

May It Always Be Legendary

~~~~ bart fitzgerald



I.

Santal 33. Boonk. A libation awaits—whether prepared, or freshly colliding due to the presence of its necessary ingredients—Hennessy and sticky-sweet pineapple juice *to chase*. Olfactory invitations usher the patron into the atmosphere before any salutation is uttered. These collisions suffice as greetings, as language may never be offered, may never be necessary. Conclaves transpire on wooden tables, benches, chairs, and stools. Their wooden slats are not frightened by the musings of meteorologists; their occupants are equally unbothered. Through unencumbered discussion the finest argumentation develops, ripened by these conditions. Some meet weekly, at a standing time. Dinner, two drinks, smoke break, then out before it gets too late. Others only arrive after midnight: six drinks while smoking, hosting the after-hours, as our celebration grows uninterrupted. These separate parties are equally regal, yet may never encounter one another. To hear their two perspectives, one might believe they were never in the same place at all. *The range of experiences is the nature of our gathering.*

For many, the gathering is already part two of an evening caper—the chosen occasion for a post-lecture cocktail, or the first public appearance after a rendezvous—as *this is the only place we can be seen together*. Many are itinerant. Whether they roam to and from the city, or simply the celebration, I do not know. But the space persists for their return. There is no written dress code, but expectations are implied. What is garish is frowned upon—the absolute finest is expected. Discretion is our organizing principle. Intentional guests do not seek the raucous praise

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of applause, but quiet affirmation. *You are seen and honored, we take notice of your engagement.* There is a slow and dedicated attention to image. Branding is minimal. Here at the gathering we imagine that the last has become the first, the finest. Our leaders do not emerge from among those who stratify, but those who seek stratification are also welcome. (They gain respite from their strivings in our queer alternative artwork.) The lowly labor more for the stratifiers than they could ever imagine, and that they will ever repay through their corporate giving campaigns. To this point, collaborations unimagined are the norm. We gather from a wide variety of backgrounds. There are no rules. This absence does not create lawlessness. We learn our needs and limits. We teach. We grow and critique growth.

Cigarette Smoke,  
Menthols. Motorcycle Exhaust. Sweat.  
Uninhibited by borders, the gathering  
rejects the concept of private prop-  
erty—every awning, stoop, driveway,  
and doorway in a two-block radius  
becomes a satellite of our celebration.  
Crowds splinter into more intimate  
whispers: taking a break, striding a  
walk, calling in sick, reassuring a lover.  
We may not make it home tonight.  
We have not yet made it inside.



## II.

24 November, 2014. A St. Louis County Grand Jury determines that Officer Darren Wilson did not break the law when he murdered Mike Brown. Mike will never reach the age required to join us inside. I watch from a bitter bed, while the streets around the nation revolt. I join my city, occupying spaces of injustice, lying in the streets, breaking off into smaller groups. We incite riots. We interrupt the flow of traffic. *Black Lives Matter!* we scream, hoarse and exhausted. We must continue to gather. We are deathly aware of the world around us. Each gathering need not be the same. There is more to protest. *Our protests are not the measure of our experiences.*

I begin to organize a brunch. Is it frivolous and decadent to plan a feast while the world is burning? I am not alone in my desire for decadence. Our aesthetic indulgence is not the culprit of our decline—*the world has failed us.* We demand to fashion our own responses. Just a few days after Christmas things will be arduous, and we'll need this celebration more than we know. Brunch will feature books for radicalizing and revelation wrapped in bows and ties, and chocolate bars, wrapped in fine paper monogrammed with our initials. I don't know who all will show up, it's a holiday, and folks have their own traditions. Maybe no one comes. It is, of course, Sunday Morning—people will be enjoying their last Sunday of the year in church. Nevertheless, an invitation is released. I plaster it over internet walls and the inboxes of my beloveds.



Sunday evening is R&B Night at a local watering hole. After church is out, we gather on Broadway, resplendent in shirt and tie, yet still hidden in plain sight. We review our experiences with the divine and express, lyrically, our desire for romantic love. We confess while drinking. The watering hole is too mellow for downing shots, but we engage in



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speed-sipping, and we elevate properly. Often we are the only party there. The hole becomes another gathering space where we can choose to hide, or be seen together. As glasses clink and the music soars, somewhere in between being “weak in the knees” and begging the question “How did you get here?” I find the opportunity to get the deejay’s attention. I compliment his work and ask if he’d be available on the day of the brunch. He’s willing to come, if I do him a favor.

