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Ghostwhistle

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Ghostwhistle: A Chapbook of Poetry

by

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

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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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Hear me out:  

—Louise Gluck, The Wild Iris
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.
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.
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—
HOW MY GRANDFATHER CHOOSES THE TREE

First, it must sound poetic—
cedar, cypress, or shagbark.

It must be removed
from the towns, the roads.

It must be empty.
No killdeer, no grackle.

It must border a clearing,
by a creek, enough room

for the crowd to gather,
pose as the photographer

    slips
beneath his dark curtain.

It must be climbed.
Gnarled

    footholds,
knotted stumps.

It must have a branch
that will not snap

from the rope’s jerk,
or just after.
AT THE BARBEQUE IN BIRMINGHAM LAST NIGHT

The hellhounds had found him.
A slab of night, he chugged,
wheezed, sputtered,
collapsed.
They lassoed him with a horsewhip,
belt-buckled the body,
bruises stippled like
halos.

Kerosene dripped from a greasy jug.
A match tossed into the brush—
a woodcoffin of strawkindling and bone.
Fire engulfed the body, not the screams.

My grandfather told me:
be a good Christian boy.
Listen to god. Listen to elders.
Don’t be denied heaven.

I sit in my grandfather’s attic of asbestos,
bibles, and fishhooks.
On the back of the postcard,
he’d scrawled:
at the barbeque in Birmingham last night—
nigger got it good.

In the postcard, faces,
strawbrimmed and cigarlipped, huddled
around a catalpa crematorium,
mouths frozen in the shape
of justice, eyes piercing the blackest smoke,
sanctuary nowhere to be found.

I ask my younger brother what the word
lynch means.
The football player, he says
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.
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.
III
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 menison
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.
IV
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,
ever’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.
HOW MY GRANDFATHER CHOOSES THE TREE

First, it must sound poetic—
cedar, cypress, or shagbark.

It must be removed
from the towns, the roads.

It must be empty.
No killdeer, no grackle.

It must border a clearing,
by a creek, enough room

for the crowd to gather,
pose as the photographer

   slips
beneath his dark curtain.

It must be climbed.
Gnarled

   footholds,
knotted stumps.

It must have a branch
that will not snap

from the tire’s swing,
or the splash after.
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 berrymush.

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.
I, TOO, HAVE BUILT A NEST

The base is newspaper, missing
persons report’s black ink rain-smudged,
meaning the names have gone missing with the bodies.

When they resurface, formless, they will find me,
as you have found me,
and we will whistle together, whistle

beneath the cattails and fronds,
behind peeled back drywall, draw
a new cartography where less has been lost.

For warmth, a headlamp stolen from a miner,
coated in canary dust lungsoot.
The nestwall’s thatched with shoelaces,

once dangling on a branch over a gorge, a boot brimming
with rainwater.
Almost anything can be repurposed.

For safety, here’s a few german pins, plucked
from herringbone coats. I have a leftover
prosthetic leg or two—
this one leaks motor oil.

Fill yourself with my miscellany. Help me
stack my trinkets,
together we’ll sit atop my throne of baubles and phantom limbs.

Remember: the leaves spiraling around us
don’t stand for anything. You,
you with fingers of wisps, bonesticks of capillaries and hangnails,

I know what you want; we both want
to be cured.
We’ll have to settle for being born.