



THE PRISONER OF HAIKU

G O R D O N . H e n r y , J r .

He never saw himself as a prisoner, at least as far as I can know. And of course he carries another name, but I use the name "the prisoner" as a reference to the years he spent in prison for idealistic crimes. He received ten years for burning down liquor stores, federally funded enterprises, and other imposing white structures, on and around the Fineday reservation. Apparently, he lost his voice many years before that in a distant government boarding school. A few teachers in the school didn't like the way he continuously spoke his own native language in school, so they punished him. Two strong men with the force of God and Jesus who knows what else dragged him outside on a bitter wind-chilled Minnesota day and tied him to an iron post. They left him then without food, without water, through the night. Somehow the men believed the force of the cold, the ice hand of winter would reach out and take the boy by the throat and silence his native language. The other boys looked

out the windows of their quarters, but they saw only tree shapes through snow slanting, as far as the light of the building let their eyes reach. Even so, they heard the punished boy screaming in defiance all night, defending the language, calling wind, calling relatives, singing, so he wouldn't forget. The screaming went on all night, and in the morning, on a bright winter day, when the school fathers went out to untie him, the boy could speak no more. No matter how fiercely or how often they beat him, the boy would not, could not speak. The teachers' tactic worked on the boy: He no longer spoke his native language. But the punishment went further, deeper than the imposition of social structure: The boy couldn't speak English either. When he opened his mouth to try, less than a whisper stirred air in an inaudible act of diminished physical volition. Boys who were close to him then said that though they heard nothing, they felt something: a coolness floated out of his mouth and went directly to their ears to the point where—the boys claimed—their hearing was frozen in time. That is, though they walked away from the boy with their frozen words, they felt the breath-held syllables melt in their heads later, in words of the Anishinaabe language, and still later in Native translations of circumstances and relationships that they never would have thought of without remembering the cold in their ears. Moreover, boys who went to the same boarding school, years later, testified to hearing Native words whirling up with every snow from sundown to sunrise in their winters at that place.

I know this: I slept in the ruins of the boarding school last December, waiting four nights for snow, and I heard the voice of the boy. What was spoken is untranslatable, immutable, subject to semantic contexts of pain most people can't fathom in the world in which they hear and speak. Yet the voice had a strength, a powerful resilience.

As for the boy, he drifted back to the reservation where he became a silent man of hands, a sculptor, then a political artist, an invidious communicator of visual forms. He made a living that way until he turned to acts of sabotage, for him another form

of art. For the sabotage was never performed without the grace and idealism of an artist. When he burned liquor stores, when he burned federally funded structures, he mixed flammables so magnificently the buildings burned in colors and fireworks that left the reservation and nearby communities gasping "oh [incredulous] mys." One time his fire left a smoke that drifted into the shape of a human face. People who saw it swear the face was of an old one, the first bringer of light, or of one who floated in a stone white canoe. On another occasion his fireworks illuminated the night with the words "The Treaty of 1837." On the night of his greatest political burning, on the night of his seventh fire, on the night in which the flames reached up, exploding bottles, licking the dark with colors and room cracklings, on the night people gathered to see in the flames an old lodge, ancestors within the lodge, throwing melted clocks into the air, burning the country-and-western ambience, of chairs and wall hangings, pointing to the melting jukebox, singing instead healing songs through that wasting machinery, to tell the people the lodge is still open, on that night the FBI found the silent man and arrested him among his cache of art materials in an abandoned barn near the state game refuge.

What could he do? Speak in his own defense? Nod his head with his hand on the Bible and convey the truth in a series of still-lives, or antlered sculptures, for a jury who didn't understand his artistic aims? For a jury who had been selected by two lawyers, one of whom would represent him without knowing what he could say? He resorted to one last symbolic act. He made a shirt and painted the words "guilty" and "not guilty" on the front and back. Then just before he entered the courtroom, he put a cigarette in his mouth, gestured to his lawyer and pointed at the tip of the cigarette. When the lawyer gave him a light, however, he took off his shirt and crushed the tobacco of the cigarette onto the shirt and set it on fire with his lawyer's lighter. He went to Deepwater Prison after a one-week trial.

