

Margaret Dickie: On "The Bee Meeting"

In the opening poem, "The Bee Meeting," the speaker herself seems uncertain about what is going on. Some village ritual is in progress, and while the speaker is included in it, she keeps looking for its ominous significance. Her rush of questions reveals her suspicions: "Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?" "No, no," she assures herself, "it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible." Although every detail causes her concern, she claims, "I could not run without having to run forever"--a feeling reiterated in her letters of this period, which detail her desire to face life alone and not to seek help by returning to her mother. Although she realizes that the villagers are hunting the queen bee, she feels somehow that she herself is attacked. She asks, in the end, "why am I cold?"

[. . .]

In "The Bee Meeting," the scene is a village social; the speaker goes to hunt the queen bee in the company of the rector, the midwife, the sexton -- those public agents of marriage, birth, death, the world in which she must now define her identity. The queen bee eludes these searchers. "She is very clever," Plath says. But the villagers are actually helping to preserve the queen bee by moving the virgins who would kill her. Still, not very grateful, the queen rises, "The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her." Left behind, the speaker identifies at this point not with the flying bee, but with the empty box, an emblem of survival ("Pillar of white in a blackout of knives") and a possible coffin.

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