

One Night with Kelly¹

nicole buzzelli

Hearts have a bottom. Like an ocean, like a well. I've met my bottom in heavy moments when I've found my density. Roped a cinder block to the ankle and sank. Because I'm Italian,⁴ my first instinct is to know what it tastes like. It tastes like homegrown conversations and undersalted metaphors, limoncello to the back of the throat, tambourines clowning their way through Sunday, alchemists turning gold back. It tastes like figs found in empty pockets, bees who sting those with opinion quotas, elm leaves who write fluttering odes on their perilous way down.⁵

The waters of my self exist in layers like an atmosphere flipped over on its head. The top stories of my personality are stacked onto deeper layers of my personhood, all the way down to the most concentrated part of me, the ocean floor. Down there sits my soul—or rather, the bottom of that well *is* my soul. I live a sinking life. If I get right, if I get smart about it, I can spend my whole life spiraling in, swimming down, peddling closer and closer to bottom. It's the strongest desire I've ever felt, to know more and more of who I am. I figure that of all the people alive, I have the best bet of knowing myself the most intimately. If the human condition is infinitely diverse—it's multiplicity spanning the amount of humans that have or are or will ever live on this meandering planet—this is the only one I actually have a fighting chance of knowing in the body, so I should probably commit my hours and madness to studying it.⁶

¹ **Kelly Akemi Yamamoto.**² Here is an image of Kelly I have in my head: She is a goddess with twenty golden, outstretched arms, and she is playing with Legos. To her left is rubble. A Lego structure had collapsed, not from its heaviness, but from its frailness—because whoever had built it had used unconsciousness in the mortar instead of cement. To the right, her golden hands are at work. Her hands build, assemble, arrange, rearrange. She moves quick, but her eyes are open. One eye on the sun and the other on the people. When a piece of her structure falls, her first instinct is to laugh. She looks around and asks, *Who wants to play with me?* What she means: *Who wants to build a new existence?* Another image I have in my head: Kelly is dressed in beige, her hands are on her hips, and she stands on the edge of consciousness, staring out at a sparkling, black sky. She looks around and asks, *Who wants to go with me?* I raise my hand. I met Kelly in college. I lived with her for three years and will be her sister for eternity. She is, as poet Monica Sok put it, “a home for my mind.”³

² Names have a soul. *Kelly* in Japanese means warrior. *Akemi* in Japanese means beautiful. *Yama* in Japanese means mountain. An image of Kelly I have in my head: She is dressed in warrior garb, and she stands at the base of a mountain. She picks up a rock and turns it over in her palm, knows to call it by name.

³ Danez Smith, Franny Choi, and Monica Sok, “Monica Sok vs. Survival,” March 30, 2021, in *The VS Podcast*, produced by Daniel Kisslinger, presented by the Poetry Foundation and Postloudness, podcast, 1:04:25.

⁴ Italian-American. My grandfather emigrated from Italy in 1932.

⁵ The bottom of my heart tastes like Absurdity playing the handbells.

⁶ Knowledge and knowledge in the body are two different things. There is a firm boundary to the knowledge I can have about thunderstorms until my body has experienced one and, then, because my body is not one.

Turn's out, Life's with me on this one. The beautiful thing about Life is that it's made everyone and everything a mirror, and in terms of seeing self, a mirror is much more efficient than just looking down. I see two ways I can look at this. The first assumes my control: If I want to swim down to soul, I can use the practice of relating to others through mirror-work to better know my self and, thus, propel deeper. The second is much more absurd: If my soul's objective is to drag me below, pull me down by the hair, the ankle, whatever limb it can get ahold of, then it can willfully position others like mirrors. It can use relation like a ton of cinder blocks to the chest. Because I value Absurdity, I prefer the second.

Mirror-work is a delicate game. The trick is to get real observant. When I was a kid, I sponged my bedroom walls purple. At night, I would lay on my twin mattress, right ear to the pillow, and stare at the sponged purple wall, finding shapes amongst the chaos, whispering things to their center, and laughing at what they'd whisper back. Observant like that.

The Law of Sponged Purple Walls goes that they can only reflect back shapes that already exist in me.⁷ Observing, however, is not mirror-work. Mirror-work is the engagement. I find a shape on the wall and hunt for it inside my psyche. I ask a question and answer honestly. I connect a dot and draw a line. The last step, arguably the most important one, is to drop all the nonsense—remember that I am no wall. I will never know that condition, but I don't need to. I have my own.⁹ Sponged Purple Wall, neither of our natures can be shoved inside a shape. All my others, You and I are strange and wonderful. No mirror can capture our wholeness; no image can render our light.¹⁰

So mirror-work is to make a metaphor, and then remember that it isn't real.¹¹

⁷ In an Instagram post I saw recently, actor and artist Riz Ahmed wrote, *2) The only reason acting is even possible is because inside each of us, is all of us.*⁸

⁸ Riz Ahmed (@rizahmed), "Highlights from our talk with @deadline about making Sound of Metal 1) You can either have vulnerability or control, you can't have both 2)...", Instagram, April 16, 2021.

