

2 March 2021

Bea,

Maybe it was a rebirth or maybe it was something else, but I'll take it either way. I'm writing from a new apartment, got here yesterday. It's five AM, and definitely not a cleansing yoga & meditation 5am like you're doing; I'm sitting on the floor wedged in between the foot of the bed and the wall/window, surrounded by a pile of boxes & suitcases in a really cramped room. Maybe it sounds awful & depressing but I actually feel... a little euphoric. Like giddy sitting on the floor writing you, leaning against the bed, facing the window, which faces a train track (train goes by every several minutes. Which also I know sounds awful, and it'll probably start driving me nuts at some point, but right now, something about the primal rumbling of it feels appropriate; it's resonating with my state of mind/being, anyway.).

It's temporary, or temporary long-term, I don't know. There are three other people here, two of them in their 20s – which feels weird, definitely not a living situation I expected or wanted to be in -- but the person whose name is on the lease is closer to our age, she's just a few years younger than us. I'm still getting to know them (obviously; just got here last night), but one of them is in the restaurant industry (a chef, I think? but not a vegan one), and another one said he's a writer & sound artist & is also working at Trader Joe's. And Zeyna (the older one) does film, but I think makes a living off editing & some other things.

So why did I move, how did this happen... You know I'd been wanting to not be in that living situation with W., for a while, but hadn't been able to pull myself out of it... I'd just felt so stuck, maybe it was inertia, combined with feeling so flattened by... everything. But what finally got me to do it – (okay this will take some setting up...possibly long-ish story ahead...)

...About a month ago (right after I last wrote actually) I get contacted by this nonprofit, to do an installation for a series in vacant storefronts (verrry general idea is artist response to pandemic). And Wen overhears my zoom chat with one of the curators, and asks about the project, and what I'm going to do. And I don't say much -- I'm not looking to have a conversation with him about it, especially when I'm just starting to think about it -- but then he starts talking about what he would do with the space, riffing on ideas he heard me discussing with the curator, saying "yeah that would be cool, but that's sort of your go-to... what if you didn't do what you always do, what if you tried to think outside your own box, Ona??" And he offers to "help", starts suggesting we collaborate, because that would make it more dynamic, and impactful....

... And as he's talking a part of me starts to feel so beaten down – I was already in this not good place I'd been in for a while – and I start believing, yeah I do suck, I don't have anything original or meaningful to contribute, if I do it by myself it's gonna be some

weak-ass clichéd thing I always do... but the collaborations W. & I did in the past were always interesting & “Important”... and I tell him I’ll think about it.

But I really don’t want to at the same time, I don’t want to surrender the space to him. Working with him in the past, it always felt like it wound up being more his piece than mine (nothing to do with ideas / work / effort / time / resources; more, he had this impulse to figuratively piss all over the work and mark his territory, so it would feel like his no matter what was underneath). So now, with this – even though my rational brain knows that yeah his work is larger-scale and more obviously provocative and in-your-face, but that has nothing to do with value, we’re just completely different artists – and even though I’ve been making solo work most of my career, and W. & I haven’t collaborated on anything in a few years – even knowing all that a part of my brain starts to think fuck it... maybe the only way for me to responsibly use the opportunity is to work with him.

And as I’m thinking this, he’s also talking shit about it – that a lot of these art-in-storefront residency programs are run by “a bunch of white ladies”, who select artists whose work seems safe & unoffensive while also being “diverse”, and that the programs are using the artists – that the landlords let these nonprofits use the spaces for free or cheap while they’re vacant only bc they’re getting some kind of tax break, & because they know the artists will make their space look cool AF & raise the property values for commercial landlords. Which can be true, actually – the people running them mean well, but the programs can boil down to power brokers letting artists in when they need them, and the second the space gets leased, the residency is terminated – which the artists know going in. Which only makes it worse, from W.’s pov – they’re taking advantage of artists grateful for any opportunity, even if they’re essentially being used by real estate. So yes there’s some truth to all this, but W. was obviously generalizing & trying, unconsciously or not, to make me feel like some sad desperate artist participating in a fucked up program— and suggesting they’d invited me because my work was safe & wouldn’t offend anyone – and I’d need his involvement to subvert that expectation somehow. And it was working – I recognized on some level what he was doing, but with me feeling less sure of myself lately & seeing things in a warped way, W. saying this, and continuing to say it, was enough to seed all this doubt.

And he started leaving these notes for me around the apartment – he’d scribble down ideas for the installation on colored post-its, the way he used to do when we worked together regularly. And it started making it feel inevitable, like this is going to happen again. The same thing. And it made me realize this is what this dynamic with him always felt like. This is what our “collaborations” had always felt like... not that I didn’t do my own work, but that he would always try to drive so much of it.

And then I got your letter, Bea, I read it from start to finish, and I cried (tells you what kind of state I was in). and by the time I got to the end I knew that I was not going to collaborate with him, and I also knew that I was moving out, I had to get out ASAP or I would never get out.

So because I knew it would basically mean losing two months' rent (not giving him notice for the next month, & losing deposit), I had to find something really cheap... so I put the word out to some friends that I needed an emergency sublet, and it got around to this place. I threw as much as I could into a couple bags & boxes, left him a post-it telling him to help himself to anything of mine in the fridge & pantry, & was out the door. When I got here I wrote him an official email giving him notice & telling him I'd cover my share for the next month – I sort of feel like a dick, but I knew I couldn't tell him I was moving until I was already gone, or something could happen to stop it somehow. (He sent a couple long emails back that I haven't read yet, so something fun to deal with later. I'll also have to go back at some point to get a few things...)

