

Queer / Nature

(Be Like Water)

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In mind-numbing despair, she killed herself. Friend, kind of my kind — I begin with her body. She is no longer a poet, an artist, a shining star. Here she is evidence of failure: my own failure, and the failure of my community.

What binds life to the earth? What binds each organism to life?

Here where the ocean and mountains meet, the will to live seems relentless. Things survive where they surely cannot. A cedar tree cracks the cliff, growing first straight out, then vertically. Ferns perch where soil is well-nigh impossible. Even the black stain on the rock is alive: an algae film of tiny plants. It feeds the periwinkles that birds feed on.

The birds too are impossible: that they are light enough to fly! What keeps their hollow bones from crumbling? How can a thing so fragile be tough enough?

Between high and low tide there is a community. You can hear it breathe. It even seems to sing: rock, water, and the hundred thousand organisms and micro-organisms that take in and let go as the sea swells and recedes with its certain, complex rhythm.

Like all edges, this place permits diversity. Yet it is a pitiless place. Death is unremarkable here. Or perhaps, despite the astonishing fight for life each individual thing undertakes, living and dying is a matter of indifference in the fabric of this community, where death is life of another kind.

II.

Despite the proliferation of discourses that decipher and celebrate queer identity, we are still jeopardized. We are wounded. We grieve the untimely death of friends.

Three of my friends are lately dead. One died of AIDS. One killed herself. One man was stalked and murdered by a former lover. In each death, and in the sum of these deaths, I feel the violence and hate the world directs at us. And in my grieving I feel it burn like a corrosive poison inside me. The way I feel when I hear that five homosexuals were stoned to death today in Iran, that a gay man and a lesbian were killed by a firebomb in Oregon, that two lovers, fleeing from certain death in Serbia, were shot and died in each others arms. Frightened. Afraid to show my fear. Angry. Empty. Grief-stricken. Afraid to show my

grief. I put it this way, after an Inuit poem: “My entrails are turning into stone.”¹

I live by a river that flows into the sea, and this is the water of life to me. It is my dream and my philosophy. I think homosexuality is like a river. At all times, in all conditions, we persist in our loving. We die; we are murdered. But we continue, despite them. Like water, we have no beginning. We have no end.

III.

Living here, I notice that nature is much queerer than we think. Birds do not come paired, male and female, like in bird books. They come alone, in flocks, in threes, in sevens. They pair off: females; males; male and female. Barnacles are hermaphrodites. The slug, with amazing grace, is born male, has sex with other males, then changes to a female, pregnant with the seed of its male partner.

I come from a culture that says there is an ineluctable heterosexual fact at the core of nature.² It isn't so. No more than all the other, related myths. That nature is innocent, violent, illogical, endangered, female. That man pits himself against it, deciphers it, fashions it to his needs. That nature needs to be preserved.

Consider these stories:

God instructed Noah to make an ark for himself, his sons, his wife and his son's wives, and two of every sort of thing: fowls, cattle, and every creeping thing of the earth, a male and female of each. A great flood came, and all flesh died that moved upon the earth. Only Noah and every thing with him in the ark was saved.

Around here, when the flood came, they didn't worry about the animals. They made a huge canoe, big enough to carry every single child. The adults put the children in the canoe with all the food they had, and said good-bye.

When the waters finally receded the kids wound up at Mount Baker, and they started over in the Fraser Valley with nothing but what they had left in the canoe. When they realized how many animals hadn't survived the flood, some of them elected to change into animals. The world was replenished by them.

We might say that Noah had to preserve nature because he understood it in heterosexual terms. The ark protected his power over the things of the earth; it guaranteed his difference from them. Instead of a relationship between creatures characterized by kinship and transformation, Noah predicates one based on difference and reproduction. We might say, as James Baldwin did, that his God is a “profound and dangerous failure of concept.”³

IV.

We are the mothers of invention. We invent ourselves and each other. We live always-new, like a river. We are mutable, multiple. We go by preference. We borrow. We are capable of transformation. If we have any purpose, it is surely this: to show the element of choice, desire at the heart of all identity (kinship). To pose the challenge of community.

What binds life to the earth? The singing river; the river's song. We are born in a rush of water, and born again in our choosing. To live queer. To fit into a complicated web of lifeforms. To sustain ourselves and each other. And to transform the established patterns, seek new habitats and abandon some, live and thrive where it seems we cannot.

V.

Trees, after all, make air to breathe in. Rains replenish the river. The river nourishes the sea, where light transforms into life, and the food we eat begins. In the face of all the mercy in the world, it seems the least I can do is love you.

VI.

The economy counterposes male and female, black and white, human and nature. But we are everywhere.

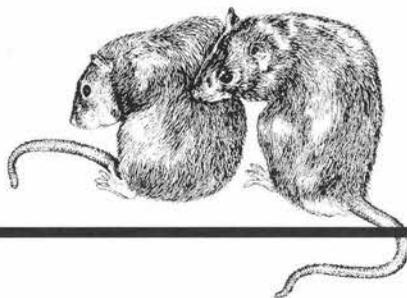
Homosexual oppression might be the matrix of all oppressions. Revealing the preposterous quality of sexual difference, we show the coercion masked by it. And we show the lie inside the heterosexual fact at the core of nature: the one that lends credence to the vilest institutions of humanity, from motherhood to the cutting down of thousand-year-old trees for apple crates.

But we also replicate every oppression inside our parallel communities, the queer planet.

I think queer identity (sameness) cannot be the basis for real community — not one which takes in and lets go, the way we breathe, the way the ocean covers and uncovers the shore. Sameness is invented by way of difference. And what are we so different from, if we have a capacity for turning? Communities of “the same” are structured by rejection of “the other.” It is a poor way to claim a patrimony, and that is all we will ever claim by it.

We have a kinship with all life, like water.

Love invents us. At all times, in all conditions, we persist in our loving. What does not change is this.



VII.

Can there be another kind of queer identity (kinship)? One allied with a choice for mercy? Balance? One invented by James Baldwin's kind of love, in the “tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth”?⁴ Love that is as gracious as a drag queen, fierce as a bulldagger, and just as astonishing as a women-loving-woman, a man-loving-man.

I feel the violence and the hate the world directs at us. I feel it in my bones. It infects our lives and shapes our deaths. But we persist in our loving. So after all, we are not yoked to fear, wed eternally to coercion.⁵

A community that begins in passion, and not difference — where we proclaim our capacities, and not our innocence — might become a community that undoes our distance from the web of life that we are kin to. With love, this is my prayer for us, and for the friends I've said good-bye to:

Be kind.

Be my kind.

Do not end.

Be like water.

Stay close to the ground.

Persist.

Notes

1 “The Song of the Girl Who Was Turning Into Stone.”

2 Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p 27.

3 “The Preservation of Innocence.” *Outlook*. San Francisco, Fall 1989, p.49.

4 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (New York: Dell, 1967, p. 128.)

5 Maya Angelou, “On the Pulse of Morning,” *Guardian Weekly*, January 31, 1993.

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