Against the Tyranny of Mad Momentum, There Is a Monument

Miller Williams

On the day Senator William Fulbright died, his wife called to ask if his life might inspire a poem that I could read at his funeral. I felt honored to be asked, as I feel deeply honored to take part in the recognition of Simon Dinnerstein through marvelously broad attention to *The Fulbright Triptych.*

The title and circumstance of this painting took me—quite understandably—back to this poem. I saw, as I read it, the many ways in which Simon's life, mine, and the lives of thousands of others have been richly changed by passage through the doors the senator opened to us onto our futures.

I'm drawn to the painting in part because it speaks so well to me of the kinship between the arts. Good poetry carries a touch of irony, showing us that what we might at first call opposites can be very close to identical. The figures on each side of the central frame—one female and one male, she holding a child in her lap, he without a lap but with a beard—would seem at first to be from two sides of the world. Slowly, their colors, shoulders, facial expressions, and presence say that they are one. The importance of irony is that closeness means nothing unless it follows distance. Good poetry is made of the stuff of this world, and draws the reader in to become a part of the poem, as *I* will always find myself in this painting, however invisible to others.

Anyone looking at this painting after reading what I've just written is going to be nodding. I celebrate Simon's powerful work as I celebrate the life of a man who helped make that work possible.

For J. William Fulbright
On the Day of His Death

Walking the square in a tree-thick mountain town
in Arkansas, a visitor is shown
a face and a few words, a monument
in bronze and stone,

a good and visible and local sign
of all the good he left us, something to touch,
but other monuments will last as long and say as much.

Think of students with minds made darkly rich
by cultures not their own, and who can say—
given the sweet contagion of a thought—
how far away

the tremors of opening minds may resonate?
Beyond our great-grandchildren? Farther than that?
Socrates taught young Plato at whose student's feet
we all have sat

through forty increasingly nervous centuries
while those rare minds turned other minds around.
Then think of the hundreds of nations, talking and talking,
the endless sound

of words, words, in every language words,
old terrible words but better than bombs by far.
This brave cacophony, he brought about.
All that we are—

fumbling and noble, enduring, uncertain, and weak—
this body of nations embodies: the foulest and best,
imperfect memory, fear, the one long hope,
and the half-expressed

deep rage of half the world, brought barely together:
one simple resolution, his gift to earth;
some words, when we had little faith in what
words could be worth.

Then think that every time, alone in darkness,
someone finds the courage to take a stand
against the arrogance of power or lifts
one hesitant hand

against the tyranny of mad momentum,
there is a monument. And there. And there.
And there, in a thought that seems at times too simple
for us to bear,

that peace is a progress moving first in the mind,
something left a little more clear
in the heads of the heads of state and common people
because he was here.

What shall we say, now that he's not among us?
We might speak for a moment as if he were.
We might take once his imaged hand and say,
We'll miss you, sir.