#### IV.

There is no conviction. Here, is the most conviction. We are sure of our need for one another. The invitation is simple. Who has been the most discussed person that week, for fame or for infamy? Where are they hiding on any given day? This is the mood. There are artists, models, writers, professors, culture workers, curators, advertising executives, and those with more complex occupations. Whether to excite their mundane lives or match the lively pace of their quotidian days, the celebration is a welcome diversion and cure. One person’s escape is another’s every day. The beauty of the gathering is captured in images, but the lives they represent are rarely handled with care and concern. I place black bars on the eyes of the weekly icons; this aesthetic intervention slows the process of their circulation. Who am I seeing? What can I depend on without eyes? If it’s worth believing that the eyes are the windows to the soul, the visual asks: *If we refuse the window—not only refuse to open it, but black it out completely—do we become soulless? Are our souls protected from the eyes we are forced to endure?*

From a secluded huddle, a fight breaks out. A mason jar flies, it bounces on the asphalt, reluctant to break. There are cheers, overseers, comments of praise and disgust. They all contribute to the energy of the scuffle, with glances and guffaws. The outdoors collides with the interior. The entanglement ignites censure, provoking reinforcement from the one-man-show that security performs. *The police are always already here*—there is rarely a need to invite them to seek what they’re already looking for. The fight calms. The celebration continues. At the core of our community, we are siblings, cousins, play-cousins, schoolmates from elementary...Our wrestling is different. If we are not siblings, we share one. We are tied to one another in deeper ways, in a place that proclaims we aren’t here.

#### IV.

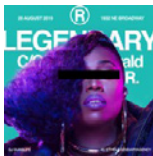
Brut. Maple. Holly. Brunch goes off without a hitch, save the kitchen’s lag in keeping up with our needs: eggs, extra hollandaise, bacon (fried hard), and the delicious avocado chutney that accompanies the crispy chicken benedict. It is a floodgate, a sign—the community is ripe for gathering. The people need a party. There are six months between the brunch, and the invitation to the first celebration of the season. I insert myself into nightlife culture, make proper introductions, make friends, pay my dues. Folks might already know me from here or there, so there isn’t too much work to do, but I have an impulse to show honor and learn the landscape. After wrapping up my workday at Powell’s Books, I make casual appearances at weekly functions in the city. Powell’s closed at eleven then, a perfect time to arrive at a nightclub, unassuming, sporting attire too cool for the coffee shop, but absolutely perfect for the club.





I chat up the bartender, discuss the most obscure liqueur on the shelf. It turns out they've been working on something to feature it, but they're unsure if it will go over well. Would you like to taste it? We are now old friends. The gathering is taking shape. The deejay is running things, his responsibilities keep him busy. To establish a genuine rapport, I find him during a smoke break, compliment the work I enjoy, follow his nights, learn how he gigs, see if collaboration is possible. A network begins to emerge.

Six months are winding down, and we must make choices. What does our queer space mean now, after so much has changed? What does our queerness look like? To create a space of respite, I labor. Who am I designing it for? My presence and intentions are the only conditions I can control. I might shape the music's direction, but I do not run Serato. I can speak to the bartender's behavior, but I cannot control his moods. I am not furniture, but I do know how to take up more space than I need, to ensure that my folks have room. They arrive from long-distance travel, or to celebrate a move, or a milestone year—there is space for them. There are no banners bearing their names. Never an official photographer, none formally welcomed, no waivers signed for film or video. Many images are made, for various reasons, but none for the attraction of capital support, media coverage, or increased turnout. Celebrations build naturally, from Opening Ceremony to Finale, with a slow night or two in between, but never flatness, never dullness. This artistic practice is creating a life, one surrounded by those who are holding the moment and practicing the future. This practice is trusted enough for folks to spend a Monday night with me. We savor.



Inside, sweat pours from the glass door and the floor-to-ceiling windows. It offers protection from the inevitable surveillance of our gathering. The door negotiates our conflict with the elements. It's too cold outside for it to remain open. It's too hot inside for it to remain closed. Striving with the weather mirrors our condition, our possibilities. While there is little canopy, the outdoors provides space for what has been outlawed inside. What is allowed inside will never touch our interior limits. I am still only doing the deejay a favor.

If partygoers are patrons, artists must be accessed spiritually—discerned—as they are not discourse. Patrons will never find works of art to archive under the capitalist banners of their family names, or house within their city's museums. This art is ephemeral; the ties it produces cannot be traced—they race beyond time. Songs are born, collections emerge, a fight erupts elsewhere. Relationships may be broken, new ones come. They contribute to the story beyond. Rising from the table at just the right moment becomes the perfect opportunity for another to sit and meet their next producer. Hopping on the dance floor when a song drops creates the space to meet a muse. There has never been a cover charge to engage this artwork. All have been welcome; but we have always known it hasn't happened without a cost. Art always rises when artists gather their audiences. *May it always be legendary.*

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