

The Importance of the Orgy

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Theresa Muller Winner in Nonfiction

“The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.”

- Audre Lorde

I, like many of us as of recent, have been made small and trembling in the face of my own lonely. My studio apartment has grown so large I feel abandoned inside it. I make chicken for one. I fold my sheets neatly. I walk the distance from the bed to the bathroom, and pace like that for a while.

I’ve FaceTimed three friends who are off tending to their own loneliness. All of them are gay. Jacob who teaches pilates and huffs poppers like they’re daisies, says he’s feeling “touch starved.” Jacob who made me cry in his apartment on 54th st. in Hell’s Kitchen by showing me the “ecstasy pose” in Graham technique, then fucking me on the wood floor until I sobbed for twenty minutes because I hadn’t felt another man in so long.

E has been watching a lot of weird porn.

“Like seriously I didn’t even know that much could fit!”

Mostly because he always watches weird porn, but now he has even more time, and no one to take him away from it. I remember I stayed with him in Korea Town and he wouldn’t even look at me. His eyes glued to a muscular man piercing himself with a guitar string. It wasn’t till I put the plate of chicken thighs, freshly fried, and potatoes with the white gravy right in front of him, that he looked up at me and smiled.

Bryce has been doing a lot of at-home gym routines. Push ups, then sit ups, then v ups, then down dogs, then vinyasa yoga with his trainer on FaceTime, then two teas no caffeine and 30 minutes of “The Daily” on his Apple TV. He says he’s gonna be ready when Fire Island opens back up. He’s annoyingly put together, and also very sweet. When I got arrested in Brooklyn for being at a protest he picked me up from the station and gave me a bath at his place while I shook silently, because all the transportation in the city had been shut down, because it was raining and “the water here can make you sick”, because I was alone and I didn’t know anyone.

All of these men I miss. I’ve pretended quietly that it’s one of their arms and not mine holding me while the sun goes down again though I swore I just woke up.

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We all met at an orgy. I won’t say where or when, or who did what to whom. Only that these are the people who are helping me survive. It makes sense. Because we’ve done it before. We’ve seen the only thing we own in its entirety: the body. And faced with that object, the trembling block of all we’ve got, we decided to bring each other joy. We are practiced in giving each other mercy. In saving ourselves for a little bit.

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The importance of the body is that it is the only thing we know. Our clothes, our homes, our relationships, even the laws which rule our society will collapse. We are being faced with in this moment the frightening fact of the fragility of our material and immaterial possessions. The national anxiety is a deeply historical one, wherein we are asking ourselves if the imaginary borders we've all decided to believe in can actually hold. Like clockwork, some catastrophe arrives with a deep resounding no. It is no wonder that my generation is turning with great fervor into digital geographies which give us the simultaneous archival illusion of permanence, and the face past whirl of ephemerality.

But the body, the body is our only permanence. It is our beginning and our ending. When the body is gone so are we. We believe that we understand deeply this contraption into which our soul was poured, its bone and hinges. We might briefly believe that great lie that all the miracles of being in a body have been uncovered.

But in the location of the erotic landscape, we encounter so powerfully the vastness of our unknowing. When the music shakes your cells loose, and your choice of intoxication jellies what you once thought were sturdy bones, when in the throws of pleasure you find yourself at the edge of some enormous cliff which you did not know exists-- when encountering these moments, you realize that the very thing which you believed to be you only familiar object of permanence, is in fact your greatest source of mystery.

This is not a trivial realization. Because if the only thing you thought you knew becomes unknown to you, this means then, that everything has the potential to be so dramatically unmade.

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There is a deeply social and political consequence to the orgy. This slew of limb and lubricant is a micropolitical laboratory. A good orgy has all the elements of a democratic experiment. There is a people. And there are rules which they will follow for the betterment of each other. There is a process of deciding what we want and what we don't want. The difference is, at the orgy, we place value on the individual. This is not a system that blindly and obediently obeys only those desires of whichever group crosses the 50%. It's the very fact that each individual is having a unique pleasurable experience with their interests in mind that makes the space so valuable.

There are obviously conflicts and disagreements, but in the messy place of the sensorium, we are willing to deal, messily, with the ever changing conditions of our pleasure. We negotiate our terms of interaction to be as favorable as possible for everyone. We have an obligation to the pleasure of our neighbor and the pleasure of ourselves, and where those places conflict we don't override one, we imagine new possibilities.

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In my home state of Texas, it's been decided that, without research or grounds, without the approval of medical professionals, anyone who does not want to wear a mask will not have to.

I worry for my grandmother who has been having bouts of asthma. My diabetic grandfather who now needs a ventilator. I worry for my sister who is adamant on going to the bars.

We've decided politically that our personal comforts are more important than the lives of those we find dismissable. We've decided the consequence for inconveniencing us is death.

My friend Tam is famous for taking his pants off at The Eagle after his long nursing shifts. Montrose is a historically gay distric in Houston, and it's not far from the medical distric. Lots of gay nurses can be seen taking shots still in their scrubs. We haven't seen him in months after he got transferred to the COVID unit. Not that we're going to the bars either. But sometimes the girls and I will do a distance picnic at the park. He says he couldn't forgive himself if he got us sick.

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I haven't had sex in months, and I don't plan to. Not right now. But I imagine we would all be better off if the general public had been to a proper sex party.

What would our situation be at this moment, if we cared for the pleasure of our neighbor. If we were willing to listen to what it is they need to feel safe and joyous, and to reach a point of compromise.

We would approach, I believe, a place of the unknown. We would have to reorient ourselves to a system of care which is immediately beyond the American imagination. The nuclear family is in a state of apocalypse, each householding fending for itself. I worry we've made enemies of each other seeking to hold on to what we know, seeking to keep some semblance of the familiar.

At the party, this gathering of the masses has decided to establish momentarily a social order wherein all law, all social code is oriented in the direction of pleasure. We have an obligation in this place to tend to and achieve our highest possibility of pleasure both individually and collectively. And in the code of pleasure we have to enter with the assumption of the unknown. We do not know what brings the room pleasure, we do not even know what will bring us pleasure, we look at the array of possibilities in the room and we invite the opportunity to be surprised by our own bodies.

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