

ON HOLDING

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But my rose, all on her own, is more important than all of you together,
since she's the one I've watered. Since she's the one I put under glass.
Since she's the one I sheltered behind the screen.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*

In her essay “On Secrets,” Mary Ruefle asks her audience to consider the rose as it relates to beauty. She urges her listeners to rework their common perceptions of beauty, arguing against the familiar recognition of beauty as a fixed attribute. She does not think that the rose is beautiful in the way that she knows the rose to be red. She does not even think that the rose is beautiful or that any thing we come in contact with in life *is just* beautiful; without us, the rose simply is. Beauty, for Ruefle, is closer to a process. If we “think the rose is beautiful . . . [we] may also thin[k] with sadness that it will die. But the rose is not beauty. What beauty is is [our] ability to apprehend it” (98).

Consider the rose. Specifically, its petals. They peel away, unfolding toward you. And consider what they peel away from: a center of denser, more compacted petals. Those in the middle do not know of the world around them, as their outermost counterparts do. But every day they learn a little more about what surrounds them. Those unfolding are the first to feel all that tells them they belong to the world, the first to be moved by the wind, warmed by sunlight, soaked with rain (although those in the center do get wet; this is true). This also means that they are the first to feel the ground. Yes, this is brave, but maybe it is even braver of those at the center, who only know the world of the rose itself. These petals, huddling in darkness, curling around themselves in embrace, feel the wetness of the rain-soaked rose, but they do not witness the rainfall. Sure, they are protected. If they ever make it outside their infolding, they will touch the earth, too. These petals within are important, often forgotten, for they are the spiraling cluster, kept in darkness at the heart of the rose. These petals hold the rose’s secret.

Given to lovers by the dozen to express affection, inked on bodies, portrayed in paintings: we know the rose so well. Of course, this is because of the rose's beauty. Generalizing the conception of beauty is dangerous. Reconceptualizing beauty standards is a necessary, valuable process, teaching us that subjectivity should always be married with what we mean by the beautiful. But I'm willing to risk a contradiction here and insist on the rose's beauty, across any board, for all. How can one deny it? When we hold a rose in our hand, we are held by nothing other than how exquisite it looks.

A lover hands you a dozen roses, and if his intentions are successful, you smile, feel a load in your chest, a certain lightness in your head. You mutter something like, "Oh, they're *beautiful*." And I'm sure you mean it. But that smile and that load and that lightness—do they really belong to the bouquet you now hold? Isn't the situation much more charged than the roses themselves? The brush of your lover's hand against yours as he delivers them to you; the thought of him picking out the perfect twelve among a hundred; the ability to feel that strange, heaving weightlessness inside you. It's a certain form of magic. Is this not where beauty is truly born?

The modern proverb comes to mind: "*It's the thought that counts.*" We've all heard it, we will undoubtedly hear it again, and it often feels hollow, meaningless, a paradox wrapped up neatly, so tight it may feel rather thoughtless. But it's true, especially when considering beauty apprehended in a moment, as Ruefle describes how "the ability to apprehend beauty *is* the human spirit and it is what all such moments are about, which is why such moments occur in places and at times that may strike another as unlikely or inconceivable" (98-99).

Thinking of Ruefle, I want to say: in a couple of days I will leave New York for Berlin to visit a boy I have been seeing for a while now. I couldn't be more excited for the trip, though I've felt rather unenthused by the prospect of seeing Berlin itself. Afterwards I will move on to visit Paris and Amsterdam, all for the first time in my life, too. These are the places I've looked forward to seeing more, since I have heard endlessly about the architecture and spirit and romance of these two cities, as well as, most importantly, their beauty. I have never heard Berlin heralded for its utter magnificence. I know it is a land-mine of history and art: a particular, peculiar manifestation of culture within a fascinating set of contexts. But this boy, to whom I recent-

ly expressed some of these sentiments, became uplifted by his thinking of me, there, on the streets of Berlin. He described the Brutalist architecture, the feeling of being in a place that has experienced a particular history. He praised the sense of finding beauty in a place that is, at first, so obviously ugly. Ruefle writes that “it does not seem far-fetched to say that the larger the human spirit, the more it will apprehend beauty in increasingly unlikely and inconceivable situations,” and the first time I read these words, I thought of this boy, nearly seeing his enlarged spirit folding forth from inside him (99).

