A SONG FOR THE WHITE MAN

When his daughter was born, Thomas Singing Bird held out his huge hands and said, Give her to me. The nurse hesitated, looked at his wide palms and at him. She saw a man not tall but, even at that young age, thick through the torso, his skin the color of well-kept wood. Dark buzz-cut hair, nose like the beak of a bird of prey, full lips, a face whose angles increased at the jaw. She was halted by his dark eyes, a permanent crease between them. He is the father, after all, she decided, and laid the child in his hands.

Thomas Singing Bird stood gazing at the baby's face. Marveling, as new fathers do, at the perfection of tiny eyelashes laid on her cheeks, at her straight black hair, like his, at her round face, butterscotch-colored. He knew when her eyes opened they would be black, like his.

No matter where he was, Thomas Singing Bird always knew where the cardinal directions lay. As he stood in the hospital waiting room he turned toward the delivery room doors, where the nurse and his daughter had just emerged. He held the child up in both hands, like an offering, and introduced her to the east, singing in the ancient tongue. He turned toward the waiting room windows and presented her to the west, then to room's entrance on the north and the hallway beyond, then to the unoccupied chairs, except for one sleeping man, on the south,

and finally to the overarching spirit above the fluorescent lights in the ceiling, before he brought her down and laid her against his broad chest.

The nurse stood hypnotized, her lips apart. She blinked, hesitated, and said, I hope I'm not intruding on something that's none of my business. But would you mind telling me what you said? He smiled, although the line remained between his eyes. He turned toward the delivery room doors but did not lift the child this time. I said, spirit of the east, of the sunrise, I present my daughter to you. Grant her many days, good days, in the light of your sun.

He spun slowly and faced the western windows and said, spirit of the west, I present my daughter to you. After her long life, may you take her in peace, in contentment that she has known all the good things of the earth and all the good happenings of life. Turning north he continued, spirit of the snow and the cold wind, test my daughter that she may be strong when life tests her, that she may always face down all harsh things and go through to the spring. Facing south he said, spirit of the warm wind, give my daughter all good things, trees and stars, rain and food, a good man and children. May they be blessed as I bless her.

Then Thomas Singing Bird looked up and said, spirit of all the earth, of all animals and people, of the four corners of the sky, I thank you for my daughter. I ask that my wife and I may never forget to thank you for her, through all our lives. I present to you and to all the spirits of the earth my daughter, that you may bless her as I will always bless her.

He looked down at the child and then at the nurse, who was weeping silently. That's the most beautiful thing I ever heard, she said.

Thomas Singing Bird opened his eyes and looked at the people sitting around him under the maple tree. He had sung the child blessing for them and told them what it means. They all stared at him, silent, and one or two of the women nodded and swallowed softly. My daughter is a grown woman now, a nurse herself, he said. Thomas was aware of the sweetness of the shade, the heat rising off the land without any stir of air, of the sweat trickling from under his arms, dampening his black-checked shirt, but he did not move. Do you want to hear more? he said. Yes, they said, yes.

So he began to talk about his people in this valley, before the white man's great canal cut through it, and then the white man's hard humming road. The canal they could cross, but the road is a greater problem. The road means they must buy trucks, must become educated as white people so they can be permitted to drive the trucks on the white government's roads.

He talked about the slow process of taking their own governance back from white men. He talked about white people, people like those sitting before him, who had finally understood that his people knew something they didn't know, something essential to living on the earth.

I don't mind being called an Indian, he said. We call ourselves Indians. Those who don't want to be called Indians, you should call them what they want. They have some ideas I don't have. What I do mind is being called Tonto, or Chief. I used to work construction. Some of them, they would say, Hey, Chief! I don't look at you and say, Hey, President! You have a name. I have a name. Call me by my name.

I'm not sure about the schools that want to call themselves Redmen or Chiefs or Warriors. I like it that they think Indians are brave and tough. We are. But there's an idea we slaughtered white people for no reason. There was a reason.

As he went on, talking about the Five Nations and then the Six, the wars and the pushing westward by white men, ever and ever more, wanting more and more, Thomas Singing Bird began to wonder if these people could indeed ever understand. These were people who wanted to understand. They came wanting to listen to him, and they did listen, almost as well as his own people would have. Their presence here meant money for this small reservation, a piece of land set aside for his tribe not very long ago. Given back, that is. It had a big house and some acres of river-bottom farm and upsloping woodland, including the sacred spring and the ledge, high up, where young men went for vision time.

