

## **Jesse Jackson's Face on the Eve of Barack Obama's Victory**

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Two tears trickling down the cheek.  
The mouth slightly open in awe.  
The stunned still gaze looking over and through  
the thunderous crowd,  
to a place beyond time,  
where the ancestors are gathering.  
Harriet Tubman holds hands with John Brown,  
Frederick Douglas chats with Marcus Garvey.  
Rosa and Martin walk arm-in-arm,  
Emmet Till sits on Malcolm's shoulders,  
to witness and watch from the other shore.

On that Chicago night, in the midst of one million voices raised in exultation,  
only one person sees them. In his face, you can read the whole story.  
The living landscape of his features  
sings the true map of America.  
The glorious purpled majesty and fruited plain revealed,  
as if to a man  
trapped in a dark, dank cell, who is suddenly released  
and gazes up at the spacious skies.  
The land only sung of and dreamed  
now the ground beneath his feet.

In that face lie also the shadows  
of the slaughtered buffalo  
and the fish dead in the stream  
of the logged forests, stripped mines and strip malls  
of the old cotton fields back home  
stained with blood and forced toil

of the footprints on the Trail of Tears  
and the dusty old dust and the migrant-picked grapes  
of the scabs and the thugs and the pickets  
of women kept down and children beaten.

All of it—the shame and the glory—is etched in those two tears,  
All the long suffering cadenced  
in this moment of triumph.

For above all, it is a face of triumph.  
Not the athlete's triumph spiking the ball and raising his arms.  
Not the Oscar winner thanking his family while waving the trophy.  
Not the opera diva bowing to her audience cradling the flowers.

It is a face that we may only see once in our lifetime,  
whose features we can barely recognize amidst the dazzle of flash and image,  
A face of astonished surprise. a wordless word whispered from the parted mouth  
that tells a truth too large to comprehend.

It is a face of victory walking through valleys of suffering and over mountains of grief.  
A face wholly innocent of the TV cameras,  
yet captured by them.  
It calls to us in its complexity, speaks  
to some distant corner  
of our soul long hidden.

What would our faces look like if we lived with our dreams deferred and  
found them suddenly arrived?  
If we, with our habit of looking to the horizon  
to keep our eyes on the prize, bumped into it  
unexpectedly on our doorstep?

If our voices, so long tuned to “we shall overcome—someday,”  
changed key from future tense to present?

Wouldn't we look stunned too? Wouldn't we be speechless?  
Wouldn't we, amidst the roar of the cheering crowd,  
stand still as stone,  
as large as history,  
and hear the harmonies  
of all the songs  
coming from the other shore?

On the evening of November 4, 2008,  
it all gathered together in one borderless body,  
shone out from a face that was no longer his,  
and spoke what no commentator could capture:

*On this night, in my lifetime,  
with no people lying dead in the streets,  
from faith coupled with work,  
heart joined with savvy,  
hope mixed with handshakes,  
Democracy has risen from the dead  
and a black man  
was elected the  
President of the United States.*

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