



2012 Second Place

Pueblo Dancer by Leslee Breene

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the village, the afternoon shadows close in.
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CHILD OF LIGHT WATCHES HER MOTHER count the money. The woman's short brown fingers rifle through a meager handful of bills: some twenties, tens, and fives gleaned from the Anglo tourists strolling through Old Town looking for bargains. She gazes out the window, across the broad valley from the *Rio San Jose* to the ancient Enchanted Mesa. Roaring westward, the bus veers off the highway toward the rising flat-topped butte.

Within the trance-like motion of the bus, she recalls young working women in city clothes, their stockinginged legs shimmering, their feet stepping smartly in high-heeled shoes. She would like to talk with her mother of these things, but she decides to keep them inside her own head.

When the bus driver pulls to a jerky stop, Child of Light lets her mother get off first. She follows, her dark head bent, as the woman falls into a familiar shamble of dragging her left foot to keep up with her right. Child of Light allows her gaze to alight briefly on the enlarged knobbed ankle above the worn tennis shoe, the foot that twists awkwardly inward with each faltering step. She paces herself to walk slowly at her mother's side to the shuttle bus that will take them to the top of the butte.

She remembers again her mother's story, that as a small child, the elders had called upon a pueblo shaman to rid her of the deformity. The shaman, an elderly man with prominent nose and very few teeth, had examined her and prayed over her, using all of his powers.

He was called back several times. When his potions and incantations failed to produce any visible change in the foot, the shaman had shaken his head and declared wearily, "I can not alter the commandment of the Kachina spirit."

Her mother's godparents, as was the custom, gave her an Indian name. Limping Deer. Some of her family still call her this, but she prefers the Span-

ish name Maria.

The pueblo dwellings, dreary, sand-hued, await them. As they walk through the village, the afternoon shadows close in. Around every corner Child of Light feels the dark one, waiting. His furtive gaze follows her from gray pools where he stands hidden—the one they call Blood Hawk.

Approaching their house near the edge of the village, she sees her father open the screen door, shield his face against the waning sun. Although much older than her mother, he still has an imposing physique: broad shoulders, barrel chest. Running Buffalo.

A picture flashes before her of her father in their tribal Buffalo Dance in full buffalo headdress with horns, naked to the waist except for beaded collar, and his white ceremonial fringed kilt and moccasins.

Inside the semi-darkness of the two-story adobe, they go about preparing the evening meal. Child of Light knows her mother is tired from the long day, the hour's commute to and from Albuquerque. She assists her by mixing the tortilla batter and chopping onions and tomatoes for the sauce. Her younger sister, Raven Feather, sets the table.

Their mother stands over the cook stove, beads of sweat pop out on her round face. She pats her forehead and upper lip with the apron tied at her waist.

Entering the house, Pale Moon bangs the screen door loudly. "Did you get the sheep in and lock the gate?" Running Buffalo asks.

"Yeah, Pop." Pale Moon, at fifteen a replica of the older man, affects self-assurance and has his own quick wit. "They're put to bed, and they promised not to be *baaad*." He uses American slang to rile their father. Child of Light sends her brother a cautioning glance. She knows Running Buffalo prefers the native Keresan to be spoken in their home but this time he doesn't reprimand.

During the evening meal at the kitchen table, talk turns to the upcoming Corn Dance. Her father chuckles. "Think you can last the whole day, my son, and not faint from the heat like last year?"

Pale Moon sits ramrod straight, puffs up his chest. "I can dance as long and as strong as you, Father."

A knock comes at the door and a familiar figure slips inside and stands against the rough-stuccoed wall. Blood Hawk listens to family discourse; his eyes, two slits, stare at her as she gathers plates from the table. She acknowledges him briefly, forcing a smile at the corners of her trembling lips. Why does he have to come by almost every night? She wishes he were here to see her brother instead of her.

Later she goes outside to talk with Blood Hawk. They sit on a stone bench near the plaza.

"Go out with me this weekend," he commands.

For a time she is silent, thinking.

She remembers the last time she went out with him, after their graduation a few weeks before. He drank too much, spilled beer on her dress, and almost got into a fight. When he brought her home, he'd roughly kissed her before she could go inside. His bruising hands had pulled her hard against him, his sinewy body demanding more from her than she was willing to give. The sour taste of him had repelled her.

Her father favors Blood Hawk, the son of an admired elder, so at last she agrees to go to the party with him.

The next day, two of the village women stop by the house: Antonia Black Crow and her pregnant seventeen-year-old daughter, Ramona. They sit around the kitchen table. Maria serves strong coffee and relates their venture into Albuquerque. "So many rich tourists, all looking at our fine woven goods."