For years prison meant a series of drawings to this artistic warrior. With the permission of prison officials, the man made a

series of historical murals on the walls of his cell. After two years and a few changes in the mural, prison officials pushed for inmate education. A lovely white humanist came into the school and taught a class on Oriental poetry. She explained the conceptual foundations of such work, the cultural orientation, the affinities between form and image, between isolation and universal vision. She taught the prisoners how to read and write haiku. The political artist adopted the form and wrote graceful passages that he passed on to the professor one evening before class. The professor carried the works with her on the commuter train the next morning and wept thick silver tears on a brown autumn day as the train passed through smoking urban neighborhoods. She advocated the prisoner's release, based on the beauty of his words. She passed his words on to poets and scholars, lawyers and radical political activists and the prison board. "The unusual nature of the man's crime," she was informed by the prison board, "stems from his unusual methods of producing forms that illustrate his personal conceptions of beauty, and to release him on the basis of his ability to produce beautiful words might reinforce his use of art to commit philosophically grounded crimes." For the final week of class the professor prepared a lesson aimed specifically at the Native prisoner. She introduced the class to translations of tribal dream songs. According to her, these songs carried the same intense brevity of some haikus and Zen koans. She hoped to make a connection for the prisoner: He could write haikus and they could be like dream songs for him; a culturally, politically appropriate act could be generated in a foreign form, from language to language, image to form. Obviously, the professor didn't understand the nature of the Native prisoner's criminal acts. What she hoped the prisoner would understand in the relationship between haikus and dream songs was deeply embedded in the prisoner's history. A partial loss of language, new forms, old forms were part of his existence before the professor gave him a final farewell kiss. This was the last connection she made with the prisoner since she failed to win his release. But the time in

the class, the education the professor had given him, inspired the prisoner to write haikus and dream songs. And he wrote only in those forms, as he understood those forms. When he wrote letters home he wrote haiku letters; when he wrote prison officials he wrote in the language of dream songs; when he wrote editorials in Indian newspapers he wrote haikus; when he wrote old girlfriends he wrote in one form or the other. This went on for two years and became the prisoner's only form of communication. Still, he could not speak.

Then, through a cultural coup, a group of Native advocates for religious freedom convinced state prison authorities to allow Native spiritual leaders to come into the prison and conduct traditional ceremonies. Since the education program had been scrapped, the officials agreed. For over a year, spiritual leaders came into Deepwater to discuss Native culture and perform ceremonies. One elder spoke about oral history and prophecy; another discussed dancing and drumming; one talked of prayer and the sacred pipe. A fourth elder brought the sweat lodge into the prison. In time, the elders and one or two helpers from the outside conducted monthly sweat lodge ceremonies for the prisoners.

The Native prisoner participated in the ceremonies from the beginning. But in the first lodge when it came his turn to speak, another inmate had to explain to the elder, Samuel Little Boy, that the man could not speak, that he would pray in silence and pour water on the rocks, then pass the water bucket to signify the end of his personal prayer. At the end of that first sweat lodge ceremony, Little Boy spoke to the group, outside the sweat lodge. "This man," he said, nodding toward the prisoner of haiku, "he had to pray in silence here. And I know his story, why he doesn't speak, why he's in here, in this prison. A little while ago after we came out he handed me a note and he gave me tobacco. He wants to speak again. So in one month we will begin healing sweats for this man. Offer prayers for him until that time."

When Little Boy returned a month later, the sweat went on as

planned, but the voice didn't come back then. So the group went on with Little Boy sponsoring one sweat a month, and each time they prayed for healing for the prisoner who could not speak. After three more ceremonies, he spoke, but the words were brief and breath soft.

The earth embraces
in song the blue sky
moves one face after another.

Apparently the healing wasn't complete. And for four more healing sweats nothing changed. The prisoner spoke, but briefly, softly, always with the same syllabic rhythm, always in strange poetic words. Finally, another prisoner who had been in the poetry class remembered the haikus and the dream songs, and he realized those were the forms the man spoke in. When one of the Indian prisoners informed Little Boy about the ways and reasons for the political artist's speech, Little Boy suggested that the healing sweats continue until the prisoner could speak freely, beyond the limits of the literary forms he'd learned. Four more sweats produced nothing more, and Little Boy never came back to the prison. A Native newspaper ran Little Boy's obituary in January. He died on New Year's Day bringing wood into his home on the Fineday reservation.

