friend, lover from beloved only by degrees, so you could almost hear the bones crack inside the flesh, a squeezing out of breath, as if neither breath nor bones were needed to live outside the enveloping moment of arms. There were people I never touched, though I loved them. There were people whose resistance to touch was clear inside the carapace they made of themselves the minute they entered embrace. The gesture of *pronaam* became false when I enacted it as aberration. It became true when I expressed it as emotion inexpressible in any other way (just thrice). It disappeared from my body language and now when I try to speak, I stumble as if over my own feet untouchable by all and heir to none.

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Five rituals to write

1. we take a walk
2. we return to our notes
3. we find other texts
4. we listen
5. we leave a space here for the unknown

1. Walk (1 Shanthi Road)

A space was blowing through me
at the end of the steps a case of brass idols

I repeated the steps of the walk counting in English
then in Welsh. After 15 I cannot remember the old Welsh numerals

so the following steps are empty
so the feeling of the terracotta tiles

2. Return to the notes (taken at Sampurna's)

Marguerite Duras – everything is pointing to her today! Sampurna, Paribarta.

[Here is where I look up Moderato Cantabile]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIuC-ttA_eA

& the gestures of these lovers. Because I don't understand French I watch their hands

rise up invite touch smooth over
she initialises he takes over she raises he soothes
is the sooth erotic?

then the hands go out of the shot

3. Finding other texts

The geography of the books around me is not familiar. This is not home and I feel suddenly not at home when I contemplate which books to select. But when at home are my books ever arranged orderly in a familiar way so that I might easily select one in a perfectly logical manner of choice? I go to the bed. *Leaves of Grass*;

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart
from them;

Someone has circled this with a pencil

Someone named Walt Whitman repeatedly persuades himself he is not above anyone else or below them.

Someone who is also fleshy, sensual, turbulent, that some one, that some one is any one of the one. Our some one.

Nia Davies, how mundane that sounds, a kosmos, of Cymru of Sheffield the daughter.

It is better when I say Sampurna Chattarji, a kosmos, of Thane the daughter. But is Thane your town? Some one called Sampurna who lives in Thane. Is she that some one? The same some one who is reading this ritual?

4. We listen (1 Shanthi Road)

I try to listen and transcribe their conversation but they all look at me at once when I sit down and tell me that my face is lit up by my screen like I'm about to do a performance.

I try to listen but they feed me pastry hearts

['Vampire food, we could call it Vampire pizza, strong garlic,'

'One scratch and my mother would freak out.']

I try to listen but instead I watch their hands:

Suresh has his hands clasped with index fingers poised to his mouth like a bridge
Ashok waves his around in a little dance to the music, a dance that is also a gesture
that is also part of his communication to us
Kashyap pinches a pastry at the end of long fingers, loose, relaxed, like tweezers

I try to be a passive listener but [I am drawn in]

I try to focus on the sound but I [listen to the gestures]

5. We leave space for the unknown

this is the space for the conclusion that I am not allowed to allow myself

this is the performance that is me writing this
the white screen-page is leaving its mark on my body, temporarily
lighting me up in a miniature reading that is writing that is listening that is thinking
all

There is a field of letters for the poem
There is a room for a conversation
There is a white screen for the humming text

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Ritual: II

1. we take a walk
2. we return to our notes
3. we find other texts
4. we listen
5. we leave a space here for the unknown

1.

A rift in the walk is a riff I have learned to work with.

Disruption : by rain, taking shelter under a tree (still) unstruck by lightning,
watching the clouds amass above the harbour leaving a steely light in their
wake.

Approach : from a side opposite to the usual, discombobulating the delicate
gears of morning.

Refuge : unfamiliar, smelling of citrus floor-wash or citronella mosquito-repellent from the hills, not unpleasant, merely a reminder of being out of one's element.

Woven (since) into the pattern of my movement, I return.
This, now, is part of the melodic intervention.

2.

'A door has been kicked open!'
Through it the sound of a kirtan.
From where has it come?
'From one ritual to another'
the waft is intermittent.
It could be seamless
'the transition'

3.