"But do they buy?" Antonia examines Maria's soft features with eyes as small and black as watermelon seeds.

"Of course, of course. They always buy our clothing and belts. We make more there than we do in our own shops." Ramona, her swollen belly meeting the edge of the table, switches her weight on the vinyl-upholstered chair and gazes blandly over at Child of Light.

But she, the eldest daughter of Maria, is looking past Ramona's bumpy silhouette, out the two-panel kitchen window

to the reflections of yesterday: the city shops, the enticing book stores, the restaurants, the busy exchange of the market place. Places of adventure—unlike the pueblo curio shop where she sells native pottery.

"Ramona looks healthy," Maria offers. "When is your baby due?" In two months, the young woman replies. Her husband is excited, it being their first.

"Can you imagine how many book stores there are in the city?" Child of Light says, still staring out the window.

Antonia Black Crow scowls at her. "You should stop thinking about books and start thinking about a husband—and having your *own* babies."

She lowers her gaze to the table, feeling the burning in her cheeks. The room grows silent. When she looks up, her mother is removing the coffee mugs, clearly impatient with their guests. But she says nothing.

The upstairs bedroom that Child of Light shares with her sister is quiet, a refuge. She is sitting on her bed, leaning back against the pillows, when her mother appears at the door.

"Did Antonia upset you?" Maria asks, tentatively entering the room.

"She is a scowling woman."

Maria laughs without opening her mouth and nods in agreement.

Child of Light stares down at the woven blanket that was made on her mother's loom.

Moving to the window, her mother pulls back the faded curtain. "You are not yourself lately. Will you tell me what's wrong?"

Child of Light shakes her head, fighting back unwanted tears. "I don't know who I am, Mom. I don't know where I belong."

Maria looks startled, then goes over to the bed and slips her arm around her shoulder. "You are my first-born. God's promise of life beyond myself. You came into this world with your eyes open and the light of early dawn streaming into the room. I knew the light would always show you the truth."

"But that doesn't tell me who I am, or what I want to be."

Her mother points at several papers tacked to the wall behind the bed. "Look at these! Your school reports, your teacher's letters of praise for your high grades. Your high school diploma. You are the first one in our family to graduate from high school!"

Child of Light absorbs her mother's obvious pride.

"This is who you are."

"But...don't you ever feel...*unfinished*?"

Maria limps to the doorway. Then she says matter-of-factly, "I am complete. I have you children, I love your father and our people. I do what they expect of me."

"Don't you ever wish you had the courage to do something for yourself?"

Maria frowns as if caught off guard. She regards Child of Light for one long moment, silently turns and, dragging her bad foot, slowly descends the stairs.

Tn the dream, many people are hovering around her, garbed in tribal costume, chanting. She wishes they would go away and let her do this thing by herself. Her body lunges beneath her. Then an elder woman sets a squirming bundle in her lap. Above her, Blood Hawk nods approvingly. She has delivered his child. She lifts the blanket to see—two heads—two heads attached to one tiny red body. This is a terrible mistake! She tries to tell everyone that this is not her baby.

One small face starts to speak to her in her native Keresan. The other little wrinkled face wants to tell her something in another language. She strains toward them, but can't understand.

She can't understand a word they are saying.

HER WEEKEND DATE WITH BLOOD HAWK does not go well. They drive to Grants, thirty miles away, for a barbecue. Drinking enough to become surly, Blood Hawk demands her full attention by clamping a heavy hand on her arm when she attempts to talk to anyone else. When they part, she suggests it would be better not to go out together for awhile. "We just don't have much in common."

A sneer spreads across his menacing face. "You will be my woman!" He holds her in an iron grip.

Gasping in pain, she breaks away from him. His sharp nails leave crimson half-moons on her bare arms.

Inside the house, she's surprised to find her father still up, watching an old western on TV. As she moves past his chair, he yawns and rubs his eyes. "How was the party?"

She gazes at the floor. "It was okay."

"You two getting serious?"

A small, barbed-wire knot twists in the pit of her stomach. "No, Dad, we're not. I told him I didn't want to see him for awhile."

"What do you mean, not see him?"

She's amazed at how swiftly her father lifts his bulky frame from the chair. "You and Blood Hawk grew up together. There is no better husband for you in the village."

Look at my arms, she wants to scream. *Look at my soul*. But she forces herself to nod obediently and, with hot tears pricking her eyes, runs from the room.

Blood Hawk doesn't come to the house all the next week. Relief fills her, but she avoids crossing her father's path.

The morning sun mantles the backs of the tourists as they hover expectantly around the periphery of the village plaza.

