

Two Standards

-- at a Native Writers' Conference in Norman, Oklahoma

Joan's one eighth. I'm a quarter.

When we walk into Billy's

I want to look like her,

full Osage. "You wouldn't find

an Indian here," she tells me,

"if not for the conference."

And the cigar-chewing driver

shuttling in from the Will

Rogers Airport confides:

"I never seen so many

Indians all in one spot."

The bar's packed like a bar

should be. Joan shows me off,

introducing her friends

to a light-haired, East Coast

educated outsider

whose mother, Betty Tallchief,

is Oklahoma's pride.

"At that table are some

Osages you should meet."

They know my relatives

in Fairfax, though they come

from Pawhuska, Pawnee.

Angela says the Tallchiefs,

the keepers of the drum,

will host the Osage dances

next June. "Will you join us?
You'll be given your Osage
name." Even though my grandmother
Tallchief's daughters became

famous as ballet dancers,
she displayed photographs
of my mother and aunt
when they were twelve, eleven
in Osage ceremonial dress,
performing at a powwow.

My mother said her father's
mother taught her those dances.
I say, when asked, I never wanted
to dance, but here, in Billy's
with the jukebox repeating
the Beatles' "Twist and Shout,"

all I want is to dance
and to adopt my mother's
Osage name "Wa-Xthe-thon-ba":
"Two Standards." All I want
is to return to Oklahoma
and answer Angela "Yes,"

though New York City's half
a continent away.
I am my mother's daughter,
"Two Standards," and tonight,
forgetting my given name,
I will take that ancestral one.

Diving

The woman sleeps in a pearl-white bathtub:
her skin, basin, and water remind you
of conch or cowrie, of your son inside,
nacre in shell. She dreams she dives

off a boat holding bucket to ribs, free-
falling until the smack of water, releasing
the pail, a parachute, then spiraling,
swathed now in transparent white, protected

like a surgeon or larva, twisting through
sea depth, boring home; imagining how
her skin will glow near seaweed fires,
she resists the pull of water, the cold.

Her body plummets, a pearl dropped in liquid;
the world is green and filled with ghosts.
Just there one glimmers.
She loosens shell from sand. It is your child

she must let go before resurfacing.

Taxi

Why don't we cruise
The Loop at noon
enjoy the jam
I'm not immune
to your deft charm
in one stalled car
I'd like to take
you as you are

“I Will Leave You in Possession of the Field”

--from *Dangerous Liaisons*

I will leave him in possession
of the field, she thought, after waking,
after the first bird cleared the sky.

But rolling over on her side,
she saw red stains on his shirt sleeve
reminding her of the film
(the aerial shot of the man’s body,

flat out, blood-smearred, upon the snow),
and edging near she touched
not blood but berries – wild berries
they’d shared the night before.

She could recall how berries taste
after a kiss, before the tongue
can argue or betray. How simple,
like sleeping in a summer field,

crushing berries, when promises
were made in summer’s name,
made in possession of the field.

Link to audio of poem: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqEstlXhpt8>