

Culture

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Saturday Night Dance At Musqueam

Ron Hamilton

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"Not much traffic going down
To the smokehouse yet.
They said the Swayxway dancers would start
At 7:00 o'clock."

"Are you sure it's tonight?
The Old Man said, "It's not till Monday."
They usually start later ... maybe 9:30.
Everyone has to eat."

"Let's go Uncle Ron."

"Okay."

In the dark and in the queer haze of
The last street light
The golden leaves on the wet pavement
Float on the surface of a cold black pond.

Pavement ends in the foggy dark
Feet beware the small
And large mudpuddles
Barely visible in the dark.

We hopscotch the small grey reflectors,
And plan our way round larger ones.
Then cars and trucks and vans speed
by. Splashing our still dry feet.

Above the roofline against the dark,
Sparks swirl, dancing points of orange light.
No smoke is visible above the smokeholes.
Voices male and female.

A unique harmony for sure,
Nowhere else to be heard.
The rumble of drums,
The cackling of fires.

Someone is gripped by their private power.
Two songs at once don't compete.
A speaker raises his voice to invite.
Somewhere nearby a cardoor slams.

Gossip and chatter,
"Long time no see!"
Others walk quietly in the light,
Shoulders hunched and wrapped in blankets.

"This door is locked; let's try another.
So many vehicles must mean a crowd."

"It's been so long since I've
Been to a dance."

"Be careful in the bighouse Niece;
Walk slowly."

"Small crowd.
Not much smoke either.
Where to sit?
Can't see my sisters."

"You guys sit with the Musqueams, okay?"

"Okay, thanks."

"That way, just be careful going
Around that old lady.
Grab the other end, just spread it flat.
Good."

"Holy cow! There's Johnny and Felix
I wonder why they aren't getting ready?"

"I don't think the masks will dance
For a while yet.
The dancers are still warming up;
People are still eating."

"He's telling us to go eat.
Do you want tea or soup or something?
Have you eaten yet?
I just want tea."

Boiled spring, rice, baking powder bread.
Johnny, Babs, Max, Mike Kew, Cindy.
Mask dancers eating together.
Servers keeping things hot.

"They're carrying their masks
Into their tent now.
What time is it?
It must be 9:30?"

"Quarter to 10:00.
It's been forever since I saw
A Swayxway dance.
Any kind of dance.
I guess Johnny and Feefee aren't dancing;
They're sitting right over there."

"Would the singers come forward now,
The ones called to sing for
The mask.
Could you please come forward now."

Helen, Frieda, Wendy ... ten all together.
Black clothes, bright head bands,
Little paddles to beat together
In place of drums.
Drums would drown out
Soft voices.

Plastic tarp covers floor,
Keep blankets clean.
Family gets busy ... milling round
Between the fires.

Those to receive names are
Dressed.
Suitable blankets,
Head bands.

Singers have money pinned visibly.
Speakers are dressed, pinned.
Goods brought in are neatly stacked.
Fires banked to burn long.

"Tonight, my Dear Friends, tonight,
A name is going to come out.
It is a name from the West Coast.
You'll hear about it more."

"This young girl will receive a name,
From the West Coast,
Tonight.
Her grandmother came from the West Coast."

"That is how she came by the right
To carry a West Coast name.
The name comes from Shiishat,
Portleburny. It's from Portleburny."

"Three generations ago,
Another woman from West Coast,
Held this name, my Dear Ones.
Now this young girl ..."

Both fires spit and cackle.
Soft sounding explosions send
Countless glowing sparks toward the
Smoke holes, thinning as they rise.

Her father is up there too now
Draped in a blanket,
Special,
Proud.

The fires seem too loud.
The speakers fall quiet.
No one moves.
The tent opens!

Powerful! Colourful! Noisy!
White! Dust rising. Bulging eyes
Rivet the crowd's attention
To the mask.

First, one,
Now two, four, six!
Low, slow, hop, step, glide
Sideways, yet forward too.

Floating, big, erect
Healer in feathers.
Eyeballs stretched into cylinders
Stabbing the dark in front of them.

A young boy is escorted carrying
Pink blanket bundle ...(mask?)
By one of the masked dancers.
He stands on the floor of blankets.