Oh, but it isn't.
I mark each shift with the needlepoint of my *kantha* stitch,
wondering about story : the word *katha* : meaning story, tale, speech, word, promise.
To the missing ⁿ
my salutations.
Pull the thread too tight and you see the bite marks on the cloth.
You need a frame that will hold it in place better than your crushing crumpling
fingers.
 Patiently, as tarmac under hammers,
 patiently, as what is new matures,
 patiently, as death must be awaited,
 patiently, as vengeance may be nursed –

Marina Tsvetaeva's *Wires*, translated by Elaine Feinstein,
inscribed in my long book as a precursor to my need, with notes,
which I read, quietly, to you :

Like the ancients marked an ancient word, a rune, a prayer, a sound that marked their obeisance, their helplessness in the face of the blank future that they would now proceed to write into existence, with the slow steady proverbial consistency that hides the hesitation by displaying it – yet unlike them in every other way – I find and place at the beginning of the page a woman's words, not mine, a fragment from all the fragments I have been collecting, as if for and from a time of great deprivation, and I look to it as I would to a little dancing figure in a series of four, of which two are seated, two with one leg raised, how far I am from that sanctified moment, as I attempt to find a way to begin, not a poem, which will come, out of all my years of constructing moments that resemble apprenticeship to the form of heightened being, attentiveness a series of poems that will aid me into the world, knowing why I need them, while the stories I must tell are waiting to understand why and how they must exist.

4.

the rejection of saintliness [...] a fable

power institutes ritual

in between words the insertion of [...]
birdcalls

value
surplus value

in between [...] hesitations
dogbarks

the whole world is entering

in [...] through the
ears

5.

panchabhoota
the word haunting me

which I must reject
as devotional

and accept only
as pentagram

the pleasing wholeness
of its shape

a fist of
air

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[Ritual notes:

Haunted by particularities
Haunted in feeling

haunted by the lack of the gesture

Haunted by elders

When does the ritualistic become the ritual? When does the language become the act?

When does a performance become an experience?

I have been reading sentences of Clarice Lispector slowly through the day because each one is overwhelming, a bodily rush

Sometimes I think I should be married when previously to be wed was anathema to me

Does something become a ritual through repetition? And in repeating what are we returning to?

]

*

Last time I did this gesture it opened me up too much

Last time I stepped in this manner I was grieving, now I feel like grieving

Last time I repeated these things in my mouth I was singing in a room full of people

Last time I sang like this it was through a traffic cone

This time the burst of grief

This time I set a cowrie shell on the floor and spin it

Last time I did this I was 9 years old

This time the cowrie shell is cold until I warm it with my face

I think this could be a fetish object. The meaning is my childhood in this house, warm the cowrie and set it spinning

Last time I wandered around a room aimlessly like this I was 12 years old

Last time I touched my grandmother's body I was 32 years old. It was July. A very hot day

This time I see her body she is 87 years old.

Last time I extended my arms like this I was in a dark room under a mosquito net in Bengaluru

Unexpected things happened after I made that improvised gesture

After I made that ritual people approached me differently

After I made these gestures I couldn't live like this any more

This time I lie on the floor like the woman in a film I watched on Friday night. She was immobilised by the Holy Ghost whilst everyone else was convulsed by the Holy Ghost. They were convulsing all over the room and she just lay there.

Last time I thought of my breast bone he had his hands on it to calm me

*

In the film the pastor is bitten by the serpent he has been handling. You can see spots of blood. The text below the film tells me that later he dies from this bite. These things are incomprehensible in the way most religious conviction is to me. These things are still fascinating. I could let this other's feeling ride through me.

*

Ritual instruction for Sampurna:

1. eat one green olive
2. drink one beer

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Ritual: III

To obey,
is that what makes rituals take root
in mind / shape / gesture / movement / practice / habit ?
and their opposites
mindless / shapeless / ungestured / immobile / unpractised / unhabitual ?
To disobey has been my default
Today, I reset the mode and obey the instruction :
I drink one beer

I forget how to spell instruction and refuse to use autocorrect as I fumble my
way back into literacy

Literally, one beer

light, green, afternoon

I get no uprush of wellbeing from being obedient
For this beloved ritual to become beloved the numbers have to be greater than > one
Obedience has nothing to do with wellbeing
I am experimenting with obedience
I am able to experiment with obedience because the instruction is suitable, amenable
to my aptitude for alcohol, light-hearted, non-addictive but necessary, inseparable
from celebration

I continue misspelling the simplest words : I correct inseparable
I am amenable, and able, and suitable because the instruction comes from a place of
friendship

This then is revelatory: obedience is possible to and for a friend
Yet obedience is anathema (that word!) to the idea of friendship
What I am obedient to is the idea that this instruction from a friend may lead to a
place previously inaccessible to me

I am obsessed with place

As if at the end of every line is a place hitherto barred and hidden

What is an instruction if not a place to put one's barred and hidden faith?