⁹ The boundary to what knowledge I can know about any body of matter's condition begins and ends with my body, its conditions, and its experiences. Any knowledge I can ever know about an other is not embodied, and therefore, not actually mine. I don't need to know an embodied condition, though, in order to know that there's wholeness housed inside of it.

¹⁰ Mirrors are like moons, reflecting the light of something they are not. It makes me think of the 1929 oil painting, *The Treachery of Images*, by Belgian surrealist painter, René Magritte. The painting shows the image of a pipe and beneath it reads, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." *This is not a pipe*. Don't forget: the pipe is not the painting, and we are each a sun.

¹¹ Mirror-work has *others*. There's window-work, but I don't like it much. Window-work is when I look out at an other. But the thing about windows is that I can still see my reflection in them. I project myself onto an image of who the other is. I don't like it when people do window-work with me, and I also feel it is wildly ineffective in either experiencing the self or the other. I'm learning, though, that it plays a role in my reality, and I can study that role real well. On the whole, I prefer rain-work, experiencing an other like rain. One way that I do rain-work is to ask a bunch of questions and then put the answers on my tongue. I haven't figured out how to take myself out of an experience entirely (as of now, I'm stuck with me, and maybe I'll always be), but I can let that other soak into my cells like water, wash over my senses like music, run through my body like river. I can immerse myself in the wetness of their rain. Rain-work feels good, and I think it is equally important to knowing soul.

Mirror-work: I stare at chipped tiled floors, and the chipped tiles inside of me stare back. I read about new suns spotted by satellites, and I find the cosmos popping open inside my chest. I stare at a fish in its tank, and I feel the desperate salmon flopping madly in my belly. And here is where the honesty comes in: Sometimes I stare at a fish in its tank, and I feel my edges become glass. I realize that I am the tank, killing the wildness of the fish trapped inside of me. Either way, the condition of an other teaches me a condition in myself. Either way, I get the hammer.¹²

Because of a myriad of factors, mirror-work with other humans can get very convoluted. Sometimes there's too much feeling floating around in the air or too much light to see anything or not enough. If I'm willing to wait with it, though, the dust always settles. Most of the time, the angle is positioned to see a particular sliver of self. Sometimes in those mirrors, I see the faces of ten thousand others. Sometimes in those mirrors, I see savannahs of empty space.¹³ Occasionally, though, very occasionally, the conditions and angle of mirror are just right to look out across at an other and find that I'm staring dead-straight back at myself.

One night, I sat across from Kelly, each of us on either side of an ash-gray couch. The sky outside, night. The sounds of the city, busy. Books sprawled out on the coffee table. Cups of tea balancing on knees. Hours of brewing conversation. We talked about joy and freedom and change and dreams and soul, and as we talked, I saw an image forming in my mind, building piece by piece. I recognized its density immediately.

Hello there, bottom.

I felt my body sink into the couch, all my ounces soaking in the experience of seeing an image from my soul. The image lingered as Kelly and I talked, and as the night wore on, it unfolded itself for me like origami bending backwards, like a stack of cards carefully fanning itself out. The desire to swim in that image clawed its way into my gut. I wanted to be with it and be with it in the presence of somebody else.

At some point in my life I had come to believe that desiring to know myself was selfish and that the nature of selfishness was to be at odds with others. But that night with Kelly, I did not feel at odds. I felt at home. I felt as if we were braced on our toes in a carefully improvised dance with consciousness, each self poking at truths in the other. Somehow, selfishness had done a backbend into relation, a self to a self, a soul to a soul. The experience of both bearing witness and being witnessed felt cavernous. I have no metaphor.

Instead, I have some math. The presence of a desire to know myself did not mean the absence of a desire to know her. The relationship wasn't binary, one-dimensional, one-or-the-other. It wasn't even two-dimensional, a spectrum in which being more in one

¹² One of the ways I know my body in its whiteness is to know that I was born into a condition of being a tank.

