

ERIKA PERLOFF

Edges, 2012
Pastel on board, 14 x 11 in



courtesy: the artist

DENI Y. BÉCHARD

A Song from Far Away

When Joseph was five, his mother placed the fiddle on the kitchen table, its dark varnish nicked and rubbed to wood in places. Beyond the open door, gulls called and flashed over the ocean, the wind rising and pulsing.

“I cannot hope,” she said, “that you’ll be as brave or as good a man as my brother, Louis, but I can ask that you be half as good a fiddler as he was.”

Already in Joseph’s ears, as if inside waves and wind, was the sound not of his dead uncle’s fiddle, which he’d never heard, but of his less brave and less good father’s—the exuberant rhythms played on the docks, in the dance hall, or even on the stoop of the house, in the evening, when there was no fun to be had elsewhere and nothing else worth doing.

Its music would follow Joseph through provinces and countries, through lives so different that if his various selves met at a crossroads, they’d be wary strangers and refuse to shake hands.

He would carry the fiddle over three continents and through two wars.

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“All the Empire’s people have been scattered out across the world,” his mother told him, as if she had pity for the Scots and Irish. But she had none. She told her stories, of her Acadian ancestors, whom the British deported from Nova Scotia in 1755, “splitting families and dumping them here or there along the coast all the way down to New Orleans.” She showed Joseph this on the map, how their ancestors had to climb—“back up the continent,” she said, and moved her finger up the East Coast of the United States as if it were a sea cliff above which sat New Brunswick. They resettled in Caraquet, on the southern shore of the Baie des Chaleurs, across from the Gaspé Peninsula. But in January 1875, eight years after Confederation, the provincial government passed the Common School Act with the intention—“*avec l’intention*,” she reiterated—of eliminating not just Catholic values but the French language itself.

“That was when my brother, Louis, your uncle, Louis Mailloux—don’t you forget his name—joined the other men to organize riots and show those damned English constables that we were the rightful owners of that place.”