/ / / / /

I cannot find a green olive with the ease with which I found one light green
afternoon beer

And so I have not followed the second instruction : to eat one green olive

This could be laziness, ineptitude, lack of initiative

There are, after all, bottles and bottles of green olives sitting on shelves in
supermarkets ten minutes away by bus

Inside each green olive a red pimento heart

brackish, sour, jhaal

I chew on the taste of the green olives I have chewed in the past, reluctantly, scooped
from the bottom of the glass

There was nothing there to entice me back

To eat one green olive is to submit to the dogma (when does ritual become dogma?)
of the evening cocktail, a martini, stirred, not shaken, the coercion into an entire
atmospheric that, while not anathema, is mildly boring

While my loathing for cocktails is anything but mild

And so I imagine the olive as

tree, branch, story

I leave obedience behind and wander into a whole grove of olive trees

This could be a scene from a film

I have never seen, touched, breathed an olive tree, let alone a grove

And yet it seems natural, possible, to be there, wandering under an entire gathering of single green olives, a lushness so fictitious it is almost fabular

I resist the urge to look up olive trees online

They must be gnarled and stumpy, bark-blackened by incessant sun, surrounded by the stomp of dancing feet

To believe this image is to succumb to the dogma of the story that supersedes all

I have drunk of the oil of the olive tree

Poured its golden (sometimes even green) light on bread and eaten what felt like a sacrament

I have misspelled sacrament

The scar precedes the wound

This is the fault of inattention

A refusal to go backwards, pressing space after space into blankness, believing in erasure as a path to correctness

I have eaten the oil of the olive and felt a great blessedness that was not mine to inherit and yet feels as owned and ownable as the other, closer to home

sarson, shorshey, tel

The oil that must be smoking hot before you can slide the river fish in

The oil that would have been rubbed into my skin had I been born in Bengal

Instead of Dessie, Ethiopia, where it was olive oil and not mustard that they rubbed into my baby limbs, I, bare and polished in the sun

So this is the source of blessedness, the reason for connectedness, thanks to

disobedience, laziness, ineptitude

I was born into the way of the olive, I was oiled and grown in the sun, breathed and birthed inside the enclosure of a longing for distance from all familiar things

I put butter in my hair and loved the smell of the roasting coffee beans all around me, pre-natal memory true as my persistent love

This every-morning ritual of strong black coffee is umbilical, this belonging to bread and fish and oil is biblical, to not resist the rhyme could be an instruction I have not yet learned to disobey

When Símon looked into David's eyes in *The Childhood of Jesus* he saw what looked *like like like* a fish tumbling out of reach

A movement as incomprehensible and all-encompassing as what Yashoda saw in Krishna's mouth

Is everything tending towards faith, then? Am I losing my opposition to belief?

I am obsessed with opposition

There are grimaces of the soul I have ossified into

That day in December I opened my arms wide to an empty hall as if I were embracing it, embracing all that would fill it next morning, in ten degrees of cold, two hundred and eighty children at a time, and there was room for them all in my embrace, for they were not mine in any other way but through words and laughter and a love I would not admit to if it suggested weakness, hitherto unacknowledged, if the opening of my arms were what it was not – an empty gesture

ND

Sampurna,

I am in the perfect place and I am in love.

Somehow.

This is not classic love.

Somehow.

This is that (old) love of love. Swimming around the rock you have to swim around.

Every year.

Like every year we have to swim around the swimming rock at Porth Colman and it is cold. Now I get to swim a different rock and it is warm. The perfect place. But it is not the ritual place. It is not my family's swimming rock that we have swum around for so many years.

I have a whisky. I cannot obey your instructions because I have no connectivity. Except the connectivity of friendship. Which exists between emails. Between real connections. I am in love with real connections.

I don't know how to solve the supine nature of other people. I am not a shaman. I do not rule the rituals.

