2/15/2021

Lotus Joy

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It’s been a dark year. What was once just a temporary glitch in the normalcy of our lives quickly turned into countless holidays spent alone, piles of takeout boxes, and then a televised civil war. And even as the rigidness of the world begins to thaw and we began peeking out of whatever caves we’ve been stuck in, I think it’s important to acknowledge the trails we’ve been through.

I think back to Thanksgiving. I didn’t expect to be spending the day in the city but with the Virus not slowing down in the nation, like many people, I was encouraged to bunker down in the place where I was and avoid travel.

I also didn’t expect myself to follow through with the alternative pandemic-friendly holiday plans I made with my friend Jamar and two friends who live close by. My bed and binging television seemed like good enough alternative plans, but alas I woke up Thanksgiving day and knew I couldn’t bail, especially since all I promised to bring was Stove Top Stuffing and a bottle of wine. To bail would be lazy. And I, a lazy person, refuse to let anyone else clock me for it.

I also didn’t expect my stuffing to taste that good. But damn I should have made a whole box just for myself.

I was the last to arrive to Jamar’s, his friends Chelsea and Mariah already bustling around the small studio apartment trying to find place for full pots and wine glasses.

Chelsea, looking both pristine and so cool wore a turtleneck and long black skirt. Mariah, with her hair wrapped and septum piercing stood short and welcoming. Both women, a few years older than I, had something that I wanted. I could feel it when I walked in. I admired something about them instantly, like I did with many black people around this time.

There were not many black people where I am from, a downside of small town Midwest living. But that past summer, I saw more black people than I ever had, both physically and virtually. It was a summer of rage. Of tear-gas and broken bones. Of “misplaced” bullets and of death.

But again and again, I saw brothers and sisters walking through the proverbial bombs of smoke and demanding more. I looked up to it. I wanted to be a part of whatever this tribe was. I looked up these people that radiate unapology.

I think of the 19th century African-American painter Robert S. Duncanson. Duncanson, who is now known in America as the greatest landscape painter in the West, was nearly forgotten. It wasn’t until the 1950s or 60s, almost a century after he died that Duncanson began to be recognized.

His work has this nostalgic warmness to it that invites viewers into whatever landscape of trees or rivers or mountains he’s depicted. In his piece *Land of the Lotus Eaters (1861) Duncanson uses this celestial gold color to brush together a lavish landscape.* As described by Princeton art historian, Anna Arabindan-Kesson a New World depiction of a scene from Homer’s *Odyssey,* tying together themes of anti-slavery and perserverance in forbidding time*s.*

In the painting, two groups of people stand on either side of a streaming river, both groups of figures small and shadowed. In what seems to be a scene of an escape plan or secret rendezvous taking place, two figures stumble across the river to a boat where the other group waits.

I think about these two figures, a lot. Running and flinging themselves through heavy water. How it must have felt like hours trudging through an evergoing current. What that feeling must be like, to suddenly be stuck somewhere between a haunting past and a beckoning future. Asking myself, *would it bad to sit here for a moment and enjoy this water?*

When the food was ready, Chelsea told Jamar to give a toast before we ate.

“Thank you guys for coming. I know we all didn’t expect anything that has happened this year to happen, but I’m honestly so glad that right now, I get to be with ya’ll. This is to us...us four black amazing young people. Happy black ass Thanksgiving. Cheers.''

We clinked our glasses of cheap peach wine and for the next few hours we bonded over drunken stories about drunken nights.. Jamar and I were partners in Spades even though neither of us had played before. Mariah had her tarot read for the first time that night. “I don’t do that witch stuff. I’m Christian.” She did it anyway. I asked Jamar to read mine, to tell me about my love life. It didn’t sound too good. I didn’t care.

For just that night, I remembered what it was like to be joyous. To be somewhere between distraction and reality. In a river that didn’t push back, that let us all drench ourselves in the simple glory of being alive. I could live here.

Or maybe I couldn’t, and that’s why I wanted to so badly.

Chelsea told us how it was her brother's first day out of jail. “Thanksgiving of all days. I just wish I could drink with my dog today.” And while it was a feeling I could relate to, I knew that it was also something I could not. I’ve never had a close friend or family member go through prison, an ever too normal experience for black people in the United States. And just like that, I was snapped back to the nuance of reality. All of our blacknesses were intersecting in this tiny studio apartment, in all of its beauty and tragedy. Whatever diaspora and technicalities had led us astray and back together couldn’t be coincidental, right?

To understand Black Joy, you have to understand its proximity to death. Physical death, financial death, citizenly death, etc. The myriad amount of ways black people are outliered among society. Yet like tribal heirloom, the Joy finds itself passed down.

Chelsea decided to video call with her brother. Over her android, she said hi to each of her family members one by one as we sat and listened, the fulfillment of this day leaving us brimmed and

“How was your dinner?” her brother asked when the phone got to him.

“Oh it was good! You know, we having a black ass thanksgiving, still staying with my people.”

My people, she said. Her words reaching out and pulling me ashore.

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<https://annaarabindankesson.com/news/2018/12/24/robert-s-duncansons-land-of-the-lotus-eaters-1861>