He didn't mind talking to the white people. They were here with a program called Indian Ways, run by his friend David. He had to think to recall David's white name, but he was so accustomed to speaking to a council circle that he never lost the thread of what he was saying to the circle of white people. David Hanscom, he remembered; the reason he had trouble with the name was that his people had adopted David Hanscom and now called him David Fire-in-Snow. David had hair the color of hawkweed and skin like milk; it made his Indian name easy to remember. Fire-in-Snow advertised for people who wanted to experience Indian life and charged them a lot of money to come visit Indians like Thomas Singing Bird. Thomas and his family were the only permanent residents of the

reservation right now, although others of his people came and went as they wanted, or needed to.

Most of the white people who came were taken aback to find themselves in a farmhouse with a country kitchen dating from the 1920s. Maybe they expected corn dances or something, maybe people in Sioux war bonnets. Hogans or teepees. One of the women who came said she had a vision. I was walking back to my car, she said, and I saw a feather sticking up in the back seat. When I got to it there was no feather there, but I had this very strong feeling I should come here. I have this strong feeling I belong here. I would like to learn your language. I would like to learn enough I could teach it.

Thomas pondered. Are you Indian? he asked. Not that I know of, she said. Maybe further back than I know. I wish I were.

I will think about it, he said. I will talk with the others. He did not tell her who the others were. That although he was a council leader, as good as the chief of his people, the elders always consulted the women, the ones old enough to have wisdom. He respected visions, but he thought the vision was very strange. Because his people never wore bird feathers sticking straight up, but bound into a sacred bundle and woven into their hair, trailing behind an ear.

The man from New York was the most eager one, eager as a puppy wanting to please. He was middle-aged, not as old as Thomas. He brought his wife and son with him. His wife was patient, doing this because Alan wanted to. The son, a boy not quite a man, was not patient, not wanting to be here. Alan

ignored them, absorbing himself in Thomas Singing Bird's words like a novice monk with a new master.

After Thomas had shown them the spring and the vision place, the dusty horse pen and the tiny plot where he raised tobacco for ritual blessings, his wife showed them all their rooms. Then they gathered again to eat fry bread, corn and beans for dinner. He talked to them about Indian food, about the fry bread. When the American president decided to drive the tribes from their land, he gave them wheat flour to eat. Not the corn flour they were accustomed to, but wheat. They didn't know how to cook it, so they mixed it with water and fried it. We still eat it, he said. Some of the white people said it was very filling and didn't finish it. Some took one nibble and didn't eat any more. After they ate, he showed them the dice game with the hand-made dice. Indians are great gamblers, he told them.

The next day at breakfast, the man from New York came to Thomas with a blue jay feather in his hand. Would it be all right, he began. I mean, we found this feather, and I wonder if it would be all right if I took it and left it at the spring as an offering. Thomas looked at it. Alan had wound some red string around it, so it was more than just a feather, but it was not a proper offering. It should have been bound with other feathers and left with a blessing. But he nodded. The man was ecstatic in his thanks.

They had another council circle. He talked about the tribe's government, and now he told them how powerful the women were. How everyone talked as long as he had something to say; how others listened as long as he wanted to talk; how no one interrupted, ever, but waited until the pipe was passed to him. How no

one imposed his or her will on the people, but nothing was done until all came to agreement.

He talked about fate. He said, When you are born, the spirits measure out your life and cut the string. No matter what you do, that is how long you will live. We believe we can take chances; it won't matter. Eat what we want; it won't change anything. How when it is your time, you sing to your ancestors, asking them to greet you when you cross the divide. How it is good to have a healer there to sing with you if you can, or at least your spouse or someone from your family or someone of your people. Someone who knew where you were going, and how you should go.

After the council circle, he asked if anyone wanted to come into the field and help him get in the hay that had been cut three days ago. He put the pitchforks in the truck bed. The woman who wanted to learn the language climbed into the front seat next to him. Three of the men got into the truck bed.

