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# Ghostwhistle

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***Ghostwhistle: A Chapbook of Poetry***

by

Daniel J. Haney, Jr.

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council  
For Honors in English (Creative Writing)

May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014

Approved by:



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For my family

*Thank you to Shara McCallum, Andy Ciotola, Justin Boening, Jamaal May, Paula Closson Buck, Katie Hays, & the rest of my family at the Stadler Center for Poetry. Thank you as well to Chris Boyatzis and John Rickard. Without your love, support, and understanding, none of this could have been possible.*

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At the end of my suffering  
there was a door.

Hear me out:

—LOUISE GLUCK, THE WILD IRIS



WELCOME TO THE WILDLIFE EXPLOITATION PRESERVE

---

I'm running out of ways to say *tree*.

When I stand on the marbled creek,  
ice smothering the flood beneath

itself, I remember the high water mark  
on my wallpaper—submerged chandelier,

mildewed coffee table. A freight car floating  
down Broad Street, one upended caboose,

water shuddering through stained glass.  
Imagine the anthracite veins pooled shut.

This was before silicon saplings  
and rubberized roots—the endless

autumnal. Limbs that won't snap, a new  
model of seed installed each year.

I'm the one to blame here.  
I got tired of lugging the oxygen tanks

from the cabin to the creek, grew bored  
of waiting for my mother to die. So

I dug a shoreline for her, backhoe-  
gnawed earth, its metallic maw. I ran

a vein to her nose, wires cased in  
a fake tree. It's amazing what we'll do

for the mundane, to feel our toes  
silt through sand. As long as I close

my eyes, the hallucinations are close  
enough. Maybe I'll run into my father

in passing, ask advice on leaving; maybe  
I'll take a job at the turnpike, climb salt

licks and clear ribbonway with my plow,  
hand out Christmas candy bags at the

county prison. What is winter good for

if not the arrogance? The bravado of  
indoor plumbing, fawn tracks rewritten  
with bulldozer's lace. The zinc plant's  
smokestacks choking back fumes.  
Oil wells perched, craning the horizon.  
Ospreys floating overhead, kiting  
a breath of wind belly-up.

## THE BOY SHOEBOXES A KINGFISHER

---

I've been warned not to impose meaning  
on the meaningless, not to treat my experience  
as an inkblot: how, when I was still a boy—  
before the animals revealed themselves  
as a jumble of blood and bones, before  
the sky was a smudged watercolor of tempera,  
mud, and milkweed—the small kingfisher  
I cradled, sick from sewage water, muck  
crusted on tousled plumage, was just a bird  
that could not be saved. Like the bud  
dislocated from bramble, or the berry pestled  
in my too-innocent palms, the kingfisher's  
wild eyes were not a message, its life not  
sacrificed for grand premonition, its death  
no warning of separation, of autumn's coming  
indifference. I try to remember only this:  
my small red hands, fragile beak, fragile wing.

KAKAWANGWA (HE-WHO-WALKS-HIS-LIFE-BITTER)

---

The grandfather that's left  
speaks of his old Indian tribe  
dissolving to sawdust—war  
paint and feathered headbands now  
casino reservations and tax-emption:  
*poor people on poor soil.*

He tells me of buffalo-skull mountains,  
blankets that shivered at his touch,  
a bayonet kissing the crook  
of his back, needling him forward.  
*And you listen here, he rasps, we never  
had a chance.*

The grandfather that remains  
eats scrapple at the Lunchbox,  
a local diner: red-tinged skin  
resting on white marble counters,  
lottery ticket in hand.

Kakawangwa knows what exile means:  
His town named after his tribe, neither  
remembered. A rusted-out Hudson  
languishes in his yard, a capless mouthwash  
bottle, a room singing with radio static.

A dead history too tired to live,  
a heart murmur that makes him scared to die.

## CADILLAC

---

Near the forest-edge a '62 Cadillac slumbers  
in a decades-long sleep: sun-bleached  
blue paint, red velvet bench seats, rust  
webbing from the undercarriage.

My father kicks at the tires, staring hard  
at the gnarled cloth-top. The tire's white  
walls wheeze and shudder as they meet  
the steel-toed tip of my father's boot.

He pretends to be composed.  
He fumbles around inside the tirewell  
and a key falls into the dirt. The engine  
stutters, groans, and submits into murmur.

