

Who is she (and what is she to you)



The small item in my handbag was demanding to be touched, twisted, consumed. But wait a minute. First I needed to stay in line, breathing small clouds in the air, until all leaving passengers had exited the train. I entered the carriage, hopped along the bulky suitcases on their way to catch a plane, and rested down at a window seat, bundled up in the cocoon of my woollen coat.

It was a crowded Thursday evening, and the train was hosting both commuters on their way home as well as travellers leaving the city for the airport. I opened up my leather handbag with the golden zipper, and there it was, smizing at me. A plastic bottle of Merlot, straight from the supermarket, hardly enough for two glasses of wine. Not that I would share it. Not that I would have a glass. A paper espresso cup would do the job. No opener needed either, my hands were twisting the screw cap.

But then the whole thing twisted.

There was a serious lack of opposing force here.

It didn't open.

This was rather embarrassing.

I slid the bottle quietly back in my handbag. And there it stayed for a while, still begging for attention.

Demanding to be touched, twisted, consumed.

Transferring onto another train, I arrived at a carriage that was too tired for chatter. The flat landscape, endlessly black, was passing by in a complimentary silence. After some pondering, I decided it was time for take two. Zip. Clenching fingers. Twist. Turn. But again, no result.

This time my endeavours didn't go unnoticed. A man with a short grey beard, neatly dressed in corduroy

trousers, who was sitting opposite me with his granddaughter, keenly followed my attempts. I could feel his friend on the other side of the aisle also side-eyeing me. I knew they couldn't resist.¹ The silence would be broken.

"Do you need some help with it?"

"I don't know, but yeah, you can give it a try", I shrugged.

Now his hands were fidgeting with the small plastic bottle. Other eyes in the train started to gaze at our struggle. But as I told you, there was a serious lack of opposing force here. After a minute or two, which felt much longer, his friend stepped in.

"Let me try."

And there, the bottle was passed over the aisle, more fingers got involved. To no avail.

"Do you have something sharp with you, like a nail-file?"

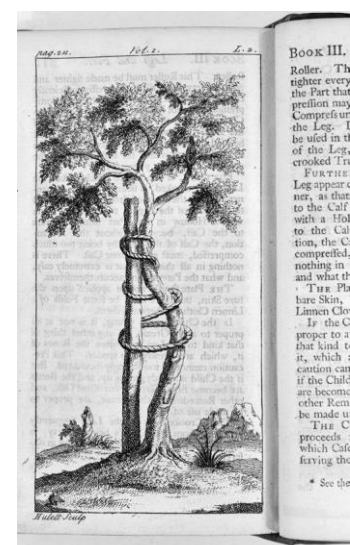
Enough now, I thought. Because carrying a handbag didn't mean I would also wander around with a nail-file. And now I wanted the bottle back. By this time, the whole carriage was silently following our trial and error.

"I will do it myself", I demanded.

Bit by bit, I perforated the aluminum with my bicycle key. It took forever. With each scratch and stab, drops of Merlot were coming closer. When the train halted I finally poured my first cup. The onlookers sighed with relief. "Cheers", I mumbled, bouncing off the train with a small jump, into the crowds again. With springy steps I disappeared into the landscape of brightly lit Chinese restaurants, towering bank offices and cars with extra bass. A bedouin of the Rotterdam evening, licking the sour wine off from chapped winter lips, on her way to a lecture. To indulge in all the sensations a city has on offer, one needs to be alone.

One hour later Paul B. Preciado showed this image below. The drawing of a bended tree that needs to be fixed is printed on the frontispiece of *Orthopaedia*, a book from 1743 by French physician Nicolas Andry that is full of instructions for correcting bodily deformations and controlling opposing forces. To straighten up the body is to straighten up life. When straightening a physical body looks already frightening, with the help of all those perverse apparatuses, then try to imagine what is needed to correct a social body. Or to rectify a spirit. At which anatomy are you looking?

Nicolas Andry, *Orthopaedia*, 1743
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas_Andry_de_Boisregard,_Orthopedia,_1743_Wellcome_L0018019.jpg



¹ Larry David - The Pickle Gambit (Curb Your Enthusiasm S09E02, 2017): "You go in there. You're gonna go to the right, near the front desk, you're going to try to open this jar of pickles, it's gonna create a diversion, everybody is going to come over and try to help, and then I'm going to sneak in, so the guy doesn't see me and I will try to find Paula. This is called: 'The Pickle Gambit'."

