

AN EXAMINATION OF PROXIMITY WITHIN ISOLATION

I lie amongst the sheets of my unmade bed. This state of lethargy has been settling for weeks. I am a slug, sliding around in inertia, waiting for new dosages to take effect, for the glaze over my eyes to run clear again. Dotting the walls of my room are taped up images; small, deep windows surrounded by emptiness. Two windows sit adjacent to one another. The first one shows two sleepers, faces centimetres apart, nestled amongst fat white pillows that seep into a luscious blue blanket and background. I cut Laura Owens' painting *Untitled*, 2000, (an appropriation of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Le Lit*, 1892) from a pamphlet I got at the Whitney in New York. Once, asleep on a blow-up mattress on the floor, I mimicked Toulouse-Lautrec and subsequently Owens' image as I slept next to one of three friends in our one-room Crown Heights Air bnb. Jenny Hval sang in *Kingsize* "In New York I don't dream. I always wanted to be less subculturally lonely, but here I see no subculture". Walking the winter streets, headphones in—a stranger in the city that never sleeps, I fall asleep on the subway, at the Natural History Museum and on this mattress that might as well have doubled as a pool floatie—closeness to anything felt so far away. Loneliness in proximity.

The sun is going down, we sit a meter apart in a field. A mosquito lands on my forearm *SMACK* my hand slaps down. It's time to keep walking.

Proximity, like isolation, relates to something's nearness in space, time or relationship. Being physically separated from people feels very intense, very different from willingly choosing to stay home for extended periods of time. It feels very lonely, and very surreal. I have spent plenty of time holed up in my house, but mostly by choice. The last time it wasn't, I had been hit by a car on my bike and couldn't walk for a week. The whole time I was very unwilling to submit to lying down or elevating my leg. As wilful and protective of my own autonomy as I am, I am not above being able to recognise the privilege and hilarity of being childishly mad at the mere thought of a week of immobility. Proximity was the space between where the car hit my bike, and where I landed on the road. It was the distance hobbled between my bed and the kitchen.

A cut is made in the ground, I am pulled out. The wound is only partially sutured back together and occasionally seeps.

There is always proximity between two people, they can never become one. Two bodies are unmergeable — for we are all our own persons, living mostly inside the seclusion of our own heads. Not even in sex do we really become one. Being inside of someone is not being, or knowing someone. When Gaea gave Zeus the prophecy his next son would be born stronger and more wise than him, he swallowed pregnant Metis to prevent his successor's birth. An action his father had similarly taken, having swallowed all of his children prior to Zeus to prevent his own defeat. A raging headache overcame Zeus. In an attempt to cure him, his son Hephaestus takes an axe and splits open his forehead. Athena bursts fully-grown and clad in armour from the chasm of Zeus' brow. Even swallowed whole, bodies in proximity must escape, become separate again.

The second window is a postcard of *Gabrielle d'Estrées et une de ses sœurs*, 1594. Two figures sit in a bath, separate, only coming together through nipple and forefinger. Two bodies connected despite the space in-between. Can closeness be forged in the place where two come together? Even if that small? When you touch my shoulder or elbow reassuringly, what is left in the imprint? Parted like lips, two silky red curtains frame a duplicitous image of birth and fertility, undone by connotations of eroticism and the bond between sisters.

Bodies lingering in contact. What do these collected images of small intimacies say of my own longing?

From across the room, looking the other two windows in the eye, is a large postcard of a still of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio Film*, from 'Five Easy Pieces' 1966-69. Two naked bodies sit with a large party balloon between them. Bum cracks peering out from the bench beneath them. One's arm reaches across the frame as though to touch the other, resting only on the balloon between them. Shot post-surgery, in defiance of her now bedridden body, *Hand Movie*, another short from the 'Five Easy Pieces' compilation, watches Rainer's

hand as fingers expand and caress each other in tender slowness. Rainer's hand moves in protest against the temporary stagnancy of her immobile body. The unmoving body. In forced stillness, fingers become moving bodies, lovingly embracing one another—a nod to the loneliness and longing produced in isolation and immobility. The windows on my wall converse with one another. I watch them. Exchanges of the space in-between.

Bodies were not made to exist alone, they are communal. Like words spoken between people (only in silence), two bodies in contact exchange a lot, primarily solace. When I have walked home with hauls of groceries for the house, I have run into friends I would usually see but have not, an interruption in the rhythm of our usual contact. We talk, walking with whatever today's instructed degree of separation is, keeping this distance between us, and then depart. I always feel significantly better after we've talked. A verbal embrace. In forced seclusion the body is silent and restless. There's nothing like the closeness of another to realise the weight of a space once hollow, now filled.

My pinky toes are bruised from our long walk. I push them together, resurfacing the dull, purple pain — this is as close as I come to retracing our walk through the wallaby grass. Memory as proximity.