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My Culture of One; Eight Relational Dances With My Books

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My Culture of One; 8 Relational Dances With My Books

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I invented the arts to stay alive.

...

Then I asked myself what I would like to read, or rather what items I wanted in my culture, to contain created, newly and justly, my needs.

Alice Notley, *Culture of One*

The relational space is the thing that is alive with something from somewhere else.

Susan Howe

~

A book is a world.

It is night, and I lie awake, surrounded by shimmering planets;

1. I might find myself pierced by loneliness—what Maggie Nelson calls “solitude with a problem”—and reach for Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* and her red monster Geryon. Here, the problem that transforms solitude into loneliness is longing. Geryon is an expert in longing, that is why he is red. His redness gives a color to my desire for non-aloneness and Carson so expertly constitutes in language, each individual breath of longing, singing it back to me. *Desire is no light thing*. Picture me now, the space in my room a few inches less lonely, the air full of Geryon and his red longing.
2. I am recovering from” chest masculinizing surgery”. *Top surgery*. The word is still longing. No longer a problem of solitude, it is a body problem. My body, which I have willingly submitted to be taken apart and reconstructed. Five years ago I walked my body into a modern dance class and began to learn how to live in it. I had spent the previous twenty trying not to live in it, carefully cultivating a practice that put me a few inches to the side and systematically unrecognizing the shapes in the mirror. In a vast, bright room full of mirrors, I looked over at my body which I had abandoned. The stretch and pull of the spine, the thud of the marley, and the give of my body against it— every breath and muscle contraction tugged me further into the orbit of embodiment. And yet, now I lie in bed, unable to raise my arms above my head, having

temporarily surrendered my body's ecstatic power for a more permanent freedom. I long for movement, and for this, I have my Cathy Josefowitz monograph from the *Thinking Body* exhibit; these queerly-shaped bodies— nearly as strange as my own— painted in alarming colors, contorting themselves into impossible configurations, so animated by the feeling of movement that I can nearly feel it in my own static body. Into her early adulthood, Cathy Josefowitz was trapped by the idea of a *right body* and the belief in the *wrongness* of her own. She did eventually pursue a dance practice, but her earlier paintings overflow with a deep longing for dance; funny that her paralysis then, now delivers me from mine. Looking at the cardboard puppets, and paintings of circus performers, and lovers, stretching and leaping through pink, blue, and yellow air— my muscles contract, and I can't help but smile.

3. On a burning day, selling bread at the Union Square farmer's market, melting under the tent that offers no relief from the cruel heat emanating from the concrete, I am dreaming my usual day-dream, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* in hand: a cool blue cloud— a beneficent nimbostratus entity, appears low in the sky. I step out from under the tent to tilt my head towards the cool blueness emanating from it and it begins to rain. Perfect, cold water fills the wells of my closed eyes, washes the streets and buildings clean, begins to rise up all around. My body is submerged and I am lifted up and carried through the streets of Manhattan, out into the Atlantic, and beyond. On those hot summer days in 2021, *Bluets* is all I can do to keep from seeing endless red. I take it like medicine against the heat, which is so constant it is no longer just a feeling but an existential state of being. *You will descend into a blue underworld, blue with hungry ghosts, pools in my mind like engine coolant.*
4. There is a different kind of loneliness. Not the impermanent absence of company, but the sense that you are *alone*. The only one of an alien race. *The sky was black and strewn with stars. I felt*

alone on the planet. Maybe this is a queer feeling, or maybe it is the feeling by which we are all *queered* at some point. But, when you have felt it enough times, when it becomes like a place, which you return to again, and again. When you find yourself in a room full of people—room, after room, after room—all alone. Sometimes, in these rooms, you search for a gaze that recognizes yours and find yourself invisible. Sometimes you are on display. Either way, you open your mouth to make words, to make yourself understood, but everything comes out as nonsense, or static, or howling. This is the *Queer Art of Failure, something queers do and have always done exceptionally well.*

5. The letters in my *Friendship* book, written long ago for Mozart, Camus, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Nathaniel Hawthorne, all become letters to me; *in the eternal times that are to come, you and I shall sit down in Paradise, in some little shady corner by ourselves; and if we shall by any means be able to smuggle a basket of champagne there (I won't believe in a Temperance Heaven), and if we shall then cross our celestial legs in the celestial grass... and strike our glasses and our heads together... Then shall songs be composed... "Oh, when I lived in that queer little hole called the world"... yes, let us look forward to such things.*
6. I AM CRYING ON MY FLOOR WITH MY ENYA WATERMARK TAPE PLAYING, *strange how my heart beats to find myself upon your shore, strange how I still feel my loss...gone before—I am thinking that the well of grief of lost love is not really a well at all but the ever-rising ocean, that I will forever be alone, that my grief is a climate-changing sea WHEN A VOICE CRIES OUT FROM ABOVE, CHARLENE, EVERYONE IS THE WEATHER OF OUR HOME STAR!...but my name is not Charlene—NO MATTER, THE LIFE FACT SHINES LIKE LOVING-OIL ALL OVER [YOUR] BODY...THE LIVING LEAVE THE [LIVING]...IT DOESN'T REPLACE, IT JUST CHANGES ITSELF—O.K.... A LIVING PART, THE LIVING PART THAT*

WAS...LIKE AN ORGAN, HAS DIED... O.K. I step out into the purpling evening to hear the sounds of the world. The life fact shines on it like loving oil. This is not loneliness, but exquisite solitude.

7. *Nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me.*
8. A book is a world when the world is closed to me. In the darkest and loneliest hour of the night, *I invented the arts to stay alive. Alone in my little room, with my culture of one, Alone in Meaning, It means that I make perfect sense.*

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1. *Autobiography of Red*, Anne Carson
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5. “Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne,” *The Norton Book of Friendship*, Edited by Eudora Welty and Ronald A. Sharp,
6. *The Loving Detail of the Living & the Dead*, Eleni Sikelianos
7. *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg
8. *Culture of One*, Alice Notley

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