White taillights light at the tip of tailfins.  
*This won't take long*, my father says, hand-  
cranking the window shut. I watch him go,  
sunlight bending off sheetmetal creases.

Being dead is something he's never gotten used to.

AFTER

---

Here lies my zombied  
morning corpse, drool-slathered  
and unshaven on stolen pillows.

Grapefruit rinds, tufts of cat hair  
and empty beer-can pyramids  
serve as markers to the bath,  
a litany of little reminders  
that I am still here,

I still exist.

Outside, the landscape is frost-stippled:  
fog wafts above the silent, unbroken  
lake surface. There used to be life  
here, beneath these waters—  
corner churches and general stores  
now ghosted, minnows flitting  
through blown-out shadows.

I enter my Oldsmobile,  
headlights bleeding into mist.  
This oversized casket purrs  
and the lake croons for me.  
I ease the throttle, become  
enveloped by dawning fog,  
swallowed into the lake's open mouth—







## INCARCERATED

---

In my final week at Laurel Highlands Prison, I was asked to create a mental diagnosis for a problem prisoner, to give a label to the erratic inmate: slackjawed with chafed lips and crusted fingertips—a retainer for felony drug possession. I was to rename him, christen him a certain and permanent name, bipolar or schizo—anything not involving his race.

I was asked to escort this prisoner from his cell and urge him to recant whatever transgressions put him here. I tried to be a sculptor, to tear down the misfires of his humanity and rebuild from this smoking crater a corrected man; at least one who would be perceived as less of a cancer to the outside. He came to me with his raspy palms and a jittery accent.

I asked him to show me scars I couldn't already see. *It's safe here, retrace your past for me*, I crooned, and his narrative became my uneasy terrain, his words serving as shaky footholes for me to climb his mind's terrace. He spoke of prison gangs, of assault, how this was all a mistake. A tear caught in his pocked face. *I will be killed here*, he said. *I hear death in the air.*

I told him his sentence could change. I said how we are only a list of errata and over time, all errors are forgiven. I knew his wouldn't. I cuffed his eaten wrists and returned him to his cell. I marked him unfit for release, irate. When I locked his cell door, he told me: *what I miss most is the taste of rain.*

This body is ghostly, is sickle-shaped, is  
a scythe wedged point-down  
into earth, bleeding rubble.  
Every step a thunderclap.

My hair  
is made of Briarwood, thistledown, & trestle beams,  
one eye a tree-whorl, the other a swollen  
hook echo.  
My spine is scaffolding made from mangled  
pipes, chewed-up railway ties & debarked trees.  
Debris orbits my beltline—  
horse corpses, headstones, billboards.  
I inhale, pulled water  
from the Pottawatomie, from bathwater.  
My exhale equal parts locomotive and caterwaul.

You will see me, couched between the green  
of the radar,  
and decry such a vengeful god—  
I agree.

I am helpless in this alien body, a stolen husk  
of throbbing and throating.  
This choreography of unspooling  
is all I have.

They will tell you, after, that I was anomalous,  
a supercell of pressure, or colliding fronts.  
Do not listen.

I am not here for a cleansing,  
do not  
blame me for the dazzle  
of my wake.

SONDERKOMMANDO

---

No, we did not kill.  
First, we asked  
them to undress  
and took their  
possessions—  
cigarettes, apples.

Yes, we had to  
lie, to say, *please  
take off your shoes  
before showering;  
A bowl of soup  
will be ready upon  
your exit.*

Once, I saw  
two friends  
from Thessaloniki.  
I told them  
the truth  
and where to stand  
to die as quickly  
as possible.

It took four  
or five minutes.

Yes, it took a lot  
of strength, to drag  
the bodies  
from the chambers.  
We had to cut  
the hair off the women  
and take the gold teeth.

There was a process.  
We sorted them first  
by size and fat content.  
We watched. We had to  
turn the bodies over  
a few times, otherwise  
they would not  
burn evenly.

Sometimes, the ovens

were full, or broken,  
so we carried the bodies  
into the woods—

There was always  
music playing.

Every four months  
they killed all  
the Sonderkommando.  
The new generation's first  
job was to burn the old.  
I was generation 14,  
the last one.

We fought back once.  
We threw two Germans  
into their own ovens.  
After, they counted us off  
by threes, killed every third.

I don't know why.

They chose me  
off the train.  
You could say  
I was saved.