Lingered over beautiful roses, I think it would be foolish not to discuss Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête*. In the film’s preamble, Cocteau implores from his audience a “childlike sympathy” that will let them believe in “simple things” (*La Belle et la Bête*, 00:03:16, 00:03:12). He feels this is necessary in order for his audience to “believe that a rose plucked from a garden can plunge a family into conflict,” yet the film is so artfully gorgeous and transportive that a comprehensive suspension of disbelief is achieved quickly after the film’s opening (00:02:45). It is both obvious and arbitrary to say that beauty is at the center of this film. Ruefle considers the apprehension of beauty as having “something to do with the secret of human existence, which is nowhere revealed, and nowhere concealed, and in front of which we remain, or become, infants” (99). And this is an important part of both the film’s construction and its ensuing success. Maybe in front of something beautiful enough to affect us deeply, we remain infantilized, stripped naked, nursed by the beautiful. The beautiful thing—in this case, the beautiful film—lures us towards itself and keeps us safe.

Like all things rich and worthwhile, the beauty found in *La Belle et la Bête* takes on numerous forms. The most obvious is the beauty of the protagonist herself: Belle, played by the angel-faced Josette Day. But Belle, whose French name translates to ‘beautiful,’ isn’t the film’s sole aestheticized character, for you could replace Day with an ogress and the film would still be dripping in magnificence. Whether it is the French countryside explored on horseback or the Beast’s grandiose castle, the locations and set designs are splendid. The cinematography feels real in a way that transforms the camera into nothing other than a small window, offering a transparency into this world, only enhancing the viewer’s apprehension of the elegance saturating the entire film. When tears are cried here, they dry into diamonds.

A film that holds beauty in its arms so affectionately is an achieved fantasy, the reason why critics as esteemed as Roger Ebert called *La Belle et la Bête* “one of the most magical of all films.” But all of this discussion of beauty might run the risk of sounding substance-less, for so far the beauty in the film has been described as external. But the film’s lush metaphors and hypnotic symbols remind us that beauty is all the while being valued as an internal characteristic.

Belle’s internal beauty is proven early in the film, in stark contrast with the appearances of her unpleasant sisters. Their ugliness and her own beauty are revealed to us as their father leaves town on business. He asks what gifts they would like him to return with from his trip, and Belle’s sisters request petty, materialistic souvenirs that will cause “the whole town to die of envy” (*La Belle et la Bête* 00:11:08). Belle, speaking softly and lovingly, simply asks for a rose, for “there aren’t any around here” (00:11:31). Repugnance and elegance are constructed both through aesthetics and the plot’s arc. Josette Day’s Belle is consistently soft-lit and tastefully airbrushed. She is repeatedly shot from a high-angle, looking docile and full of love and hope, her gaze pointing up towards the sky, up at us. Her sisters are not treated with such grace by any means. Their dialogue always sounds crude. Their mousy facial expressions appear harsh and miserable.

By the film’s close, Belle is the only character (other than the Beast) who seems wholly contented, while the sisters find themselves with less desirable fates: to carry the train of Belle’s wedding gown. Her sisters fade away, hardly able to hold our attention. Belle loves and is loved and in the end flies away with the equally angel-faced Jean Marais, presumably to a land of never ending happiness. In the vein of Ruefle, Belle’s “human spirit” is indeed quite large, as she is able to “apprehend beauty in [such an] increasingly unlikely and inconceivable situatio[n]” (99). She is beautiful, but she is also beauty itself because she had the ability to apprehend the beauty within the Beast.