With barely a cloud floating on the horizon, this June Saints Day promises to be hot. Child of Light, taking her position in the line of dancers, straightens her sister's *tablita* on her small head. In another line, standing in front of her brother, Blood Hawk sends her a sidelong glare. She avoids his eyes, swallows down her rising fear.

A drumbeat fills her ears. The dancers file from the *kiva*. The older men are the first, dressed in vivid shirts, white pants, and moccasins.

Up the middle of the plaza moves a young Indian beating powerfully on a great belly drum. Next to him, walks another man carrying a long pole from which parrot and hummingbird feathers dangle.

In quick, marching, shuffle steps, two long lines of dancers come. Men and women alternating. The men, with clay-streaked chests, jet hair falling to their wide shoulders, wear white ceremonial kirtles embroidered in red and green. Strapped to their legs, small bells jingle and hollow deer hooves rattle. The women shuffle barefooted in the simmering dust. Sheathed in black dresses, one shoulder bared, their long raven hair plays with the occasional gust

of wind. Their arms and necks shimmer with silver bracelets, strings of turquoise and coral. On each head is tied a slender *tablita*. They carry sprigs of evergreen.

The two human lines stop and face each other; Child of Light and the younger children taper out on one end. When the flag carrier dips his long pole over their heads, a thunderous drumbeat captures her ears.

Her pulse quickens in expectation of this ritual that is more than a prayer for rain. Her father's story of the Corn Maidens is vivid in her memory. He has told her, "In our mythology, eight sisters fled in fear from a too-amorous god, and now we entreat them each planting season to return and multiply their seed kernels in the earth." Running Buffalo also revealed that, "The corn is part of the Corn Mother, our Mother Earth. It is a part of us."

The old men chant as they form an arc before the two lines of waiting dancers. Sprigs of evergreen lift and fall. Then comes the sound of tinkling bells and clatter of deer hooves.

The dancers fall into a great, slow-moving double circle, each woman on the outer circle a shadow at the heels of her man. A powerful down-trodding stamp, insistent and heavy from the men...then faster as the drum quickens to double time.

As the circle turns, Child of Light sees her mother, Limping Deer, behind her father. She is *dancing*. Her eyes are unbelieving as they meet her mother's.

This small, proud woman has hidden her deformity in the shadows since childhood but now, in full costume, bravely dances in subtle rhythm with the drum. As beautiful as any Pueblo woman in the village. Her mother's feet, in unison with all others, caress the dusty earth.

An instant's pause. A shrill yell. A rattle of gourds. The blood beat of drum pierces Child of Light's heart, and then the sky.

The men play out motions of rain falling to earth, sweat running off their bronze bodies in rivulets. The dance continues on throughout the day. The sun beats down through gathering clouds. Groups of dancers change, repeat the chant, the steps, until the first swell of cool air glances off the mesa from the plain.

As if willed from the clouds, the rain comes.

IN THE DEEP OF NIGHT, beneath a full hunter's moon, Child of Light perches on the rocky edge of the plateau. The valley below is a moonscape; the pueblo at her back is still. Only the faint memory of drumbeats echoes in her ears. Before her, across the wide valley, looms the *Mesa Encantada* as far as her eyes can see to the right and to the left. Enchanting as all the legends of the Acoma and the Laguna, it even now holds mystery, its own secrets.

A coyote howls out on the plain. Child of Light hugs her knees to her chest feeling goose bumps skitter down her naked arms. Overhead, the stars blaze back at her thousands of light years away, but tonight, near enough to

reach out and touch. Many nights in the past, she has come here with her brother and sister to study and pick out the constellations, to speak of what paths their lives will take.

Her mind reflects on today's tribal dance. Most brilliant of all is the dancing figure of her mother among the other Pueblo women—bolder than the others. Braver. Never again will she, the daughter of Limping Deer, feel shame for her mother's deformity, or pity. Only pride now fills her heart. And a certain sadness. Her life path cannot be the same as her mother's.

A cool wind sweeping up from the valley floor lifts her to her feet. She brushes away the wetness from her cheeks and climbs back over the rocks.

BEFORE DAWN, CHILD OF LIGHT takes up her woven satchel packed with some of her belongings. On the kitchen table, she leaves a note and

fills a vase with wildflowers. With one glance over her shoulder, her eyes catch the bright blur of pink beard tongue, blue-violet lupine, golden trumpet-bush. Just as their seeds must scatter on the wind to take root in distant soil, so their flowers will return again.

Silently she opens the screen door and is gone.

From the bus, she watches the early sunlight glide across the mesa to the west. To the east, the road follows the *Rio San Jose*. The bus follows the road and the river to new life.



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