

31 January 2021

I almost didn't write back. Which would have been chickenshit.

Had a dream the other night where I was walking up this hill in the rain. It wasn't brooklyn, or it was some secret part of brooklyn with unusually dramatic topography. It's raining, pouring, and I'm trudging up this very steep hill, to get to... something at the top, not sure what. Can't really see, water's running down my face into my eyes, even filling my nostrils, like it's so much water my face is flooded. There are these rushing currents of rain spill-off along the side of the road I'm on. And then I lose my footing and slip, and fall to the side of the road... but instead of hitting ground I fall right through into deep water and keep on falling, sinking backwards, watching the surface of the water receding -- and I think, oh. I'm drowning. guess I'm done. And I relax. But then I think, maybe I should at least try to save myself. So I rally my energy and start swimming up toward the surface, which now seems really far away and I don't have much air left... and I realize I waited too long, it's too late now to save myself. And that's when I notice the other bodies in the water, motionless -- the whole ocean or whatever this is is filled with bodies. But I keep swimming up, and then just as I break the surface I hear someone shouting "Ona!" -- either like they're trying to help me, or they need help -- and I wake up.

And waking up didn't feel like a relief. Which...you're in Thayer so don't know how much you've been tapped into what's happening in the country, but it's grim.

(jan. 20th my heart did lift there for a bit... just the sight of that garbage human loading his ass on a helicopter & back to florida. But other than that...I know people were moved, I had friends texting throughout telling me they were weeping from relief & joy but honestly I just felt numb (even with amanda gorman, who is yes phenomenal)... don't know if it's managing trauma or self-protection or what. I guess it's knowing this administration isn't exactly the radical reckoning this country needs... like yeah it's better than a raging white supremacist narcissist tweeting from the oval office 24/7 & having the nuclear codes, but is that the bar now? and this terrifying lunatic conspiracy evil ass shit is still here, it's fucking tens of millions strong & how do you reason with this nationwide cult that's impervious to logic/facts/rational thought, how do you fight it...it's just -- I don't know.)

But look at you. Ho. Lee. Shit. WHAT??? You're in Michigan. You're dancing in barns, you're building houses and making new friends and waking up before dawn and meditating and doing yoga and feeling alive & awake? Sounds nuts, in the best of ways. Bob is obviously incredible if he's got you all living in tents & rvs in winter.

Have you decided yet if you'll be back in february, or staying longer? But main thing is you're doing really well, which is really, really good to hear. Crazy what's happened in your life since your last letter -- or what you've made happen, rather. Crazy & inspiring as hell.

I've been stuck here for the last year, but a lot longer than that really, & can't seem to get out. Even the most micro of shifts requires me to mobilize all this energy I don't know if I have. When I close my eyes lately or just always in the background there's this endless video and audio playing of an enraged mob yelling and roaring and breaking things and breaking bodies & faces... and there's this background hum of horror and rising anxiety, and realizing it's no nightmare, this is all happening...

Guess I am very far from a state of early morning meditation and yoga, Bea.

Things with Wen are not good. He's been working on some installation the last several weeks, getting back every night at three or four am. I know this because I've always been a light sleeper and also I'm barely sleeping these days, and also he's not trying to be quiet, he doesn't give a fuck about waking me up. He gets back and slams the door and first thing is grinding coffee beans which is his going to sleep drink whenever he's in installation mode. Because he says he needs to focus before going to sleep.

A couple days ago he got back and usually I stay in my room and endure it but this time I came out to the kitchen and told him he was really pissing me off and he said why because he interrupted my sleep he thought I wasn't sleeping anyway and I said no because you're a careless irresponsible dick, that's your m.o. And you want everyone to "inhabit" this artwork even though to "inhabit" it you have to take off your mask and wander around with a lot of other people "inhabiting" it when there's another way more infectious strain going around and that's not interesting or radical that's just being careless with other people's lives.

So the piece -- you're invited to wander around this "danger/vulnerability space", which is basically this giant sculpture maze (with a big ass monolith in the center. seriously?? yes.). And yeah it could be an interesting interrogation of safety/danger/risk assessment, but I don't know how it's legal or why anyone participates in it, even with the timed entrances. He told me the collective producing it thinks that part is tongue in cheek, like no one's actually going to take their mask off, but he thinks people will. (He was like, "you should check it out, Ona. you could even do a little something of your own in there if you want." Like it's this act of generosity, letting me leave one of my little art ideas on his master work. Yeah let me get right on that.) He's always talking about how he wants people to occupy his artwork but it's the other way around. Fuck that guy.