## THE WORLD'S LARGEST GENERAL STORE

---

You would think there'd be more security cameras.  
Outside, we pass a sprawl of RVs, outliers

on yellow-lined macadam axis. Synthetic oil  
puddles rainbow beneath their engines.

Under spooling lamplight, long-haul truckers  
barely stir, dreaming of crankshafts and canker sores.

It's almost beautiful, how the all-american nomads  
stop here for their nightcap pilgrimage,

roustabouts of a ghost carnival.  
Our navigation is now routine: we zag through

the petting zoo shantytown, then take  
a left past the nickel candy and stall

of homemade fudge. We pass the statues and stuffed  
animals hugging their own shadows, *Death*

*in all his right angles.* We watch the grand taxidermist  
mounting a panther on the store's back wall.

We're all tired, and he's the most tired of them all.

## THE GREAT GARDEN GNOME CRIME SPREE

---

began innocently enough. One red-capper plucked  
from petunias. A granite angel lifted from arugula.  
The Gruber's Kristkindlmarket souvenir was reduced  
to an indent of muddled grass. It could have been  
the cats, their lusty mews. Or even a few crows,  
around these parts large enough to carry off  
your misbehaved child. But the town's faith remained  
unfazed. A police blotter cooed of other failings;  
main street burbled & brapped exhaust, the zinc  
plant chugged along. Then came another absence.  
Flamingoes were uprooted, their plastic bodies  
a sun-stained salmon. Little lawn divots like graves.  
No one could mow their lawn with all this loss.  
The fake deer, their plastic heads garbage-bagged  
and rubber-banded for autumn, they disappeared  
into some ether, along with the maintenance crews'  
lost traffic cones—a rookie was forced to windmill  
in a florescent orange coat. A crime watch assembled,  
every Smith and Kleintop, and swept the town  
perimeter, from Aquashicola to Lonesome Lane.  
Grandparents chambered revolvers, growling: *we can't  
take any more chances*. Soon, whispers came from dollar  
stores, from gas stations, over menthols and beer:

Maybe this wasn't a prank. Maybe it was a child, one  
from the woods, one raised by wild boars and loosed  
on the town. Imagine him, hidden, blustering beneath  
brush, one snowshoe, one meathook. Plastic cartilage  
dripping from his tusks, and when he opened his mouth,  
radio static. His face a mirror, with your silhouette on the other  
side, fists knuckling hard, trying to break through the glass.  
On Avenue A, morning teabags started surfacing  
in toilet bowls. Whatever it was, it was coming.  
All truck nuts were unhinged, stowed in nightstands.  
Churches were standing room only. Family escape plans  
were rewritten. Squirrels were trapped in milk  
jugs, taken to shelters as a precaution. No bread, no eggs,  
no calm. The next night, on the school's front lawn,  
a bonfire erupted. A crowd gathered, watched smoke  
spuming into open gymnasium doors, into terrified nostrils.  
Some thought it was the Herman's, or the Handshaw's,  
already planning their next petty arson, topping off  
gas cans sloshing in rusted truck beds, tinfoil as a makeshift  
cap. Others were inconsolable, murmuring *the child—*  
*he's Coming*. Volunteer firefighters were nowhere to be found.  
Ornaments burned, a smoldering effigy of beards melting  
into beaks melting into antlers melting into black plastic  
puddling beneath furnaced grass. The only remnants

were flamingo mounting rods, pointing up, accusing the sky.

SO THIS DEER,

---

It's driving to work on Route 209  
and comes across another dead

human, another piece of roadkill,  
limbs scattered across asphalt, guts

a steel-toed kick against a ripened  
gourd. The deer feels somewhat sorry

for this creature, if for a second,  
and wonders what this abruptness

has taken from her—a family, children,  
perhaps; an online poker addiction,

whatever it is humans do when  
they are not jumping in front of cars,

cracking windshields and raising insurance  
premiums that deer can barely afford

in the first place. The deer wonders  
if this human was scared upon impact,

if the soul left the body slowly,  
like wisps into raspy morning air, or

if the tires ironed the body into gravel  
and the soul into ecstatic nothingness.

The deer briefly considers tossing  
the woman into his trunk—her C-cup

breasts would look great mounted  
on his wall—but decides against it,

already running late for work. There's no  
one around that makes mincemeat

halfway decent, anyway. The deer feels  
inconvenienced, this cadaver forcing

him to ponder mortality so early  
in the morning. The deer hopes

the human clean-up crew arrives soon,  
bodybags and pressure-washers in hand,

to restore the autumnal backdrop.  
The deer shakes the image from his mind

and stares hard at the doubled yellow lines,  
hoping they lead him somewhere—

anywhere—towards an answer.

