The Song of Louise Blue Feather

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I played violin in high school. That was back when I had two hands to play with, when I could follow the notes without them dancing off the page like a murder of crows, lost in the sky.

People think I was talking to God when I took an old hatchet from the yard and cut off my left hand. It wasn't that. It wasn't God talking at all. God is a great power, and His love turns everything for the better. He doesn't hurt. He heals.

I was pretty average at the violin. Not in my head, though. I lay awake at night, auditioning for first chair in the school orchestra, and no one, not even that tiny Linda Lindsey with the voice like a spoon on a glass, could play better than I could. My violin was an extension of my mind and voice, so easy, the way the notes slid out—now poignant, now sweet, now raw, now polite and precise. I could play like I was in concert with the angels or God Himself. I was born singing that violin's song.

Everything was better in my head. When I looked out our trailer window in winter, I saw the land as it was in spring—rolling and green, spreading forever in every direction. When I looked at my mother or father, both Rosebud Sioux Indians, I saw the long chain of ancestors behind them. I called them "presences," people who'd gone before. These ancestors loved me and played their lives out every moment to produce these parents who looked into my face, to produce me looking back.

I've heard people talk and say that's when I turned crazy, assuming they know me well enough to see. It's only that reflection of yourself deep inside, scaring you, that makes you want to keep me in this place
where you keep others who mirror your pain like I do. You think I
don’t know or care that I’m in this state hospital, that I’m too crazy to
think or feel like you do.

Sometimes when a thing happens it seems like there was only
one thing making it happen. Really, everything happens because of a
long string of other things happening, like the way-back spirits who
extend behind everyone into a distance far deeper than any grave.
This thing I did—cutting off my hand—went back into the beginning
of life. The presences taught me that life could be held in the hand
like a wounded bird, like the grasp of a trusting child.

I was maybe sixteen when the presences started to show them-
selves. First it was my parents and sisters and brothers. They shifted
and changed within people’s faces—familiar, then strange again. Then
my grandparents appeared, and their parents and grandparents—all
the way back until every person looked familiar, and every person
loved me too.

Sometimes in my head I see an Indian woman, pregnant, walking
down a dirt road outside a broken reservation town in South Dakota.
Say she was my mother. I’m telling this as though it is maybe true and
maybe false because that’s how it is for me—not knowing for sure.
She could be my mother, carrying me, this woman in my head. She
may not be related to me. She could be me years ahead.

She is walking and holding her belly and singing. She is singing a
song that my people sing when we are trying to forget, trying to rise
above. I am inside her, singing too, my small voice soft and muted by
her tissues and skin. The throb of the drums is her feet stepping
down; the shift of her legs slides me side to side.
Grasshoppers whirl and click in the crisp brush. It is hot, blinding hot. The sky reflects down like a silver bowl. Even though this woman might be a stranger, casting shadows on the future, I think we must be related by blood, since she comes into my head so often.

I left the Rez at eighteen because in my head Omaha was a much better place to be. I could work at a job and live on my own without seeing our old trailer decay and our family go hungry when they could not find work. I wanted to move forward, to forget. Saying good-bye was something they expected of me. It was why they raised me. It was the thing that was supposed to happen.

I moved to a small room in Omaha. I worked in a laundry, steam-pressing clothes. The machines came down and hissed, lifted, came down and hissed again. The machines held the spirits of my friends and family from the Rez. They wouldn’t let me forget.

Beautiful songs sizzled in my head as I laid out the clothes and pressed. “Louise Blue Feather,” they hissed. “You are true, hallowed be to God, in Heaven and Earth, you are chosen and true.” I felt God’s breath in my face, warm and sweet and clean. He healed my friends and family. I felt it and knew it was happening.

After work I used to place myself in a corner of the Blue Danube bar down the street and just watch people. It was a working class bar with vinyl stools and booths lighted by 100-watt bulbs on wires. The wooden floor creaked and groaned under the overweight old men in engineer’s caps and overalls. The women wore masks of makeup that looked crusty and heavy in the dim light. Apartment houses smelling of bacon grease surrounded the Blue Danube, which drew a crowd of maybe ten on a Saturday night. The people played 40’s records on the jukebox and drank wet mugs of beer.
I walked to the Blue Danube almost every night to see the people I knew. I'd sit in the far booth towards the back, order water and maybe a cup of coffee, and take a sip every time I saw one of the presences, to signal I knew who they were. The faces of my parents came and went, crossing and shifting. I kept watching for my mother to come in the door and take me home. You might think that was foolishness, for my mother was far away and I hadn't seen her in many months.

At first it was just a game. I would try to see how close these strangers came. Sometimes I saw a flat cardboard figure with glistening eyes like my mother, or a waxy man holding his cigarette like my father did, pinched between thumb and forefinger and putting it to his mouth like a whistle. In my head I had wonderful conversations with the people there. Some looked like sisters or brothers, cousins I knew from the rez. It didn't matter that some were white and some were black. It didn't matter that I hardly ever saw an Indian face like my own. I could always look past the differences to the tiny points of resemblance—the shine of my mother's eyes, the slight shuffle of my brother's leg from when the car fell off the jack, the ring of my sister's voice singing to the baby, the clench of my father's jaw if he talked when he was angry.

