

the things that are left (For Mark II)

I was living alone when I wrote about Mark's work three and a half years ago, seeing a man whose politics and routines I hated and not getting off enough for it to be worth it. It was, as I had speculated in the text, *a reaction against a year of aloneness, a revision of a solitary life*. You could call it infatuation, which can so quickly turn into revulsion at oneself. We fell out eventually, over Israel's occupation of Palestine, but we are still strange friends, I think.

I don't live alone anymore but I haven't moved. It's been a year and a half with my girlfriend living here too. Her rhythms and routines have brought stability and joy. But I push against them by staying up too late and drinking alone since the death of my dog. I have romanticised the sense of freedom I had when I first moved here, into my stepmum's empty house, just me and her (the dog), the rooms almost empty of things, no real weekends or weekdays, a bended kind of time. I didn't even have my books when I first arrived – they were all still in the flat I once co-owned and had to leave. The slow accumulation of dried plants and objects – along with all the books that arrived in boxes from the flat, but not all the furniture that I want back – now accumulates dust and spider webs. (The new dog has chewed through all the pinecones and teasel stems, creating a layer of indoor mulch.) It was here that, for the first time in many years, I drew and painted. I pressed plants and read about their medicinal properties and cultural histories, and then learned to dye fabric with them. I made a garden. I sewed panels of dyed fabric into curtains. I made quilt tops. I embroidered. I thought I was remaking myself, learning to take up space. Four years on, I feel unmade, unravelled, failing at doing my work, feeling more isolated in this world that has reconnected without me, or not – I wouldn't know.

I want the lessons I have learned about taking up living-cum-studio space to inhabit me forever, I wrote in that text. Mark had been making sculptures in his Berlin apartment, living with them like flatmates. *For the first time in a long time, I feel like I have a whole body, not a body of parts splitting open or tearing themselves away from each other*. I don't know how I feel now – maybe like the parts are fusing together, bonded to something like a family, but queered. This is something I want, but I still feel the need to tear away from. (Re)productive time, family time, is also something I want to destroy.

Mark still lives alone. Unlike me, he has maintained his self-sufficiency, in homemaking at least, self-sufficiency being a concept that masks the reality of interdependency, having a committed partner and friends, people to care for you, and who you care for, within the realities of a culture of extraction, of so much labour for such little reward. Mark's drawings describe the feeling of being one of many, part of a social body, and how cut off or separate you can still feel despite this. He uses the metaphor of a body-in-parts, a body struggling to hold itself up. Heads are too heavy; they need support, and sometimes their weight is held by other body parts, an act that seems impossible to maintain. In *Under the weather, a* (2021), a person has become the components we all know are underneath our skin: sacks of organs, abstract forms that weigh down on the head, shit coming out of the mouth. In *as yet untitled (headache)* (2020), a singular body has grown its own support to rest its head on; the rest of the body has been sacrificed. This fragmentation

or extension describes the effects of being alone, or solitary, on the body, how we feel the labour of just existing as a strain.

I feel like a different person depending on who I'm spending time with, whether I am alone or in company, and Mark's drawings also remind me of this feeling, that we're holding so many versions of ourselves in our bodies, and some of them weigh heavier than others. Some of them are absolute *nightmares*. *London bend* (2016) is a decapitated head and neck being held up by arms, on its knees. 2016 – is that when we lived together? I can't really remember. I moved there when I had to leave the first time. We were different versions then.

Living alone costs more than living with a partner, literally. Single people are less financially resilient, even if they are more emotionally self-sufficient. When I lived alone, and I was single, I felt released from the rules of gender and sexuality, the tyranny of the couple, of heterosexuality and womanhood, but that doesn't mean I was free in the eyes of others. Nothing had actually changed, I was just avoiding plain sight. As José Esteban Muñoz writes, "To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality's path... Being lost, in this particular queer sense, is to relinquish one's role (and subsequent privilege) in the heteronormative order." We need to be lost to the logics of reproductive futurism in order to imagine a future of queer kinship. Coupling is like making a new version of yourself, but all the other ones are haunting you.

Sometimes you have to get away. It's like Libuše says in the feature documentary about her work:

I feel like I could achieve a lot in my life but I fear I might screw it up.

"Now it's not the right time for art," my mom says...

Why can't I just live my life the way I want?

Libuše has recorded her life in diaries and photographs since she was a teenager, producing the kind of evidence of queer lives that is so often unavailable to us in the present. In the early years of the AIDS epidemic, 1983–85, Libuše photographed the clientele of T-Club, where gay men and women gathered in Prague. Libuše's subjects were her friends, recorded as an insider, taken over many months. The photographs are full of joy, drinking, coupling and freedom.