It happened so fast, once I made the decision it was like something just got unblocked, unstuck, like I was running on this liquid fuel & was energized and motivated in a way I hadn't felt energized or motivated in so long. It never would have happened without you, Bea.

No idea yet what I'll do for the storefront project (timeline is still tbd), but I've been thinking about being sick, on multiple levels. sick body-sick, obviously; but also sick in our brains, sick in our souls... how we've all been through a collective trauma, and we're still going through it. And this feeling of having descended into collective madness, and are we ever going to get out of it.

Last night after moving all day, I finally took a break to have a drink in the kitchen/living room/common area with one of my roommates, Zeyna (the one in her 30s) and she was telling me that her mom (in Ohio) is a QAnon supporter. Her mom will text her these stories about children being killed, and evil democrats drinking their blood... and her mom actually believes that the inauguration was just a video created by the deep state. And it doesn't matter what Zeyna says, it doesn't matter how much logic & evidence she has to refute what her mom is saying... because whatever she sees on facebook is what's happening, and if you try to convince her otherwise, that just reinforces it for her. Because people denying that the stories are true is proof that the stories are true. Just: madness. And it sounds really painful for Zeyna.

So... this is fuzzy, but I've been feeling this yearning for a cleansing or healing of some kind... maybe it's like what you're doing? which... it sounds really intense, what you're doing, Bea...the drumming, sleeping on the floor...I hope you're doing okay. I mean on the one hand you sound more than okay, and energized and alive. And the rawness makes sense. But you're definitely not crazy, and you're definitely not alone. And it is not a hangup to not want to sleep with someone who's also sleeping with someone else; obviously totally fine to do it if you feel good about it, but if you don't, listen to yourself and definitely do not. (Take it from someone who's been in a few too many messed up situations that felt bad at the time, but that I still somehow felt obligated to participate in...).

Your february dedication is helpful to me, focusing on endurance. I guess enduring is in a way what we've all been doing. But beyond enduring there also needs to be a recognition of how we have been fucked and fucked with, a recognition of it and a reckoning – like what do we do with knowing that, and what can we do to un-fuck ourselves? to cleanse and heal and whatever we need to do to somehow move on from this?

I think about how I grew up in Moody, and in my family... I always thought it was bullshit that you seek out the fucked up things you grew up with – or I always thought I was too aware and too smart, no way I was going to go seek that shit out. But looking back, that's exactly what I did. It's like I subconsciously sought out these patterns and positions that I occupied growing up, recreated these messed up dynamics because... what, because they felt familiar? because if you grow up deformed you're like "oh this messed up room feels comfortable", and that's only because your body is contorted so instead of uncontorting your body you seek out a situation that keeps you contorted. Because that's where you fit.

Jesus I sound like I'm ten. I don't know what I sound like. I'm living now in what feels like a surreal apt situation with three other people, some of whom are more than a decade younger than me. Which is like, it's fine, I was once in my 20s, too, but I feel like ... what am I doing here? When I was in college, I was living one year in this apartment with a couple people I had met through a bar I was working at. And this one guy was ten years older than me – I was 20 and he was 30, but he seemed a lot older. He was brilliant, he had this very lively mind and photographic memory... and he was perpetually drunk. Wake-up-and-drink-vodka-first-thing-in-the-morning sort of drunk. His room reeked, like it was rancid, like his body was just baking in alcohol or something, this pungent smell as soon as you stepped foot in there... which I rarely did because it was... acrid. It burned my nostrils. And he was such a nice guy, and so smart, but... I was just like, what is this guy doing. You know? he's living with this girl ten years younger than him, and the other roommate was a tattoo artist who ran his business out of the apartment and was always having customers and their friends coming over and smoking pot in the living room around his tattoo chair, and I would come back from class and just... have no idea what the fuck apartment I was in. And actually as I'm telling this story, I'm like, maybe I was the person who was sort of fucked up in this story. What was I even doing in that apartment?

And now, I'm like, what the fuck am I doing in this apartment? But I feel good somehow. I'm in this tiny space, I have no idea what the future holds, but I feel freer than I've felt in a long time.

So it's a couple hours after I started writing, and realizing I need to somehow make this room look not-alarming for my students to see through zoom... so, gotta figure out clearing a corner.

Bea thank you so much for your letter. But also, take care of yourself. Reading about everything you're going through – everything you're enduring – on the one hand I'm so in awe, and it sounds so incredible and empowering and transformative, and I know you say it's really good. And I know it's important to do things that are uncomfortable sometimes, and that hurt. But at the same time, not everything that hurts is good, not everything that is uncomfortable is good. Maybe sometimes, you do something that hurts, and you grow. But sometimes you do something that hurts, and it just hurts you.

There's nothing wrong with you, Bea. You also deserve to take up all the space in the world.

Love,

O.

quick note before sending – throwing in one of W.'s post-its, so you can truly appreciate...

EXPLODE THE CONTAINER

blow(n) up city / "what a nice window"
(cement/hand sanitizer/confetti?)

(DON'T) PLAY NICE / MASK UP

take, eat; THIS IS MY (DIVERSE) BODY.

(un)easy on the eyes
(resin/oils/peppermint/newsprint)