Sometimes I brought my violin with me. I'd sit there, my violin tucked under my chin, my fingers pressing the patterns for pieces I used to play. I heard the music, even though it was only my fingers moving, and the bow lay broken in the case, the yellowed horsehair sagging and looping from being stretched tight year after year. I played for everyone there. Pretty soon, I knew they could hear it too, because they acted shy and nervous, talking quietly amongst themselves as though it were so beautiful they didn't want to disturb it. They acted haunted and a little afraid.
I think that was the first time in my life that I really felt that sense of power—where you know you are affecting other people even though they may not know it themselves. It made me giddy sometimes—watching and talking and playing music for all the people I'd loved in my life.

One night at the Blue Danube, an Indian woman pulling a wire cart full of groceries stopped in to use the phone. She wore a threadbare yellow skirt to her knees and a scarf over her gray head. The phone was in the back, where I was. She called long distance to someone, someone who loved her and wanted her to come back. She talked low and soft and kept feeding quarters in. Then she cried. Even though the bar was loud, I heard that catch in her voice, like the catch in my mother's voice, like the tone my mother would use if she knew where I was and was talking to me. I looked into the cup of cold coffee in my hands and saw the pregnant woman on the dirt road, singing. There was light above her head that looked like the sun and the white sky. I knew she was calling me home.

This woman became another presence—my mother's face and voice were tucked inside hers and turned back and forth from the woman to my mother. Then she hung up the phone and turned away. I got up and followed her.

She went out the door and down the street, pulling her wire cart, the groceries jumping and rustling over every crack in the sidewalk. I turned the corner where she turned. She bumped the cart down some stairs to a basement apartment, and I stood at the top. She found her key and looked up.

The evening light filtered down on her face and shifted back and forth in the shadow of a tree near the street. She was young. Then she was very old. I saw the ridges of veins in her legs, and then I saw that
her skin was smooth and dark, like a wooden bowl wiped with oil. She looked up at me, shaking her head, and the scarf she wore over her long gray hair fell to her shoulders.

“Who are you?” she said, and when she said that she looked cardboard and flat again. I turned and ran. I ran to my room and packed some things, then ran downtown and waited in the bus station until the bus came to take me back to the Rez.

It was August, hot and dry. My sisters had been looking for me all summer. They told me that our mother had died in May. It was overwork and heart problems. They said she died one night when the moon was so bright you could drive the Rez roads without headlights.

At our trailer, my father sat in the shade, chiseling bark off a log with a hatchet. He looked like someone else, like some other soul had slipped into his body and moved his hand over the bark like someone else’s hand. His teeth were gone and his skin folded like soft leather.

There was nothing left to make me see the man I’d seen so many times. The face of his presence disappeared. I didn’t know him.

I told my sister that a knife was in my heart. I told her I wanted to be buried with my mother. I sat in the grass by her grave, fingering my violin. I saw crows circling. I lay for days on the bed. There was a patch of paint peeled away on the ceiling, and where the yellow showed through it looked like an old woman’s head.

One afternoon a white woman came to the door. Her face kept shifting, her voice crackling in the hot air. I did not recognize her and knew I never would. She was a presence from another world. Her eyes were glass, her face an empty plate. She said I needed to go with her to a doctor in Rosebud, that my sisters were very worried about me,
that the doctor could help me.

I ran to the back yard where the blue sky seemed to fall and crash like glass, and the rolling sandhills looked open and unbroken, spreading for miles in all directions. Then I saw someone far away, walking. I stood and watched the pregnant woman come along the road, singing and holding her belly. She was full of presences, of ancestors hiding in her body and moving across her joyous face. I wanted her to be my mother, carrying me. I knew she was my mother, carrying me and singing. I reached out my hand to hers, and she folded it into her own. Her song was the voice of a violin. It was my voice too.

I held her hand tight, like you hold something in a dream that you don't want to lose when you wake up. I held her heart, which fluttered like a feather in the wind.

My father's hatchet lay on the ground near the log he'd split when he was sitting in the shade. I picked it up in my right hand and lay my left on top of the log, still holding the presence of my mother. I sang with her. The song rose. It was light. It was power. It was God within me. No white woman could hurt me.

When I slammed the hatchet down, the song jarred. But I felt nothing. I still held my mother. That's why I did it. It wasn't God telling me and it wasn't anybody telling me anything.

I have never been sorry about my hand, even though I cannot play my violin. I will always hold my mother's voice and heart in my fingers, and God will always speak to me the way she did, the way her mother did before her and her mother before that. All these people who love me are with me, within me, and our songs carry across this open land forever and ever.