Diaries and photographs are the kind of evidence that can be used against you. Muñoz again: "Historically, evidence of queerness has been used to penalise and discipline queer desires, connections, and acts." Photographs can quickly turn into physical evidence of transgression: Libuše was once asked by the police to show them a roll of film had taken the night the person was murdered, a reason why she stopped taking photographs at T-Club. In light of this, Muñoz argues for suturing queerness to the concept of ephemera, the trace, the remains, "the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumour." This is the real subject of Libuše's photographs – queer knowing, moving and feeling that happens in the club, or in a couple's bedroom, even on your own in the bath, away from the "harsh lights of mainstream visibility and the potential tyranny of the fact." In an interview about

the documentary, *I'm Not Everything I Want to Be* (2024), she recites a Czech saying: "It's always darkest under the light." It's hard to see what is closest to us, even if it is visible to others. What is most hopeful – a queer future, say – has its hidden or negative aspects. In order to live on her own terms, Libuše had to leave Prague, and go to West Berlin, formally in West Germany, in 1985. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, she returned to Prague, where she still lives with her wife.

Libuše's photographs from the T-Club are imbued with wilful collaboration, made with her friends and lovers in the moment. They are ephemeral moments that the camera, when in the hands of an insider, a lover, can enable and transform. We see the remains of queer acts that can happen inside, beyond "the cool look of a street cruise, a lingering hand-shake between recent acquaintances, or the mannish strut of a particularly confident woman." Libuše's camera captures ephemeral performances of queer freedom under a totalitarian regime. The photographs are evidence of queer lives under siege, which must usually keep hidden from the camera's flash to avoid exposure. Libuše turns the camera, a tool of surveillance, into one of resistance and legacy construction, capturing the pleasure and freedom that can be sought out in the underground.

Zuzana's photographs document a social scene under threat from the mainstream, the punk music scene that formed in Ostrava, in the north-east of the Czech Republic, around a street called Spodní – "the bottom". As a community, they lived in buildings in that socially excluded area in return for repairing their apartments. Like Libuše, Zuzana photographed this scene from the inside. Zuzana's photographs are a call to imagination, providing tiny glimpses – a relationship dynamic, a room, a night, an act – of the individual life experiences that brought these subjects together. She produced texts for her bachelor thesis, a 2015 photographic book, which articulate the project as a kind of challenge to the viewer, but also to the kinds of documentary practices that photograph excluded communities, such as Roma people who lived in the area, as other to themselves. "Let's work with them, live alongside them. Let's imagine where they come from, how they are treated, what they pass on in their families, what kind of attention they get from their parents, how they can't get rid of stigmas." Zuzana documented her own community, turning the camera inside rather than using it as a weapon to exclude and objectify.

The photographs Zuzana produced function through accumulation, a mass of alcohol-infused moments of collectivity and kindness as an act of survival. The lives of Zuzana's friends and acquaintances are documented en masse, hanging out, holding their cats, eating, drinking and smoking – sometimes all at the same time – and resting, asleep or passed out. The characteristic blur of the snapshot enhances the spirit of her subjects, who are unserious, anarchic and young. Captured by Zuzana's analogue camera, her subjects live out their everyday lives, holding each other up, sometimes literally. They roll around and hug, relax and laugh, partying in dive bars or the squat buildings, naked with dirty feet and laptops. Sometimes they pose in relaxed groups. Bodies contort and slump. There are so many of them. Each image, like each person, contributes to the whole, like a collective, a social body in flux.

Mark's live-out partner takes him on walks every Sunday afternoon, a beautiful act of care. L and I circle through less than a handful of places to walk at the weekend. The house

is near enough to heath, woods and cemeteries on the edge of the city. These were places I walked with the old dog – the dog who died but who wasn't old. On these walks, I looked up plants and trees I didn't know the names of, and I still do this. Some I gathered and pressed or made dyes with. Some of these places are where I walked with my friend, part of a couple who “bubbled” with me. He would drive all the way from South London and we would get drunk and watch horror movies and then walk the dogs in the woods the next day, the pair of them screaming around after the squirrels, my one often refusing to come back. We worked out how to catch her by standing apart and kind of herding her somewhere enclosed. Eventually, she would run from one of us into the other. The new dog is shy, far more cautious. She runs fast but stays close. The old dog who wasn't old when she died was a symbol of my self-sufficiency and unattachment. She was my dog, but she was also not separate from me, more like an extension. The new dog is our dog, together. What would she be doing if she hadn't met me? Maybe she would have found a better way to spend a Sunday afternoon.

In between working on other pieces, Mark has made small sculptures out of white bread in the studio. White bread is trash food – not nutritionally beneficial, all the fibre removed. Here it is a kind of studio detritus, a miniature architecture made out of a mixture of the materials he uses for sculptures and drawings: adhesive, plastic, beeswax, plaster, graphite and food colouring. (Scientists have been trying to work out how to make a healthier version that still tastes like white bread by adding peas and beans.) The forms are small: pellets rolled up in the fingers, cut-out houses as a child would draw – one with a head or a flower, one with ears – and some more abstract shelters. They somehow represent all the time that is spent producing work, all the breaks when your thoughts are elsewhere. This is studio time, unproductive time, *queer time*.

The house we live in is full of our things and our pets but it's still just a container – not mine or ours, not permanent. At times it feels like a trap – and the only way to stay in this city, which is not Prague or Berlin or Ostrava, but London. It feels as if, at any moment, we will have to pack it all down and leave. So many of us have already left. Where will we go? Possibilities arise in our minds – another city that is cheaper, maybe nearer my mother, or a different edge of this one? – but these too are transitory, lapsing. Home is just an idea, a cut-out. It can be rolled up in the fingers like any other thought.

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