¹³ If I decide to think like an artist, I can also think about negative space. Think of the body as an embossment. Think about what it was carved from and the shavings that were stripped in the carving. Look in a mirror and see all the things there and not there. I can also think of the body like an installation, interacting with its environment and its environment interacting back. When I think of the body in this way, boundaries of self begin to lose their sense.

direction meant being less in the other. The relationship was of another dimension entirely. It was more like the relationship between mass and gravity: the more I wanted to know myself, the more I wanted to know her. Another way to say it: selfishness and selflessness are positively correlated. The more self I have, the less I have, too.¹⁴

Which brings me back to soul. I'm currently sifting my way through Bill Plotkin's book, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and the Psyche*. In it, he tangibly defines *soul* and *spirit*:

The concept of soul embraces the essence of our particular individuality. This individuality reflects our unique and deepest personal characteristics, the core and enduring qualities that define our personhood, the true self, the "real me." Soul is what is most wild and natural within us.

In contrast to soul, the concept of spirit points to what all people, all things, have in common, our shared membership in a single cosmos, each of us a facet of the One Being that contains all.¹⁵

I love definitions; they are a structure to play in. But the trick to them is to not be fooled by separateness. The real relationship between soul and spirit is twisted and tangled and twined. A desire to know my soul is a desire for all souls to be rightly known in the collective name of spirit.¹⁶ The relationship between individual and the collective, then, is like mass and gravity. Reverence of the individual, including the one I am, cultivates and nourishes reverence of the collective. This is a truth I hold: to revere the mountain, you must revere each rock.

Soul is granular, and mirror-work is in reverence of the grain. Recently, I read *Conversations* by Ai Weiwei, a book that acts like a transcript of several conversations Ai Weiwei has had about his life and work in the wake of his 2017 exhibition in New York, *Good*

¹⁴ The suffix -ish (as in *selfish*) means to have the qualities of something. The suffix -less (as in *selfless*) means to be without. To experience having the qualities of being an individual self expands my experience of being without one. I am both whole and fraction of whole.

¹⁵ Bill Plotkin, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and the Psyche* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2003), 25. Bill Plotkin is a depth psychologist, ecotherapist, and wilderness guide.

¹⁶ To know a soul rightly is to be in right relationship with it and all things. I see right relationship as being in an orientation that faces the direction and makes decisions that are in favor of Life for all Life. This is in opposition to the other side of the directional spectrum that faces Death of any Life.¹⁷

¹⁷ The true relationship of Life and Death is multi-dimensional, not binary or spectrum. There is Life in Death and Death in Life. That being said, I believe the first two dimensions can be used as tools, as long as they are not mistaken for singular truths. Thinking about Life and Death as on two sides of a spectrum is useful in my understanding of an abstract concept like right relationship within the confines of my embodied experience, which heavily relies on the first two dimensions to make things concrete for my brain. Facing and walking towards Life is right relationship. Facing and walking towards Death is not. Sometimes making things uncomplicated tells my eyes where to look, my feet where to walk, and my hands where to work.

Fences Make Good Neighbors, and documentary, *Human Flow*, both of which focus on the global refugee crisis and put human faces to some of the millions and millions of displaced people around the world.¹⁸ His 2017 *Laundromat* project in a gallery in New York worked my gut like a wrench. Featured in the exhibit were the clothes and shoes and blankets that were left behind by the refugees forced to evacuate the Idomeni refugee camp in Greece. Each item of clothing was individually washed, dried, and ironed. They were hung around the gallery, sorted and placed as consciously as each cell is in the body. The project was a heavy-footed stance of care for these people who were discarded by systems that don't operate under the fundamental tenet of human dignity. The project was a stubborn reverence of soul hanging up on display.

And, again. In 2008, the Sichuan Earthquake killed tens and tens of thousands of people, and it was clear the Chinese government was not going to discuss the number or nature of deaths. In Wenchuan, 1,700 students went missing under the rubble of their high school. Ai Weiwei organized a citizen's investigation to find the names of the students who had lost their Lives. One of the works that came from this investigation was an installation, *Straight*, made from the rebars of the collapsed school. Of the installation, Weiwei said:

This is a really sad story. After almost two years, I located those rebars from the quake. They were all these broken rebars, all very twisted. The local people were reselling the rebars; they would break down the concrete and take them out. The rebars were made of metal, so you could make a few hundred dollars a ton. By that time, my name was already very sensitive, so I had to use people from my studio to buy all that rebar. We just paid more to the local people for the rebars, took them to Beijing, and started to straighten them out one by one. It takes about two hundred hammer strokes to straighten one rebar, and there were about 150 tons of rebar to work on. After two years, they were all straightened. It's a form, so it doesn't really need that much creativity, and it bears a lot of meaning and struggle. It has strength in itself.²⁰

¹⁸ An introduction of Ai Weiwei made by Alexandra Munroe in *Conversations*:

We know Weiwei as the world's most famous artist and activist. He is also a curator of some of the most influential shows in the history of Chinese art; an architect of an entire art neighborhood in eastern Beijing; the first artist possibly anywhere in the world to see the internet as a space of free mobilization, as a forum for free expression—especially in China, where such mobilization and constellation convening of a forum were unprecedented in modern Chinese history. When Evan Osnos asked him why he spent eight hours a day blogging and on Twitter, before the Chinese government shut down his blog in 2009, Weiwei responded, "It's no different than making art. My stance in life is my art." Robert Bergold some years later asked him what advice he had for young artists; Weiwei responded, "Forget the art. Fight for freedom."¹⁹

¹⁹ Ai Weiwei, *Conversations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 3.