She wears checkered trousers, boots of soft black leather wrapping her ankles, and an off white jumper with a scruffy collar. On the rusty coffee table her hand is resting aside a stack of books and a café au lait. The fingers of her left hand are clenching a pen that is clearly ready for action. Everything is so right about this image of poet Rosemary Tonks, but even more convincing than her effortless style of dressing and semi-calculated posture is the determined look on her face. A look that is both deep in thought as it is ready to express these thoughts; the words almost spilling out of her mouth. She'll speak any minute now, through her handwriting on the paper in front of her.

"I have developed a visionary modern lyric, and, for it, an idiom in which I can write lyrically, colloquially, and dramatically", she would say about her style. "My subject is city life – with its sofas, hotel corridors, cinemas, underworlds, cardboard suitcases, self-willed buses, banknotes, soapy bathrooms, newspaper-filled parks; and its anguish, its enraged excitement, its great lonely joys."



Rosemary Tonks in the 1960s by Jane Brown, cover image of 'Rosemary Tonks, Bedouin of the London Evening, Collected Poems', Bloodaxe Books, 2014.

The image of Rosemary Tonks is impressive, but also misleading. The cover of the book that is haunting me for a while now, shows Tonks in the 1960s, when she was a successful writer and part of the London bohemia. Here sits a fearless woman of the city, who in her poems portrays herself and her surroundings more densely than it could have been, guzzling it all and adorning the streets of London with musky perfume and raw silk.

Perhaps Rosemary Tonks didn't die in April 2014, but in 1977, when she lost most of her eyesight due to extensive Taoist meditation exercises, "which involved staring for hours at a blank wall, turning the eyes in and looking intensely at bright objects".² This was one of many physical misfortunes - after suffering from polio which forced her to write with her left hand - that would ultimately lead to the moment where Rosemary Tonks decided to continue her life as Mrs. Lightband. She traded London for a small town at the sea and turned to the Bible as her complete manual for living. She stopped writing poetry and prose, destroyed her manuscripts and crushed a precious collection of inherited Oriental treasures to pieces. Her body continued to live on for decades, but the poet vanished.

Looking back, it's difficult to point out the exact moment where the rupture set in. Where the fractures within her - both of physical and of mental nature - were finally beyond repair, in a state where meditation couldn't correct them anymore. Only a complete rejection of her writing and of her beloved city, only a total surrender to the Bible, made Rosemary Tonks step out of bed each morning.

After transitioning, is whether she'd ever hold a pen in her hand with the same conviction as she does on the cover image that's haunting me?

You gave me a book of her collected poems, which are published against her will after her death, and although we laughed about her manspread, the book has been travelling with me since then in my backpack or lying around at the house, and my hands hesitate to write.

Who is she (and what is she to you).

Some parts of her biography don't make sense to me. She is described as being a central figure of the literary scene in London, but ends up being completely alone, refusing to open the door of a nondescript house at the seaside.

Why did she decide not to take part anymore?

"She was not noted for supporting the sixties sisterhood." ³

Perhaps she didn't want to belong to the whisperers. I mean, I understand she didn't want to be a public speaker. As she stated in a (rare) interview, "you either read and you give talks and you become a public person, or else you write consistently and everyday and think on a certain level. You can't go back to that deep level of thinking if you are too much of a social person". Negative reviews of her work affected her immensely: "they just smash and smash my poetry", she exclaimed. It's plausible Rosemary Tonks preferred to drink alone, take a night bus back home, and observe city life from a safe distance, from a state of isolation.

But why not make a sidestep: leave the main stage, but still say what needs to be said. Whisper it. As my friend M. did recently. Who performed out of eyesight and printed her whispered poem on a gigantic poster designed by F.. How to handle that? Just roll it. Cycle through the night, put some pressure on the pedals, the rolled up paper will be your broomstick. Pass it on to the next one who should be in the know. Or gather at a park in the city, the noise of passing cars buzzing in the background. Sit in a small circle, light the candles and cast a spell. Some youngsters who usually hang out in this park may first laugh at you, but will soon enough realise that they need to take a distance, take a step back.

Share your blacklists. Gossip. Didn't you want to be a part of this Rosemary? Did you have friends? No: did you have sisters?

Why did she become the freak who completely excluded herself, only to be glorified later. And there's nobody who would say: Nah, she wasn't like that, she actually wrote with her right hand.

Last night a fever kicked in. I ordered a stress ball online. They only come in a package of two.

- Radna Rumping, december 2017

