

Debra Di Blasi

Dead Languages

Last night I dreamt those we then called *Indians* came back to take what was theirs: land without scars. Horses standing asleep in raw prairies. Bison grazing. Coyotes yapping inside a copse of white oaks, and bears gnawing marrow.

The small tribe's chief—was he *MáñiXáñe*, was he *Great Walker*?—decreed the razing of our farmhouse, barn and fading red sheds, though the dismantling'd already begun. I walked in blooded moonlight. A mother suckling her infant watched me pass as if I'd strolled from a world of ghosts she could not possibly envision.

I had:

Skinny barefoot girl in grass-stained shorts, ragged pullover, horn-rimmed glasses and blonde pixie cut. Here inside dreaming I'd escaped my older self to return to me at ten, when I was more boy than girl, more *no one* than *some anyone* and happy about it. Me haunting Indians as they'd haunted me irrecoverable years vanished in the farm's caliginous woods.

How we dreaded the Osage and Iowany ghosts buried in shrouded pastures and knolls. Sensed their bones sunk in deep loam below plow blades; arrowheads and beads turned up and under again and again, each season's corn or soybeans or alfalfa weaving roots round chert and vertebrae.

Fearful and shamed, we were, by fair umbrage for what was stolen:

[*Bounty land* of forty-acre plats doled out by Presidents Buchanan and Pierce to soldiers who killed the Indians or each other in wars as monstrous as those to come, these to stay.]

When big summer clouds shifted light and shadow, a solemn ghost would appear at the periphery amid trees with trunks so black and towering they resembled burned pilasters of smoky temples.

Kestrel

All smoke, those tales we told ourselves. Wisps of truth rising from lying embers.

We galloped the farm's cow paths on make-believe ponies in games no white person inhabited, wanting desperately to belong to a tribe that would have us as we were: barefoot and unbridled on bareback pintos, seeking nothing but cool water and shade, a glimpse of wolf slipping away into a past without *Ma'unke* fences or guns—bows and arrows fairer, perhaps, certainly more silent than rifles, though every dying mammal's groan or squeal would anyway scatter the grackle flocks. As would the keening of the last Indian to leave the farm, depart its woods and graveyard of yellowing bones, just once turning to look back over a shoulder slung low, at the rain blowing in from the future—a verdant watercolor ruined.

Woodland Indians hunted rabbit and deer, fished the creek that those days would've run full, as no upstream dam had yet choked it off. They left behind what fell. They left.

Dagüre rají hna je?

Words waking me from the dream wherein I did not belong. The Chiwere language, the last native speakers dead since 1996, haunting. Still. And yet.

Why did you come back?

I don't know.

The bones of wood buildings, metal trash and rubber toys sink in deepening loam and loess. Time's a tumbler turned backward. The past comes unlocked. Populated. Then the door's barred. The moon's light dims.

I keep walking. Into a deeper night beyond night where Chiwere voices sing a rising and fading cacophony, descant with cantillating crickets and tree frogs, coyote yips, a bobcat's scream like a mad woman's dirge. Mine. Screaming, screaming mad, sorrowful, dreaming. Until, at last, all native ghosts are safe to go on living inside a demolished reassembled world.