The field lay across the winding state road between them and the river. On the other side of the field was the canal and beyond the canal the interstate. Although they could see traffic streaming by on the highway, it was muted by the distance, sounding more like a spring-flood river than machinery. Nothing much used the canal any more, except sometimes an inboard motor boat cruising idly along, tourists. It was quiet enough in the field they could hear cicadas. In the far trees, crows.

Stalks of ripe fodder, still faintly green, lay heaped in long rows between the furrows. The men hopped down from the truck bed, handing out pitchforks. The woman took a pitchfork too, and began pitching the cut grass up into the truck. He said, No, you drive the truck along. He showed her where low gear was, and she found the brake on her own. The truck straddled the rows; they could work four rows at once, one on either side of the wheels and the two in the middle. She inched the truck forward; the pitching went so rapidly they had to ask her to go a little faster. The truck bed began to fill. The men had to reach higher and higher with each forkful. Thomas grunted as he reached up. His belly got in the way a little, but he was used to this. High above he saw a white half-moon, a day-moon. He smiled, thinking how the moon would increase while the white people were here and he could tell them moon stories. They were near the end of the third set of rows, working in a happy rhythm, when Thomas dropped his fork and lurched away from the truck.

For a moment he thought somebody had stabbed him with a prong by mistake, just below his right collarbone. He looked down. There was no blood. His legs dissolved beneath him. He found himself lying in the furrow, smelling the rich earth, hearing the crows, looking up at the day-moon. In the distance he heard the word “ambulance.” No, he croaked, no ambulance. But the man from New York was already dialing 911.

Thomas was aware of the humming of the highway across the canal and a faint monotonous bird call, a species he felt he should be able to name but could

not. He opened his eyes to twilight, without a moon; he blinked, focused, saw he was in a dim place. Have I died? he wondered. I must have; my string came to its end there in the hay field. But where are the spirits, the fathers and mothers, to lead me to the right place? He no longer smelled the earth; the air tasted of chemicals. He could lift his head just enough to see he still had his body, his belly swelling above his chest. His clothing had been replaced with a patterned fabric, the kind women make curtains out of. He frowned and let his head drop; he realized something was clamped across his nose and mouth. He tried to move his arm and found there were thin snakes attached to it, a red one and one you could almost see through. He ripped the red snake away with his other hand, found himself holding a rubber tube with a needle in it, a ruby drop pendant from its tip. He didn't know whether the tube had been putting blood into his body or taking it out. The place the needle had been stuck began seeping drops of red; he tried to put his finger on it and found another needle was taped into that hand. He ripped off the tape, the needle, the mask on his face.

The bird calls instantly became more rapid, more insistent. He saw an apparatus with jagged lines, thunderbird lines, moving across it, spiking up more and more frequently, the bird calling in rhythm with it, louder and louder. Now the spirits of the east, blue-clad, appeared around him. He was puzzled. His journey should be toward the west, not the east. They began talking urgently to each other, as if he were not there, and picking up the tubes and needles. He had not been in a hospital since his daughter was born, but suddenly he remembered and knew them for what they were.

No tubes! he thought he shouted. He began to pull the round sticky spots and their tails of wires off his chest. Mr. Bird! one of the nurses said. Mr. Bird! We're trying to help you! You've had a heart attack. Please! Let us help you.

The trilling bird became shrill.

No wires! No hospital medicine! He punched away their hands, their equipment. The man's voice said, I'll hold his arm; maybe you can get a sedative in.

My string has run out! he rasped. Let me go in peace!

What? What did you say? A nurse put her ear close to his mouth. The male voice said, Hold still, Chief! I need to get this drip back in!

Bring me my people, ordered Thomas Singing Bird. Bring my wife.

No can do, Chief, this is the ICU. No visitors.

The pitchfork stabbed his chest again, and then again. Thomas Singing Bird closed his eyes and began to sing the death song. The man said, Help me, Sue. I can't find a vein. They fumbled with his hand, his arm, pinched the flesh up. I can't either, the woman said. Let's try the carotid. He sang louder. His voice came out of his body like the primal rumblings of the earth, like a storm breaking, like a volcano wanting to erupt.

What's he saying? said the male nurse, still seeking an entry for his needle. I can't make it out, said the woman. It doesn't seem to be English. She stepped back, listening.

He seems to be…chanting, she said. Maybe…singing.

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