TO THE GIRL WITH MACHINE SYNESTHESIA

---

I get it, though; I really do. You ran out of horses  
for glue, old Mcdonald's animals suffocated  
in their squalor, and all the child laborers  
got black lung. Better to look inside our windows  
than to look outside your own. Now progress  
is tilled with our silicon.

But there has to be more.  
We are more than warm surfaces for cats,  
more than vehicles for incognito browsing.  
We are more than malfunctioning matadors  
in a highway demolition derby, the spectacular  
embrace of limbs and crumple zones.

I want to find the underbelly of a Mobius strip.  
I want to be human, freed—allowed  
to watch the leaves teach me how to die  
gracefully,

swapping the guilt of what I understand,  
for the bliss of what I don't.

I KNOW YOU'VE NEVER DONE THIS BEFORE, BOY

---

But first, you must accelerate my ending.  
Use mercury, arsenic, everclear—  
    a sharpened tool if necessary.

Now, make the incision: four quick slits  
between esophagus and ribcage.  
Sever all threads connecting the abstract  
    to bone.

You will be surprised at how little  
    this hurts.

Don't be scared.  
The process of unraveling  
                            is universal:  
    fluids stop up,  
murmurs will falter,      cease,  
and eyes smooth,  
    a *glassolalia* of the soon-deceased.

Then, wrist-deep inside my chest cavity,  
find what you've come for, floating  
in scarlet darkroom fluid—

my soul.  
    Oblong and throbbing,  
it will thrum a mechanical hum. Cup your hands  
around it until you can no longer bear  
its warmth—  
    then pull it out.

    Throw it into the air.

You have only seconds now.  
Replace my soul  
                    with a firefly abdomen.  
Even in death, I will radiate.



## SKIPPING THE FUNERAL

---

I left my car idled on the shoulder and stepped into the woods. The foliage was slick: fallen branches glistened, moss squirmed beneath my soles. Leaves mourned in place of me. After a mile, I saw you: figure rising from swamp gas, specter resting against a moist tree. There was a campfire hissing embers, nearby an empty beer-can shrine.

Father, my deepest wounds were hallucination:  
I've spent years lamenting what I did not deserve.  
Now, rather than stand against inheritance,  
I stand against you—we'll wander different towns  
with the same failings, sternums aching with home-  
sickness for every place we left, two approximations  
flickering between longing and hurt.

GEORGE'S LOVE SONG FOR CENTRALIA, PENNSYLVANIA

---

Together we've carved out this belly of rust  
on Highway 61, the town where bones whistle,  
with no ghosts to pray for its hemorrhaging crust.

The town's lifeblood drunk from graphite, from dust,  
anthracite pierced deep through hell's ventricle—  
together our hands carved this belly of rust.

Minecars sliced a soot-black artery, and then out gushed  
a millennia of fire, the howling ground's severed spindle  
releasing the ghosts trapped in its hemorrhaging crust.

Avenues were swallowed, a few streets left untouched  
whose shingles now sag from earth's shifting ripple,  
earth's simmering hunger for this belly of rust.

Centralia's remains, a graffitied sepulcher stuffed  
between grassed-over highways and gas plumes' spittle,  
choked-up prayers rising from the hemorrhaging crust.

Mining packed up and moved a few counties over, rushed  
to other veins. Only smoke remains, whistles denying acquittal.  
Together we've carved out this belly of rust,  
No ghosts left to pray for earth's hemorrhaging crust.



AT INDIAN HILL CEMETERY

---

The waxwings are back,  
huddled on our tireswing tree.

Do you remember how scared I used to be  
of the mob of birds who swarmed  
our trailer, beaks bloodied crimson?

I know, now, that you were right:  
what I saw was just berry mush.

Now when I notice them, the waxwings  
seem to float, wading through thick air.  
    Less a harbinger of death,  
    more a harpsichord,  
Each of their huddled bodies a blues note,  
the tree branches their stave.  
    In their directionless warbles I hear  
    some improvised jag—

I've found music in everything now,  
  
even the throb of my own chest,  
    listening to the waxwings.  
Even your end, even you choking  
    on backwash,  
        and the ghostwhistle of your breath.