No other elder picked up the spiritual traditions program for Deepwater Prison, and the Native prisoner spoke only in haikus and dream songs.

I made a point to find the man, to read his words, to hear his voice. Four years after he was granted parole, I met him on the reservation, at the Strawberry Inn bar. It took some time for me to adjust my vision when I entered the bar, but when I did my first glances stopped just short of amazement at the Indian artifacts and artwork in the place. Old photographic prints and drawings hung on the walls above booths at the rear end of the room. A variety of red pipestone pipes hung above the bar, re-

flected in a wide mirror behind a stand of hard liquor. Some pipes were carved into animal shapes of eagles and buffalo; some had plain red bowls with carved twisted stems; some stems were ornamented with feathers and beadwork. On both sides of the mirror simulated treaty documents covered the wall in glass cases. Human clay figures, about a foot tall—each unique, in facial features and physique, each marked with an engraved pictograph on the forehead—lined shelves above the treaties. Except for the bartender, there was only one other person in the place. He sat drinking at a stool, a few feet from a murmuring jukebox, examining the positions of balls on a pool table.

I spoke first. "I know you," I said. He looked my way for a moment, then lifted the bottle between his legs. "I'm here to see your writings, your drawings. I want to put them into a book," I went on. "I've talked to your brother, he said he would let you know that I was coming to see you."

When the church bells ring
the road to Rush Lake breaks off
one cold crow calls there.

That was all he said before he got up from his stool and walked away. I didn't understand the meaning of it until later, when I watched the smoke gliding away from an introspective cigarette. I met him the next morning on the road to Rush Lake. He handed me a birchbark bundle and walked away on the road to the old grave houses.

HAIKUS AND DREAM SONGS
OF ELIJAH COLD CROW

The red horse eats
from blowing weeds in human
indulgence at dusk.

The river with a
missionary's name wears an
ice face at dawn.

Walls leave no company:
a man's shadow grows solitary
moon songs in a cell

So many sundown dogs
improvise on a bark fugue
running for machines

Names travel autumn
wind under the formation
of white cranes passing

Flammables in air
sculpted moment to moment
a heart hungry for home

A sky full of shapes
animals of days above
animals below

A dried flower lifts
then you too are gone away
wind over concrete

Let the girls sleep deep
in dandelion grass, let boys
explode from their skin

An old woman cries son
under uniformed photographs
the red hawk keens out

A leader mouths peace
on the bright road from Yellowhead
one thousand trees fall

Who will sing for whom
when he who sings for no one
must die singing

An old dancer whirls
on his bustle feathers shake
surrounding a cracked mirror

What has fallen to earth
this time has fallen to earth
in a whole fog.

Deer measures silence
between words and guns going off
again and again

G O R ò o n D . H e n r y , J r .

The road to eternity
is closed by x's and y's
a roof between the eye and cloud

Prison guards sleepwalk
in a cancerous vista
of domestic quarrels

Travelers come out
of sun looking for Indian-
made real crafts real cheap

This one-eared woman
whose father slept with crow once
saw him turn to steel

The sweet upside-down
cake the radical's wife made
changes the dialogue

Anger comes and goes
one fire ant walking the tongue
to the back of the head

Tired of windows
the dull dead dream of cities
Santa Claus lights go out

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T h e P r i s o n e r o f H a i k u

Eagles nest in the refuge
uncle returns from Vietnam
a drunken shortstop misses a pop fly

A museum with two doors
one door out into the rain
a dark full bus leaves

He of the golden hand
metallurgical carnivore,
carnival god of grease

and meat grows great
until trickster finds
his racing heart.

