

I could say
I see you
Despite any blue distance
I recognise you with a squint

I could say
I taste you
In pacts and punchlines cooked up between breakfast and dinner
Cross parties, cross orbits, cross mercies

I could say
I hear you
You're preaching to a choir hyper with whimsy
Our unsayable stories are caught in whispers
Shuffled mouth to mouth
Fence sitters and kill joys
Shriek war cries at each other, indulging in racket
I catch you despite it

I could say
I smell you
In the heat and dirt of our world
In lush riots, summers, and practice
In flowers and grass on overgrown paths
Where we once declared ourselves

I could say
I feel you,
I walk around with you, holding our common object
I have a posture that swallows the intimacy of scrutiny
And you cannot disgust me

In bodies of work, weighted against each other
A slippery language
Is passed by hands
Some clasped in frantic risky prayer
Some clasped sweaty beneath the kitchen table
Some clasped to release into a slow clap

I will say,
I am with you

again, and again

Making friends

By Astrid Elouise Bell

The bus is still moving so, stumbling like babies, we lurch to the front. It's a season of hurtling. The world seems to be slipping its rails. The sun is covered by a cloud and I'm thinking of my friends. Bare legs on itchy grass, the sounds we make when greeting each other, kissing cheeks, arms holding bodies or patting backs, long goodbyes, long dances, quiet encouragement, delightful foolishness, restlessness, staying up and sleeping in with the windows open, keeping secrets and gossip, sharing our fatigue¹, filling the sink with dishes, all sorts of overlapping. I think of errand running, spending time together despite our routines. Going the long way back to our houses. The niceness of the unremarkable that springs from the air ordinary days bring. Despite its ubiquity, Friendship seems a curiously underrepresented relationship. It is caught in a productive tension between the individual and the communal. In the contradictions and presumptions of institutionalised life. Amid the ruckus and frustrated shrieks of hard materials in conflict. Among compounding crises, old and new ties of platonic love thread the future with the past. I want to think about what friendship teaches us. How friendship might offer a response to urgent questions regarding communal care, reclamation, and use. At the very least, it is a kind of love that deserves recognition for its potential to push against modes of being presumed and hierarchised by the State.

To take serious something often taken for granted. To follow friendship around, across senses, movements, and borders. I'll narrow my terms. I think of friendship as a verb, a doing word. Friendship isn't a state occupied sentimentally by generative, positive potential. It can keep us at distance in tension, competition, and ambivalence. I've been a bad friend, unable to bear the intimacy of scrutiny or hanging around and allowing the undefined aspects of friendship, its inconsistent vocabularies, to create silences. Friendship can be unrequited, unproductive, and painful. It is risky and demanding. We can maintain it for fear of loneliness or in a misguided loyalty to consistency and comfort. Despite this, it is essential in vulnerabilities, failures, and triumphs, in its troubling traits and benefits. Relationships are hard and friendship doesn't

¹ "Sharing of fatigue" in reference to Tom Melick's reading of fatigue as an under history of labour: "His essay asks what might be found if we think of fatigue as an affective state that protects us, in reclaimed moments or rapturous dissociation, from the incessant demands of work. Can we find each other in such a state, and plan for a more permanent escape?" *A Little History of Fatigue*, 2020, published by Rosa Press.

make them any easier. As Sally Olds writes: “As a model, Friendship does not fix anything, but it begins to unfold sex, love, romance, resources and care from their compression into couples and families.”²

In friendship we are manoeuvring between and through ritualised frameworks for sorting human affection. This leg work can make it more demanding than relationships consummated by sex or facilitated by family. That which we do not intuit or inherit can register as a demand. Because it largely untaught to us, we should take the time to perceive this demand as one for the creative function of difference. In a speech Sara Ahmed made regarding the life and work of Audre Lorde, she says: “Perhaps the very struggle against injustice is what gives us the resources we need to build a more just world. These resources for survival might include a certain willingness to cause trouble, but also humour, love, a certain lightness of spirit, and wit: we lighten our loads as well as our moods when we create spaces to be with each other.”³ I read this and thought of being a friend, of the undisclosed territory outside institutional relations and the maintenance it requires. If our resources for survival are not acknowledged, they can be perceived as surplus. Friendship deserves consideration and celebration. Amid the complex histories that bring us together it is a common miracle. Good friendship is a staunch commitment to understanding others, the self, and the stranger. If we start from this place, far from utopia, both the good and bad form a foundation from which new communal and subjective forms can be imagined. For friendship to be meaningful, disruptive, and constructive, it must begin and remain a volatile in between. Always becoming.

All this uncertainty can make undertaking and maintaining friendships feel radical. An orientation or flinch away from what may sit solid and sturdy in our lives. Though habits of meeting in the margins, are not intuited from nowhere. They express the ability of crises to reveal cracks in our all too efficient systems and structures. The pliability of our alliances, their conditions and limitations are importantly unpredictable, and agile. I am thinking of a photo of construction workers sitting on a steel beam high above the city, eating sandwiches. We are lovers, friends, co-workers, and family forming hybrid structures that keep us above a rising tide. Friendship is scholarly and stupid, silly, and earnest. A slippery endeavour charged with latent power, “conditioned by the chorus, a formation whose beauty resides in remaining ever-

² Sally Olds, *For Discussion and Resolution in People Who Lunch - Essays on Work, Leisure & Loose Living*, 2022, Upswell Publishing

³ Sara Ahmed, *Introduction to Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*, April 14, 2012

incomplete”⁴. Friendship is something we do over and over that teaches us how to live and work. It has a language with logic inscrutable to outsiders. Friendship is an undisclosed annex in the institution which upon visiting can reveal resources for survival and worlds worth inhabiting.

Friendship is a threat. It’s intimacy, tenderness and camaraderie are troubling to the ways of being presumed and hierarchised by the State. Friendship enacts affection that disrupts neat images of intimacy and at their break creates new imaginings. It refuses alignment on the axis of normative, romantic intimacy. In the rooms of political representation, a more ubiquitous yet less tangible relation such as friendship stands no chance. This might be its point. Friendship is a fracture, an opening, a blind spot; one we will always go back to. As Tom Roach says, “*what seems on the surface friendship’s greatest weakness is in fact its greatest strength: Its very irrepresentability points toward a politics beyond representation.*”⁵. The power of friendship, a peripheral and malleable act, lies in practice. It is a communal project gathered out of what is inherited and what is made.

Hand in hand, our fingers never catch a particular object or place to rest on or cling to.

⁴ Andrew Brooks, *Inferno*, 2021, Published by Rosa Press

⁵ Tom Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement*, 2012