This year, like many now, I will probably miss the ritual swim. And I'll be further damned, somehow in the reaches of my agnostic but obedient child self.

I often send my mother unexplained requests that meet some demand of my projects and she obeys without query. Last time I asked her to name her formative feminist texts, to find out if I had really been raised as a boy, and this time I ask her for a picture of the swimming rock to send to you.

You can only swim around the rock at high tide. If the water is rough, passing through the narrow slot between promontory rock (where the preferring-to-be-dry take their seats, where your warm clothes are waiting) and the rock itself is tricky. A thrill. The kelp doesn't help. But its slick touch on your ever-so-cold skin is not to be shirked.

Today I don't get to swim around a new rock because yesterday I gashed my foot on another rock whilst swimming. Because I was raised a boy I keep sustaining mild injuries.

The man who brought me my whisky is from the Himalayas. He pointed out all the rocks he has swum around in this bay.

Wearing a bikini at Porth Colman doesn't really suit the extreme cold and grey sky but it gives the ritual some glamour.

What do we obey with this swimming ritual? What grid have we set ourselves as family? This ritual from Wales bears no resemblance to your rituals from Bengal but they can be disobeyed just the same.

I want you to come to this place which is not remarkable but such a visit would be a mark of friendship.

I was not bathed in oil as a baby but I was dunked in brine, iced wave, kelp.

I'm sorry but to come to this place you must jump in.

*

What is ritual's relationship to desire?

everything has a relationship to desire and thus
must be ritual

like for instance: the touch that is regulated, performed
the dressing up
in order to transform
a reaching towards ecstasy
the becoming someone else, god, devotee
the turn to the body

(who am I in the realm of the other?)

I made a writing ritual with Suresh. Papers, books, glue, scissors and sharpies. On a square slip of paper I wrote this prompt which he instantly recognised as from the Vachanas:

*Mine is the path
of the master of lust, dust and smoke.*

The line below this, which I did not include is,

That is enough for me.

when lust, dust and smoke may include everything:

desire, death, trace – ghost.

Mine is the path of never enough

that is desire, deferred.

Maybe ritual is one of these deferments of desire, its staging posts between perpetual motion.

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Nia,

This morning I noticed (after re-visiting your words) that I had rhymed kelp with help in a poem I just finished (for children)

In all the intervening time between your childhood rites and our writing rituals, the words kelp and help had stayed on as mirrors in our other-walk

I had to look up *kelp* (though I knew what it meant, precision mattered like a passage through doubt) :

large brown seaweed, of the family Laminariaceae, long tough stalk, broad frond, divided into strips, could be used as food, and source of medicine

calcined ashes of seaweed, source of various salts

Ritual could be divided into strips, used as food, salt, source.

Reading Clarice Lispector I wrote:

If every moment were a small green grape being peeled, the thin green skin being peeled away by fingers delicate enough to peel without bruising, leaving the grape intact and glistening, that would be her, nibbling with small white teeth the flesh of incipience

I preferred to think green (not brown), slippery (of course), the rock that I would slip from in my thin green skin shouting *help!* as I fell into the water with my swimming-fear on

I grew up in Darjeeling, nestled against the Himalayas that your whisky-man came from

This was my excuse to not learn swimming till age 22

In a city (Kolkata), in a lake (dark almost black), in a section of the dark black water cordoned off by bamboo railings I hung on for dear life, kicking

I passed my swimming test

leave the cordon, swim to the middle of the lake, touch the invisible wire and return

and never swam again

At age 44 in a rooftop pool under a desert sky with a friend, still kicking my legs like a child, I excused my lack of skill to an old and silvery Swedish couple with the tale of my mountainous upbringing

Like you, Nia, raised as a boy (among boys), wearing Naughty Boy shoes, shaking leeches off my sturdy calves with salt, the only girl Boy Scout in town, dancing her Mowgli dance, shouting "Akela we do our best!" with the rest

Wolf-child I

survived my passage into girl-self with that sturdy boy-self steering me along

I never howled

I will not shirk your invitation to the swimming rock, Nia, I will sit and shiver, fully-clothed and unglamorous and glad, so glad, to be part of another grid of danger

I have no desire to be devotee or god

It is the danger I desire (in the mind, without the body's cooperation)

Danger's relationship to desire is ritual.

I will remember that when I jump