Front dancer stops short of the turn.
The others line up behind him,
And on the drum signal,
Bend at their waists, and rush.

Coloured feathers sweep everywhere!
Springing up behind each mask.
Shells create the roar of breakers.
Dust wafts up mixing with smoke.

These monsters rush into the centre.
Flanked by fires.
Surrounded by witnesses
And relatives.

No longer floating, gliding
They drum with feet like courting grouse.
Deer hoof rattles
Hiss, inches off the floor.

Behind the masks, or in them,
Or maybe it's the masks themselves.
"Huuuu!"
Power speaking of power.

The masks reverse and back away,
Then rush again.
Four rushes, four withdrawals,
Then round the fires and out again.

"My Dear Ones, this young boy
Will wear a mask tonight.
It used to be that only one dancer,
In any family, could wear the mask."

"My Dear Ones, tonight, this young man
Will wear the mask even though
His brother wears one already.
He, will wear the mask too."

"His family was scared, something
Might happen to him.
So, he's going to put on a mask
Tonight, my Dear Ones."

As he speaks, the boy holds
The pink blanket bundle,
The mask
He'll wear tonight.

Late comers from the kitchen
Solemnly return to their seats.
The floor is cleared.
The fires crackle, sparks dance.

Below us a woman knits,
Her face all black and red paint.
Children are quiet
Hundreds of people ... no disturbances.

The tent opens,
And the huge house
Fills again with the sound
And feeling of an earthquake!

Swayxway!
Ten of them this time!
The dancers are modern;
The dance is timeless.

Satin, beads, sequins, kerchiefs,
Quarters, florescent paint, piano wire.
Deer hooves, eagle feathers, sea shells
Cedar branches, bull rushes, ochre paint.

Carpenter, administrators, students,
Young men and a boy.
Fishermen, hunters, spirit dancers,
Cleansers, healers, believers all.

They hunch and scurry,
Shaking shell rattles violently.
They become erect,
Waving cleansing sprigs of cedar.

A high pitched chorus begins to work.
Small paddles clack sharply
In their hands,
Keeping time to an ageless song.

Upright and stationary,
Slow and sure,
They sing like countless others,
Generations before them.

Wham! drum signal sounds,
This is the last round;
The masks have done their work.
Behind, they leave two, nameless.

One at a time they make their runs,
Four times toward the tent.
Amid smoke and dust and thunder
Each goes back home to ...

The last one on the floor
Does an extra circuit around the fires.
Upright in arrogance and power,
He leaves us his dust, and a memory.

Time stands still,
And so do the singers.
The dust falls,
And the smoke rises again.
Only fires make noise,
And no-one moves ...

The ones in the middle ... centres of attention,
Thaw and begin, slowly, begin to move.
The singers return to sit with us.
We come back to life.

"My Dear Ones, tonight this young man,
This young man here with the beautiful
Weavin' on, he's gonna keep it.
There'll be another time he'll wear it."

"My Dear Ones, there's gonna be
Seven openers."
Directly in front, the two women,
One with paint, one without.

"They're preparing a hairhat, Niece,
Her son is hollering."
They're unbraiding the light brown,
Small, almost blond, braids of hair.

Paddle jacket, black paint,
Knitted leggings, deer hoof rattles,
Conical hairhat tied on.
Back straightens, then curls forward.

He hollers, he screams, he cries.
He bounces in power.
He rocks on power.
He stands up on power.

They sing quietly at first,
Careful to match the opener's tempo.
Louder, then louder. Drum beat!
He moves off, round the fires, flying.

Like a large, slow-moving owl,
Like a phantom in this opera,
Like a figment of my imagination,
He tries the floor just cleansed by masks.

His is smooth now, familiar again.
To singers rested by spring and summer,
Song, dancer, singers, dancer,
All are one smooth movement.

At his place of beginning, home,
He finishes his cycle,
And is helped to his seat.
Such care and attention given him.

Another opener,
Then, the rest.
Six, not seven.
"Always in even numbers, not odd."

As we walk to the door,
She comes slowly round the fires,
And we move to let
The last opener live her power.

Outside the air is cool.
We drive home in a van.
And jumbo jets take off across the river,
Strobe lights dancing in the night sky.