Consider the rose. This time, I want you to ponder the act of considering it. Ruefle works towards an unpacking of the “the DNA of a word,” its etymology (91). She writes:

Consider the word *consider*, which originally meant to ‘observe the stars.’
Consideration leads to *comprehension*, which originally meant ‘to grasp, to

seize something with the hands and hold it tight in the arms': what the mother does with the child. To hold, to put one's arms around. (92-93)

While you hold the beauty of the rose in your mind, holding it in your arms like a child, the beauty of the rose holds you, cradles you. In this moment, you hold and are held; you nurse beauty just as beauty nurses you. Ruefle admits: "I don't know about you, but I just want to be held" (93). I believe that as Ruefle yearns to be held, she also yearns to hold. She is constantly considering, and considering the act of considering, which she has already taught should be as something that leads to comprehension, or holding. But there are many ways that one can hold.

It's fruitful to consider the many forms of holding in *La Belle et La Bête*, along with the many types of being held. Ostensibly, the Beast holds Belle, but, whether by the curse that has made him who he is or by yielding to the vision of Belle, there is never a moment in the film when the Beast is not being held. But the way in which Belle holds the Beast is the means by which the Beast ultimately becomes human again. If Belle has an innate and concentrated ability to experience and understand beauty, this power is akin for Ruefle to the "ability to listen. And change, or be changed" (99). Once Belle recognizes the suffering inside the Beast, recognizes the human in the seemingly inhumane, she begins to comprehend who he actually is. This comprehension, this holding, is ultimately what changes the Beast. And what change is greater than turning a horrible beast into the alluring Jean Marais?

Earlier in her essay, Ruefle recalls an excerpt from Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*. A dialogue between two characters reveals how "[s]tudents do not read, they drink . . . [b]ecause they desire to know the whole truth, and that makes them desperate" (Fitzgerald qtd. in Ruefle 82). Here lies a division in the grasping for truth that separates fruitful forms of trying to understand from harmful ones. The students' desperation is born out of trying to understand the "whole" truth, erasing the existence of secrets and the possibility that there are certain things which are simply beyond total comprehension. This type of holding causes stagnation, because once something is entirely understood, it ceases to be worthy of understanding at all. By trying to hold on to the *whole* truth, students lose the ability to be held by *some* of the truth, by the part that matters most to them. Throughout her entire time in the

Beast's castle, Belle never asks the Beast about his pre-monstrous existence. She does not need to hold on to the truth of the Beast, as she comes to learn some of it, that which matters to her, through patient listening. For Ruefle, this listening permits change. If Belle's ears had never been pressed to the Beast's chest, there would have been no final act to the film; the Beast and Belle would only have held each other, trapped: they would never have flown.

With "On Secrets," Ruefle wanders and wonders. She understands first that "[t]o say that consideration leads to comprehension is to say that observation leads to action" (93). Ultimately, her entire essay is primarily an act in consideration. It seems she knows that thorough consideration will lead the way. Belle is similarly wise: by considering the Beast's humanity, she is able to comprehend his spirit; by observing this spirit, she enables action—a change—that saves him. One might relate this sequence to Ruefle's description of an astronomer looking through his telescope as he "considers the stars, and embraces the universe in the closed space of his mind" (93). No different than an astronomer peering through the telescope, Ruefle embraces infinity within the closed space of the page. Ruefle "would rather wonder than know" (101). We think knowledge will open doors, while it often closes them; the only way to fit through those doors without closing them behind us is to wonder, and to wander. This is simultaneously discomfiting and enthralling. It reminds us at once of both the possible and impossible, that anything worthy of completion cannot be completed. All we can do is hold and hope to be held in return.

In light of Mary Ruefle's thinking, writing, and the perspective that she writes from in "On Secrets," I will leave you with some words, beautiful in their lack of completion, from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*:

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
I am, I am, I am. (199)

Met with and answered by her readers, the incantation of Plath's "I am" seems to lift us from the page, as if we were approaching the stars ourselves. Their beauty we can name, though never reach, nor pull into our arms as we wish to. Yet sometimes, this flying together is enough, or it can be, when we listen to its pulsing call, alongside that "old brag" inside us all.

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