²⁰ Ai Weiwei, *Conversations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 80-81.

The art was not the rebars; the art wasn't even the installation.²¹ The art was the stance, the stubborn reverence offered to the students' souls. There's not enough hammers in the world to straighten out that kind of loss. But to have buried souls willfully unacknowledged is another kind of violence, compounded onto firsts.²²

Another way to say it: When a soul is not revered as the Life it is, humanity moves closer to Death. When any soul is valued more than another, the collective becomes polluted. Supremacy is an oil spill in the oceans of humanity, in the oceans of this planet, and in the oceans of soul. The systems in power made of human creation seep tar.²³ They walk towards Death—Death of Wild Life, Death of Feminine Life, Death of Black Life, Brown Life, Muslim Life, Sikh Life, Poor Life, Asian Life, Indigenous Life, Displaced Life, Gay Life, Trans Life, Queer Life, Young Life, Elder Life, and all the embodied expressions of Life, beautiful and infinitely diverse, that are being violently pushed to the margins by these systems that carve protected space for existence only for supremacy's select few.²⁴ If supremacy is an oil spill, humanity needs filtration. As freedom worker Dr. Jaiya John says it, supremacy-inferiority is a virus.²⁶ If supremacy is a virus, humanity needs herd immunity.

But the thing about oil is that it floats. It cannot reach my bottom. I find the maritime boundaries; within mine, I swim down.²⁷ Sinking feels different in my body than I thought it would. I feel denser. My self drips heavier, more Life is pulled into my orbit. As I sink, I amass

²¹ At best, the installation was a mirror.

²² Firsts like not building high school structures with care, humanity, and precision.

²³ Male humans, white humans, humans of European descent. Colonialism and capitalism are oil with the singular objective to consume Life.

²⁴ Supremacy kills more embodied Life than I can name. As I write this, I feel angry and resistant. It is so sad. It is so shameful. I want to live in a world where the pollution of supremacy does not need to be explained because it is inherently understood; a world where the value of any Life does not need to be proven; a world where a body's right to live does not need to be made explicit; a world where accountability is defined as systems and individuals being held accountable *to* those who have been harmed; a world where much of what is called privilege is understood in the framework of rights that were stolen; a world where a person's Life can be spent swimming down to soul without them having to expend the energy on fighting for the freedom to do so; a world in which supremacy is not a normalized condition infiltrating communal spaces and individual bodies; a world where oppression does not strip communities and individuals of their choices; a world where Life and bodies are free. Fuck supremacy.²⁵

²⁵ Fuck Supremacy (A Haiku)

Fuck supremacy

Stop fucking killing people

Why is that so hard?

²⁶ Jaiya John, *Freedom: Medicine Words For Your Brave Revolution*, (Camarillo, California: Soul Water Rising, 2020). Dr. Jaiya John is a freedom worker, author, and poet. He is the author of numerous books, and the founder of Soul Water Rising, a global rehumanizing mission supporting the healing and wholeness of vulnerable populations.

²⁷ Another way I know my body in its whiteness is to examine my relationship with boundaries and my relationship with center—with who or what should be in center and who or what should be in footnote.

more grief, and my body's capacity to feel it expands. I won't look away—the ground is seeping with blood; the earth cries; violence is fed to the children.

I am amassing more joy, too. This is a truth from Kelly: Life is meant to feel good in the body.²⁸ There is reverence in enjoying the senses, in putting every truth on the tongue, in flipping over the pillow of consciousness and burrowing my face into the cool unfamiliarity of its backside. There is pleasure in watching Absurdity make a muck of my serious claims. The poets, for instance, refuse to surrender their antics; the birds can make songs out of anything; the seventh graders have it all figured out; the trees give advice to their seedlings; the flowers have mastered the swing dance; the sun continues to peacock its sunrise whether I wake up to see it or not.

In the end, a mirror is only good for so much. It is just an image; it is not the pipe. Soul, drag me down. By any means necessary, drag me down. Kelly and all my others, what's your ocean floor like? I want to know from the bottom of my heart.²⁹

²⁸ She would also probably say, *Enough with all the cinder blocks. Dance down, instead.*

²⁹ A truth to remember in murky waters: each rock belongs to the mountain. When I forget, repeat: *Humanity is my home. Humanity is my home.*

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