

AT ARM'S
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A few weeks ago, I moved to Philadelphia and promptly fell into a melancholy that rendered me unrecognizable even to myself. The air is different here. Shrub roses cascade vertiginously – bright, vermillion blooms. On the main drag of my neighborhood are cafes, restaurants, and shops, the sidewalks cracked and swelling. I prefer to walk in privacy and suddenly each outing feels like an announcement or parade. There is the man sweeping outside the People's Baptist Church. There is the woman who sits outside the co-op greeting me as I come and go. In the park, I watch various chess games while I eat tofu banh mi, well aware that these players are also watching me. After a short time, I inevitably retreat indoors. The quiet solitude of my apartment affords me ample opportunities to watch films — and to write. I drift through my new rooms like the narrator of Maya Deren's poem: a "somnambulist in seaweed gowned / float[ing] down the green, the doorless corridors, / leading myself at arm's length."

It was in this interior space where I rewatched Maya Deren's film *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). The opening shot presented a spatial layout with which I was intimately familiar: a woman walking between rooms. I had always thought of *dérive* as applicable only to city streets, but to drift without direction or purpose in the confines of one's home seemed a similar impulse. The difference was merely one of publics – and of scale. What might I discover for or about myself in such strange and private quarters? The yarn of possibilities unfurled in my loose and twitchy hands.

During *Ritual's* party sequence, various guests rotate around one another like planets, bejeweled in black garb. The high contrast lighting is unforgiving. Writer Anaïs Nin was furious at her depiction, later accusing Deren's camera of a unique ability to "uglify." The women did not speak again. But the choreography of, and commentary on, sociosexual mores endures. When Deren runs into the ocean, I think of how films can extend into and through one another across time. Perhaps the woman waterlogged and beached like a whale at the beginning of *At Land* (1944) is Maya Deren's character from the end of *Ritual*. There is another life for her character once she enters the ocean, there is another film waiting. What appears like a drowning at the end of *Ritual* is a rebirth for the somnambulist "gowned" in "seaweed."

My own life feels similarly protracted. And that stretching sensation extends throughout *Ritual's* opening party sequence and *pas de deux*, as characters assume others' movements across the film's various cuts. Just as these characters sometimes feel like different iterations or interruptions of a single, unbroken movement, each frame of Deren's, and each film, creates a series of associative linkages.

As I watched *Ritual in Transfigured Time* over and over, the sun set across the row houses outside my third storey window. It was drizzling, the spring unseasonably cool. Though I found myself distracted by the rain light, and the rooftops, and the sycamores' branching crowns, I watched the film several more times before fumbling back to bed.

During this period, I occasionally experienced dreams in which I felt a slight pressure or prick in my backside and was subsequently paralyzed for an indescribable amount of time. In the dream everything shared the same contours of the domestic space in which I dreamt. In these dreams,

the experience of reality was the scariest part. I was aware, in the dream, that I had been pricked by something that rendered me immobile, and the realization lit up my nerve system during these freeze frames of time. Something was transfiguring within me, but I am still learning what.

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In *The Aesthetic Syndrome* (1989), the schoolteacher Nikolai Alekseevich falls asleep at inopportune times. He has caught the aesthetic syndrome, from which Kira Muratova's drama derives its name. So disruptive are his symptoms that he sleeps through a screening, the first forty minutes of the film we have just watched – one that bears no narrative relation to what transpires next. The actress of the first forty minutes appears on the theatre's stage to applause. She has a face like a flashbulb, luminous and haunted. She wears the years elegantly on her bones.

In the film within *The Aesthetic Syndrome*, the death of the actress's husband prompts a series of outbursts as she careens from altercation to altercation. She screams. She berates her geriatric boss. She throws herself on men who fling her off in turn. She, too, is drifting, but with a more violent bent. Her movements reveal nothing but a restless mind at work.

I have long believed that my ambulatory thoughts are the most conducive to writing; that to be in motion foretells how an essay or a poem will later take its shape. The moment I predetermine where I am going is the moment when I lose the thread. In one of his first lines of dialogue, the schoolteacher rages that he "has to write it down... He tried to be good to everyone, but it was impossible. He tied new knots before unloosing the old one. The weight became heavier, but he couldn't let go. He wanted something romantic!" Is his outcry a recitation? An incantation? I couldn't tell you. But I must write his words down, another gesture that completes, as well as opens, figurations of thought.