

Trying to Find the Indian Family in Millennium Park, Chicago

for MT

This is a town you know  
in ways I never will.  
The last time I was here,  
freeways switching lanes  
on me indecipherably, landed me  
at a Chinatown exit with no corresponding  
on ramp, wandering under girders  
among horns blasting me, a bat lost  
in a cathedral, your digital voice  
a beacon, telling me right  
here, then left, and arriving  
to you, on the front porch.  
Though I have faced Dallas,  
Los Angeles, Manhattan,  
I never wanted to drive  
in this city again.

But this night, I have arrived  
at Evanston, and we take  
the El downtown, navigating  
tokens, exact change, hit  
a Mexican place, and now,  
because it is four years  
into the new century,  
and because we haven't seen  
each other in a while, and  
because I am only passing  
through, and because this is a town  
you know, and because, always,  
you try to expand my knowledge  
base, orientation in the world,  
and because it is a beautiful night  
in early October, and because we know  
the toll our northern winters take  
on us, you suggest we jump back  
on, glide above the streets for a few  
more stops, enter the Millennium  
Park. I, of course plead, as always,  
ignorance, ignorance, the Midwest  
a wide open question mark to me.

It is four years, almost to the month,  
before this country will change the course  
of its history, elect a melanin-rich  
President, announced on this same land  
near the southwestern lip of Lake Michigan,  
but on this night, in 2004, neither of us,  
our Indian writing imaginations, even

combined, could not have imagined that story.

I ask what it is we'll find at the Park,  
and you are incredulous at my lack  
of knowledge beyond the confines of New York,  
and just suggest it often has contemporary art  
installations, and that this will be a moment  
of discovery for me. When we arrive, you are  
not proven wrong.

First, we stand beneath the giant chrome  
kidney, jelly bean, the Sky Gate, our dark-skinned,  
aging reflections distort us like amoebae,  
and I could probably stay here a while,  
watching myself reach up, become tall  
for once, but our attention is drawn  
to a different installation, something  
called "The American Family," life  
sized photo panels of mothers, fathers,  
sisters and brothers, Amish, Muslims,  
corn-fed Nordic Nebraskans, Italians,  
Germans, Africans, African-Americans, Chinese,  
Mongolians, Japanese, Thai, Hmong, Ukrainians,  
Cajuns, and of course the list goes on,  
but because we have both been disappeared,  
our indigenous binary code stripped  
from the equation, time and time  
again, like so much war-paint, we make  
it a pilgrimage, one panel at a time. Other  
visitors, delighting in finding themselves  
represented here, begin to notice  
our exasperation, feigned and over  
dramatic and first, more real with each  
passing panel, and still no American  
Indian families, not one--the closest  
we get is the Mexican family, complete  
with serapes and sombreros.

We eventually arrive where we began,  
the Sky Gate, the Star-kidney, knowing,  
as the autumn reminds us it's coming,  
air around us sharper, seeping  
into our bones, like blood in earth.  
It is here we find the American Indian  
family, our chrome reflections on the underside  
of the sculpture, like two small atlases, holding  
everything suspended, illuminated in street lamps  
coming on one by one, while above, the light  
of a million dying stars, arrives, joins us  
in reflection, and the coming of another  
harvest moon, where dispersed seed carries on.

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