

November 23, 2020

Bea,

Thanks for the song rec – I did listen while reading, as per your order. And then I start hearing it everywhere after. Over the speakers at my neighborhood bookstore; blasting out someone's car windows (on another balmy 70° November day); & then a third time in Prospect Park, playing off some random kid's cell phone. So, obviously something about listening to it while reading your letter shifted the fabric of the space-time continuum, bringing me into more frequent contact with "umi says." Nice work.

All this to say: Hey. Bea. We are writing each other. This is now officially a Thing. We're a thing!

Hearing about how Moody went through Nov. 7, 2020, is at once utterly unsurprising & deeply enraging. I hate that you were stuck there in that bullshit silence. We were totally spoiled here in Brooklyn -- streets basically exploded into celebration. People were getting together at intersections & corners, cheering & clapping & dancing, playing music, giving out champagne (& water & masks! love nyers)... it was downright exultant. (So exultant Wen & I even managed to rejoice in the same general area, which isn't saying nothing.) I'm enclosing some celebratory 11/7/2020 confetti from a couple different spontaneous gatherings that day, so you can take in some of that celebratory magic. (Which as we know has been followed by weeks of something decidedly less than magic. {HOWL OF ANCIENT ENDLESS PRIMAL RAGE})

Thanks for sharing the recipe -- means a lot to have. Gotta admit, though -- taking one look at it gave me a mild panic attack. Like, what's a currant? What's browning sauce? Who has a large glass jar hanging out around their kitchen? (I'm guessing the answer is, who doesn't, and what's wrong with you, Ona?) But it was your mom's rum cake, so I had to go for it -- totally shocked Wen, since I never bake. He insisted on helping, which pissed me off until I realized I needed the help. He's a way better cook who actually (and weirdly? for a kid who grew up in Beijing?) knows how to make his own browning sauce (and pointed out that we *did* have large glass jars – in the cabinet in the back). Plus I hate greasing the pans and he's into that shit. So, I know not your intention, but sending that recipe did wind up bringing two alienated humans back together for a few moments of food coma.

I feel like a complete ass for idealizing your & your mom's relationship -- I do remember that chorus story, so fucked up, aiya... So different with my parents – they were so distant they never said anything to me, to injure me or otherwise. I think I made them deeply uncomfortable – I always remember that time you & me were sitting on my steps & I was in tears – just, completely sobbing over something (don't even remember what). And my mom gets back from work, and looks at us, and then says, "Oh, hello, Beatrice! Always good to see you," in this very sunny way -- and then just continues past us into the house. And that didn't feel weird to me, but I remember you grabbing my shoulder & staring at me saying "what just happened? Your mom just saw you in tears and walked right past you?" & I was just like, yeah, what else would she do?

sigh... all the ways parents can mess up their kids... one advantage of not having any is not having to worry about permanently damaging someone the way only one's own parent can do...

It sounds like you're in a different place, but I actually feel okay about not having a kid. There's this belief that you miss out on so much without, but it's just different... Yes people with kids learn & experience things they would never learn & experience otherwise – but people who never have kids learn & experience things they would never learn & experience otherwise, too. And it infuriates me when people say not having kids is selfish, as if having a child is some kind of selfless act. It's all just... stupid and reductive. (Obviously I have a lot of thoughts about this... being a woman in my late 30s with no kid & no plans on having one, in a world that is so steeped in stories elevating motherhood... I guess I find myself seeking out different kinds of stories, these days.)

Sublet didn't work out. That stresses me out. I'm still looking. Sort of. BUT I've been a little less motivated to spend any time/energy looking, in a good way (I think)... I've started getting into a new project, or exploring the beginnings of one -- at least something that's maybe on its way to being something... At this point it's still mostly process & impulse more than a coherent idea. Back when I was in grad school I had the (totally pretentious) idea of creating pigments from different materials representing different parts of my history – sort of tracing my parents' immigration paths from china & germany, the towns or regions they were from, & putting the pigments in water, & letting different texts sit in the water (for days or weeks), until the paper achieved a sort of pigmented & aged quality – & the texts were immigration laws & news clippings & different writings on critical race theory & xenophobia & assimilation etc etc... And then I took the dyed paper & would use it for an installation wherever... paper over some unassuming public surface like a bus stop or a public restroom or a McDonalds booth. The very obvious idea being that our complex layered histories & other people's attitudes about those histories – and how those attitudes & policies shape our histories & our experiences -- are with us wherever we go. Pretentious I KNOW, it was grad school. I wanted to be Jenny Holzer or Tracey Emin (but being Tracey Emin scared me) – not that my work was (or is) anything like Holzer's or Emin's, obviously (or maybe it's not obvious... are you familiar with their work?) – it was more about how they think about art & what it can do, & their relationship to it, if that makes sense – for Holzer about the public dimension of her work, & how she makes visible things that are meant to be hidden or secret; & for Emin how she brings so much of her personal life and history & perspective into her work.