Oh and then we fucked. Because why not I'm stuck in this apartment with him, might as well, what else am I going to do, try and sleep? (So if it hasn't been clear, no, Bea, Wen does not feel right to me; very well aware this is not a healthy situation. This falls into one of those situations where I'm like: oh, well.)

At some point I really need to get a move on when I will actually change this situation. I don't know when that will be, because I'm feeling a little out of it. But that's no excuse. You weren't feeling so great, and you managed to radically change things.

Still floored by what you've done since your last letter. And your gas station/car encounter sounds insane & beautiful & totally the opposite of my early morning Wen encounter. So I'm glad one of us is experiencing meaningful human connection.

I am not making important work, Bea. I actually feel like you're making fun of me when you write that (I know you're not; that's just where my brain's at, apparently). I feel like you're making fun of me when you tell me it's obvious I went to grad school, & you wish you could use words like "calibrate," because I'm feeling pretty useless & pointless & powerless in my work (and elsewhere). I started teaching a zoom class at NYU (on the politics of space and identity – which yeah I guess also sounds like another douchebag grad school thing, but it's actually my jam), and have been wondering lately if the students are smirking at me. In the second class one student asked me how the last year has impacted artists' perspective on their work, which is a totally normal, legitimate question, and I started to answer and she sort of cut me off and said but how has it impacted your work, specifically – has it altered your sense of priorities & responsibility as an artist – which again, totally fine question, and I responded, or I stumbled my way through a response about how my work has always been about marginalized identities & communities, & interrupting/claiming space, and so in some ways I've felt my work has only deepened in this respect given the ongoing calamity & how the national conversation has shifted blah blah blah but as I was speaking I was just screaming SHUT UP to myself, like I'm so sick of my words & speaking & hearing these words, & what do they even mean anyway they don't mean anything they're all just bullshit – and I felt like I sounded like I was trying really really hard to justify myself to my students, and they weren't buying it. Like they were all listening to this out of touch middle-aged woman in a zoom box who doesn't really get it, who's trying to excuse herself, trying to make herself feel relevant -- Which is okay, I get that I'm just sort of experiencing a little more dysmorphia than usual but it's unnerving, to feel that way in a class setting. Teaching's always felt pretty natural & instinctive to me, to my practice... I've always loved being in a room with young artists at different stages of developing their work, & exchanging perspectives & ideas... so even the fact that I'm feeling this way is... not good. I was having a hard time staying on zoom, I kept calling for another five, ten minute break when I could turn off my camera & my mic and try to calm the fuck down. I keep expecting to hear from the school that they've received reports of me unraveling before my students' eyes. And I'm supposed to be this grown-ass adult working artist, with confidence & wisdom & skills to share...

I'm ashamed because I mentioned last time that something was starting to stir, some beginnings of some new project. But instead my brain got fuzzier, and the idea disintegrated, or feels like it did. (And also all my fucking words & ideas are bullshit, there's that, too.)

One of the reasons I almost didn't write back is that you seem so open to being who you are, to saying what you're thinking & feeling, not hiding anything -- like you have this direct channel from heart/ soul to voice/expression... and I feel I've been blocked off, or

there's a block... I'm reflexively defending myself from scrutiny, or something – like there's some stench of inauthenticity (only made worse by the fact that I supposedly explore authenticity)... I'm trying to shake it, but that's what I think I was experiencing with my students, & with friends I've felt isolated from, and with Wen – and I guess I almost didn't write you back because I don't know if I can handle it if I start feeling that with you, too.

I don't have any art to send, but I wanted to send you something. Right now I don't have a ton that feels solid to me, I'm just grasping at things, but re-connecting with you, writing letters with you, this feels real, something to hold onto. Like a lifeline (no pressure though). So, I just put together a few of the words that have passed between us since we started writing... like a little snapshot of our correspondence to date. On a legal pad, because why not.

It sounds like you're in a good place right now, Bea. Sounds like you're well on your way to freeing yourself from that memory. You know you're good enough, right? You always have been? (Easiest thing to say to someone else, and I mean it saying it to you. But I get that it's hard to say it to yourself and mean it.)

love,

o.