

"Words' Worth" Poetry Readings

Poets at the Culture, Arts, and Parks Committee of the Seattle City Council.

Saving Face by Arthur Tulee

Lake Union, Seattle, WA 1996

Here among the dozens of wall-mounted photographs
of Northwest Indians is my face.
Not my face, as if I stood or sat
for a pose in traditional clothing,
as if I could leave this nose, this chin, these eyes,
this soul to anybody but family to own.
but still there it is, my face, everytime I eat here.
I make a point to see my face,
have never considered avoiding my face,
was never surprised to find my face among these dead.
I touch the glass my face is under
and read the inscription under the frame
as if it were new each time, every time.
"Yakima Indian, identity unknown, circa 1898."
On my 11th visit, eating my 11th alderplanked salmon,
I notice for the first time that my face
is beautiful on a woman's body.
I feel my heart shoot the rapids
of my genetic homeland.
I know my family member will be set free,
will no longer be kept apart from her family,
she will be home soon.

I can't help but think
what I'd do to feed my family
in those early reservation days
when starvation and poverty
were older members of the family.
But I pass no judgment on survival,
on the necessary and the sacrificial.
On my 12th visit, I take action.
I strip to my breechcloth,
paint my face in the parking lot,
and carry a hunting knife between my teeth.
Shadowless, I slip through the double doors,
walk invisibly past the hostess station,
stalk down a sloped floor to my face
and deftly cut it down from its 25 year perch.
With salmon cooking all around us,
I say a prayer large in meaning, short in duration,
and carry my back straight, my eyes true
and step out in God's broad daylight
and save two faces this day.

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