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(1926-2009)

Powwow (1962)

*(Tama Reservation, Iowa, 1949)*

They all see the same movies.  
They shuffle on one leg,  
    Scuffing the dust up,  
Shuffle on the other.  
They are all the same:  
    A Sioux dance to the spirits,  
    A war dance by four Chippewa,  
    A Dakota dance for rain.  
        We wonder why we came.  
Even tricked out in the various braveries--  
    Black buffalo tassels, beadwork, or the brilliant  
    Feathers at the head, at the buttocks--  
Even in long braids and the gaudy face paints,  
    They all dance with their eyes turned  
    Inward, like a woman nursing  
A sick child she already knows  
    Will die. For the time, she nurses it  
    All the same. The loudspeakers shriek;  
        We leave our bleacher seats to wander  
    Among the wickiups and lean-tos  
In a search for hot dogs. The Indians  
    Are already packing; have  
    Resumed green dungarees and khaki,  
    Castoff combat issues of World War II.  
        (Only the Iroquois do not come here;  
They work in structural steel; they have a contract  
    Building the United Nations  
    And Air Force installations for our future wars.)  
These, though, have dismantled their hot-dog stand

And have to drive all night  
 To jobs in truck stops and all-night filling stations.  
 We ask directions and  
 They scuttle away from us like moths.  
 Past the trailers,  
 Beyond us, one teepee is still shining  
 Over all the rest. Inside, circled by a ring  
 Of children, in the glare  
 Of one bare bulb, a shrunken fierce-eyed man  
 Squats at his drum, all bones and parchment,  
 While his dry hands move  
 On the drumhead, always drumming, always  
 Raising his toothless, drawn jaw to the light  
 Like a young bird drinking, like a chained dog,  
 Howling his tribe's song for the restless young  
 Who wander in and out.  
 Words of such great age,  
 Not even he remembers what they mean.  
 We tramp back to our car,  
 Then nearly miss the highway, squinting  
 Through red and yellow splatterings on the windshield,  
 The garish and beautiful remains  
 Of grasshoppers and dragonflies  
 That go with us, that do not live again.

#### ANALYSIS

The pathos of a dead or dying culture and the mockery of traditional rites carried on purely for commercial gain are brilliantly expressed in this poem. What has been lost is a sense of tribal identity, and with that loss have been lost enthusiasm and individuality. The Indians have been drawn into the modern American culture of movies, hot-dog stands, bleachers and loudspeakers, automobiles and trailers, filling stations, building contracts, and mechanized war. They wear clothes furnished by the government. They are all alike. This is the reality of their lives; their dances and Indian costumes are the pretense. Thus they shuffle through their dances without spirit, and the dances have all become alike. Continuity with the past has been broken; there is a suggestion that they have learned the dances from the movies rather than from their fathers. The dances no longer have meaning, and the tourists, for whom they are performed, are disappointed.

There is a lack of meaning on both sides, for the dances are performed for money rather than out of belief (for worship, rain, or war), and the motivation of the tourists is idle amusement rather than genuine interest or participation. Only one old tribesman carries on the tradition out of conviction: he does it for the children rather than for gain; but his great age--his shrunken figure and toothless jaw--make him forlorn and pitiable, a symbol of a lost past. The children do not pay much attention, and, ironically, he carries on his performance by an electric light.

His cause is lost.

All aspects of the poem contribute to its effectiveness. The rhythm of the poem, and the way it is printed on the page, themselves give the effect of a shuffling dance. The diction is unerring. In line 10, for instance, where the Indians are "tricked out in the various braveries," the word *tricked* means fancifully dressed or adorned, but it also suggests falsity or deceit--these costumes are no longer their true ones; the word *braveries* means showy dress or display, but here it suggests also something appropriate to an Indian brave--and a note of irony is sounded. The simile in lines 14-18, of the Indians dancing with their eyes turned inward like a woman nursing a child she knows will die, precisely describes the attitude of the Indians toward their ancient culture, which they know is dying, but which they spiritlessly carry on a little longer.

Finally, the concluding image of the broken grasshoppers and butterflies symbolically condenses the entire content of the poem. The garish and beautiful red and yellow splatterings are like the colorfully feathered costumes the Indians don for their dances, but they are the remains of dead creatures “That go with us, they do not live again.” The Indians are now submerged in our culture; their traditional way of life is dead forever.

Laurence Perrine  
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