But something about reconnecting with you had me digging through some old stuff & remembering the simplicity of those first pieces, of slapping stickers on the wall – how in that act I was trying to claim some part of space, trying to interrupt some part of Moodyites' experience with my own (small & strained/straining) voice.

and thinking about Moody, & how we grew up drowning in it, silenced or at least muted significantly by it...how we had to adapt to Moody instead of the other way around, how

we flattened ourselves ... our very presence disrupted Moody's sense of itself, & we were expected to calibrate who we were to fit it, to be as undisruptive as possible, to make ourselves hidden.

So it's something I'm curious about now... excavating Moody & growing up there, how it shaped us, how it sent us on this trajectory to wherever we are now & where we might be headed... how layers of moody are always there underneath... some kind of palimpsest approach... & also something about brain wiring, & making sense of this moment of time... So you know, THAT. Totally cogent thought, right? Perfectly clear.

I think about how I've spent a lot of years unbecoming – like I knew myself better at 16 than I do now, which is ridiculous, I recognize that's ridiculous. I read interviews of artists our age or younger who talk about how now they know who they are, they're so glad they're no longer in the crazy uncertain place they were once in, they're so glad they've emerged from their crazy uncertain periods of life, maybe somewhat scathed, but wiser. And I think I'm not supposed to be in this crazy uncertain place. I should have figured it out by now. I remember many times in my 20s thinking, "this is it; I've arrived." Having this mature sense of myself, like I knew who I was, like I'd been through the fire & come out the other side, mature & ready to be a self-possessed art monster moving through the world. But instead...

I did read an interview with Tracey (Emin) from a few weeks ago, actually, that resonated in a way -- she's been going through cancer treatment the last year, even in the pandemic, went through chemo & had some serious surgery – she had a tumor in her bladder, & her doctors had to cut out her uterus & fallopian tubes & ovaries & lymph nodes & urethra & part of her vagina – and she was talking about how she feels so lucky, & she has so much to look forward to, she's better than she's ever been ... and then she said "men only ejaculate once, but women have multiple orgasms" --- which yes we all know, but what she was getting at was that men tend to trail off as they get older, & do their best work between 40 and 50; but women often keep going & do their best work after 50. Which, I hate generalizations of all kinds, especially ones that are gender reductionist. But she described seeing her life as a trilogy – she said when she was 18, she was more honest & had more clarity than she did at 35, when she said she was confused and lost her way... Now she says she's in part three, where she feels she's more mature, and softer and tougher at the same time. (also, Tracey is a human without children, too...I go around collecting older brilliant women without children, to remind myself of all the different models of wise accomplished fulfilled womanhood there are out there.)

Sera sounds like a crazy superhero person. Glad that you've got a cool woman of color coach/human in the hellscape that is Moody (and I get it that you feel you need to leave Moody; I regret saying you should never sell Natural. Absolutely sell it and get the fuck out if that's what you need). I don't totally know how I feel about Sera weighing in on my relationship with Wen, but I definitely support your having a kickass friend. (I am also amused, if somewhat saddened, by her impact on your relationship to vegan banana bread...but your vegan banana bread SO TASTY.)

Your sessions together sound pretty intense – what’s a memory that you freed yourself of? (or obviously you don’t have to tell me.) I like that she’s helping you relax and be open, but for what it’s worth, bitter/ closed-off/alone are the last ways I would think to describe you – I always think of you as connected & loving (if also capable of scathingly & deftly putting someone/something in their place when called for).

The POC farm community is intriguing ...those kinds of things are so overrun with white folks, so that element alone sounds very cool. I gotta read up more on transcendentalism. Are you planning to visit there yourself? I’ve always been curious about doing a spiritual retreat, but worry I just don’t have the discipline or inner serenity to hack it.

And here I am torn between wrapping up so I can get this letter out the door, and getting to everything else I want to get to...

so quick final notes:

- yes about white women (not all white women of course because generalizations are bad but also: yes!)
- chris & his fucked up family: uh, what? fuck that guy.
- WTF 45 BRAINWASHING I KNOW 70% BELIEVE THIS SHIT HOLY SHIT
- feel you on Purpose, & wondering what mine is...
- adult Justine! lovely.
- thanksgiving is a few days away, which feels odd. curious what your plans are/were? Some friends here in brooklyn want to get together, but it feels like a bad idea, so it’ll probably just be me & my roommate (who despises thanksgiving, which... I don’t blame him). It just feels strange & unsettling going into it...actually, going into this whole holiday season, or slipping into it, feels strange and unsettling, & heading toward the new year, or plummeting toward it, with everything so uncertain & barbed & perilous & unknowable...
- I feel like I didn’t know about that summer camp.

okay that’s it.

love,

o.