

3/18/2021

## Lotus Joy

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It's been a dark year. What was at first just a temporary glitch in the normalcy of our lives quickly turned into countless piles of takeout bags and holidays spent alone, and then even somewhat of a televised civil war. It's been a year. And even as frozen rivers begin to flow again, the rigidity of the world beginning to thaw and us, survivors, begin peeking out of whatever caves we've been hiding in, I believe it's important to remember the waters we've had to wade through to make it here.

I think back to Thanksgiving. I didn't expect to be spending the day in the city. Like many, I planned on making the trek back to my hometown, but with the Virus not showing any signs of stopping its roll, we would spend the coming holiday in whatever spot we were.

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 bingeing 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.

Even though as a teenager I had dreamed of escaping my hometown and never returning, there's now a sense of pride I take in the traditionality of journeying back. In a sense, I think because it's a visual reminder of how far I personally have come since moving away. For a more tangible visual, I think of Robert S. Duncanson's, *Land of the Lotus Eaters (1861)*.

Duncanson was a 19th century African-American painter and was (because of blackness) nearly-forgotten. Now he's known in America as the greatest landscape painter in the West. His work has this nostalgic warmth to it that invites viewers into whatever landscape of trees or rivers or mountains he's depicted.

In his painting *Land of the Lotus Eaters (1861)* Duncanson uses this celestial gold color to brush together a lavish scenery of sky and jungle, with shadows and highlights adding drama across the piece. In the work, 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?*

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 chic, wore a turtleneck and long black skirt. As she fluttered around the house with dishes in both hands, she did so naturally as if everything came easy to her. Mariah, with her hair wrapped and septum piercing stood short and welcoming. She told me about her architecture studies and we bonded over roommate horror stories. Both women, a few years older than I, had something that I wanted. I could feel it the instant I walked in. I admired something about them instantly, like I did with many black people around this time.

After moving to Chicago this past summer, a city whose segregated past is still obvious in the way the city is run, 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" police bullets and of black death.

But again and again, I saw brothers and sisters walking through the proverbial waters and bombs of smoke, demanding more. I looked up to it. I wanted to be a part of whatever this tribe was. A tribe that tended to each other's wounds and fed each other and found ways to carry on.

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? Like a river, we always find ourselves threaded to the ocean.

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, pushed to the perimeters of life and drowned. 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 aboard.

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