Oh, you must agree
the words will hold to the end
meaning what they must

Save the fish with beer
one can funds anti-Indian
underprivileged drunks

Now the blue heron moves
striding twice over wet stones
lifting, twisting snakes

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Two old ones in this
doorway of light calling come
down come down come down
from that high wall

Two crows rise from a
squashed possum breakfast
cawing in sun bands

Lips to skin under
squash-blossom necklace the day
holds no more for us

Bezbig, neezh, Andaykug
Awkeewanee neeba, gee
weesinnin wabun

Church women speak out
Flower drives a new galaxy
to her father's funeral

Under the iron tracks
through dwindling space of closing eyes
(a bridge of panting names and years)

Then mother reaches out
picks up the golden cross on
the red Formica table

Winter comes for her
sings her death in the guild hall
a boy receives a blanket

In the moon of the
frozen doorknob, what looks good
takes part of your tongue

With many fathers
I leave my voice of the past
not speaking is not knowing

Hands gesture open
the space around the stone form
man, woman, child

Descended from stone
before the merging of clans
into treaty bands

In black and white, words
coordinates, rivers, lakes, mark
lines over red earth

Signatures, names, the
undersigned, with marks and lines
anglicized in print

Clan leaders, head men
scripted identities so
many with an x.

Andayk, Flatmouth, Sweet,
Minogeshig, Broken Tooth,
an x by the name.

On 59 a moose
lopes through wisps of prairie snow
lost but not afraid

Tracks of birds in dirt
hieroglyphs around stumps are
filling with warm rain

An oar in water
a hand lit by moonlight
journeys holding sky

The dream x of man
the woman in the chromosome
shadow into light

Smell of autumn smoke
trachoma drags away a child
in a fevered village

Name energy repose
before the blue gun reports
death on a distant hill

Winter lasts and kills
and graves can't be dug
by ordinary hands
with ordinary shovels

The heart runs on from an
essential terror, the news is
there is always news

Days are numbered
like numbered suns
sunlight gestures
into dust to a picture
near a radio

The dream x, old man
an immigrant at a station
waiting for his wounded son
an American shadow

Bear ascends the stairs
one golden glass from oblivious
to women problems

A boy painted himself
white and ran into a river

A boy painted himself black
and fasted out in the sun

A boy painted himself
yellow and rolled in the mud

A boy painted himself
red and white and black and yellow

Crossing Wind's stick is
invisible at the Megis Lake drum

Abetunge he who
inhabits his X mark
in the presence of _____.

The dream x draws us on. I cannot speak for Cold Crow, but his words have forced me from the page. I see how he returns to old forms, and in my references to documents, I hammer away at myself for thinking of myself, and an old drunken shadow builds another wall. In the dark I look for my hands and find windows beyond the fringes of light around my fingers. On the road a few memories wander away singing, their tracks filling with falling snow. This is who I am, a few photographs taken for a moment of truth, a few belongings wrapped in brittle paper, a few dead relatives away from my own road into the sun. And I don't want to think of Cold Crow anymore. He died where we all die, on the

way to death, run down by a vehicle out of control. I went to find him on the road where he gave me his haiku manuscripts, and I found him there, frozen in a ditch, beyond wild wheel tracks. He was the subject of his own name, covered with winter crows feasting on his body. Of course they whirled away when I discovered him; of course I discovered him when they whirled away in great numbers. He had no eyes then. What I had to ask him ran wild with tears from my own eyes. "Cold Crow," I said to the dead body, "I understand now your name. I understand the dream songs, the haiku attempts. I understand this frozen road; the words will come back. They will return from the air and reform on distant lips." But Cold Crow had no lips; these too were taken by the voracious birds in a thousand bloody painful kisses. So I looked to the rest of the body. Everything was there. One hand rested on one breast, the fingers of that hand pinched at the tips, near an opening in his long black coat, as if Cold Crow stopped in oratory, gesturing to his heart as he referred to some deep truth without words. But there under his hand, inside the coat, were words on yellow notepaper.

A F I N A L D R E A M S O N G

a note to hold
the eyes open a hole
in the Fineday earth

make an x in the snow
where you saw me standing last

I am on this road
to town to find a gun
for my lips

Г о р д о и Д . Н е и т у , J r .

make a circle in the snow
a prayer offering of tobacco
make this place
a prayer place
to each of the four directions
put flags of different colors
when the wind turns warm.

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