



2021

Ghost Dog

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Recommended Citation

Roger, Adam (2021) "Ghost Dog," *Floodwall Magazine*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/floodwall-magazine/vol1/iss1/16>

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Ghost Dog

We called him the loneliest dog in the world. On Exeter Street, behind our apartment building, we would see him shivering. Tim, my brother, thought the dog was a greyhound because it was thin and had a long, narrow skull. "No," said Donald, my oldest brother, "it's too short. It's just a skinny mutt."

For a time we thought the dog lived in a house that we could see from the kitchen window of our apartment. Tim paid more attention than Donald or I and figured out that the dog never went inside that house. "It goes onto that house's porch," he said, "to get out of the wind."

The dog had a collar, but it never got close enough for us to read it. It wandered all around our neighborhood. Some days we would see it on Murray Avenue, lying with its head on its paws on the sidewalk across the street while we waited for the bus.

Mostly the dog just shivered and yawned. Sometimes as it yawned a high-pitched whine came out. I said it was like his teeth were a choir and they sang when the sun hit them. "God," Tim muttered, rolling his eyes. "Moron." Donald was the oldest but was not as disdainful of my company as Tim could often be.

Sometimes the dog would bark. We'd watch its eyes and the tilt of its head, trying to guess what it was barking at. It would bark once, and again, and seem to wait for some response, and then bark five or six times quickly, at nothing we could see. "Sometimes it seems like he's barking at cars," Tim said one day while we were waiting for a bus, "but look: the street's empty." The dog continued barking, its body shaking with the force of that noise. But I thought that I could understand it. The dog had reached some point, every time it barked: it just wanted to be heard, and seen, for anybody who heard its barking to know he was alive. That's what his barking meant. We were not allowed dogs or cats in the building where we were living then. Years later, our mom would remarry, and we'd move into a little house with a yard, and Alex, our step-father, would tell us we could have a dog if we wanted one. But by then we'd all be older and none of us would want a dog or promise to be around enough to take care of one. I was the youngest. Mostly I followed Donald and Tim, and it was me who decided the dog had a ghost in it. We were in a stand of old pines sloping down a hill toward the creek behind the middle school, sitting on a fallen tree. I said that the ghost was of a man who

had been murdered on Exeter Street. I didn't know where that idea came from but when I'd said it I believed it instantly. The man's throat was cut, and the blood spilled out and flowed down the hill. It was at twilight, I said, and the whole sky looked like it was full of blood. The man tried to scream but all that came out was a little gust of breath.

It was a happy dog all its life, I told them. Donald and Tim just sat listening. But one night it was wandering around town, and it crossed Exeter in the dark turn just behind our building where a passing car nipped its back legs. Not so bad it was bound to die, just enough that it had to drag its hind legs across the pavement and lie on the curb, whimpering.

As the dog lay there, the man's ghost--it had been wandering around Exeter Street for some time--dove into it. The dog's whimpering stopped, then started again: higher, louder, the whimpering of the dead man, not the dog. The dog's owners came and found it, I said, and got its legs fixed up. But the ghost wouldn't let the dog stay penned up in a yard. Once his legs had healed, the dog jumped over the chain-link fence surrounding his owners' yard and ran away from its happy house, back to Exeter Street. And that's where the ghost was now, I said. Waiting for a chance to get revenge on the man who killed him.

Donald and Tim never said that they believed this story, but the next time we saw the dog, Donald nodded at it and said, "Look, there's the ghost dog." We told a few of Donald and Tim's friends about the haunted dog. Some just sort of stared at us and nodded. Others laughed. It didn't seem to matter, because after a while we more or less believed it.

We didn't know what to think on the Sunday afternoon when Donald and Tim and I were coming home from walking around town and saw the dog stop right in the middle of Exeter Street, way up the hill. The sun was going down behind him, hanging there so that the sky was all aflame, orange and yellow. The dog caught the fading daylight so that we could see its hollow, greenish eyes. It just stood there, staring down at us. We stopped too and just looked at him without saying anything. I had a feeling that maybe this time he would let us get close, but I didn't want to spook him.

We stood there maybe a minute, until a Jeep that we saw sometimes—somebody's boyfriend, somebody who would spend nights on Exeter Street sometimes and in the early morning skid out of there—lurched around the curve of the road and ran its front and back wheels clear over the dog before the driver even thought to slow down. It did slow down then, but only barely.

Donald and I moved into the middle of the street to try to make it stop, but Tim moved out of its way and then we had to too because the Jeep didn't slow down and the driver laid on the horn as he came. All of the Jeep's windows were tinted, but with the sun setting red over the hill you could see a silhouette of the man's head and the shaking of his shoulder as he pounded on the horn. Tim flipped him the middle finger as the Jeep passed by and yelled out, "Asshole!" Donald and I walked up to where the dog had been standing.

The dog was absolutely flattened and battered, finished. He looked like any other dog would have, and we weren't thinking then about its being haunted. We walked around it without saying anything. Then Donald said quietly that our dad had taken him on a car trip once, and they'd hit a dog that was trying to cross the road. Our dad had taken a shovel out of the trunk, and walked back up the road to where the dog was going crazy, flailing in the road, and he put it out of its agony with the shovel and then buried it beside the road. Donald said we should bury the dog. I wondered what would happen to the ghost inside him.

Our mother was home when we got in. She'd just gotten off work and was soaking her feet in a tub of water in the kitchen. She noticed Donald looking around for something to dig with and when she found out what he was up to she wouldn't let Donald do it. She called animal control. Her feet left wet tracks on the tile as she moved toward the telephone. From the kitchen window we couldn't see the dog but we could hear the beeping of the animal control truck, see its orange light striping the needles of the pine leaning over the backyard, and hear the low voices of the men who took the dog away.

The three of us agreed that we would slash the Jeep's tires the next time we saw it. But we only saw the Jeep once more, and never got a good look at the man who drove it. One night at four in the morning—this was two weeks later—the alarm of a car on Exeter Street went off and wouldn't stop. We lay awake in our bedroom: I shared bunk beds with Tim, and Donald had his own bed across the room.

After ten minutes we heard one of our neighbors—it was loud Pat, whose raspy voice you could hear all the time down in the street—come out and yell for the man who owned the Jeep to come out. We snuck outside, still in our boxers and pajama pants, and stood on the crumbling back steps, watching for a glimpse of the man who'd run over the ghost dog. Other neighbors trickled out, standing together on the sidewalk in front of the house where the Jeep was parked. It got spread around that the man's name was Rod, and Tim laughed out loud when someone yelled, "God, Rod! Turn that

thing off!" Dennis, our neighbor, yelled that, and a minute later hollered, "I'm gonna kick your ass, Rod!" Dennis pounded on the door of the lady Rod stayed with. The people out on Exeter were annoyed, and gossiped about Rod and the woman, right out on the street. The longer the alarm went on, the worse the stuff they said. The woman Rod stayed with was older than Rod, someone said, and lonely, and all she did was wait for Rod to come over.

Nobody came to the door, and the people out on the street didn't pound much longer before someone called the police. And when the police came, they didn't pound but once before someone picked the lock or kicked the door down. Our mother had come outside by then, her bathrobe drawn tight around her waist. She didn't like us all being out there, but I guess she knew we wouldn't sleep until we knew what had happened. By this time another cop had bashed in the window of the Jeep and dismantled the alarm.

It turned out, when they got the door open, that there had been a gas leak, and while Rod and the woman slept, the gas had seeped through the house, and Rod and the woman had both asphyxiated.

The sun was just coming up by the time they carted the bodies out. Nobody seemed to know the woman's name. We watched while two stretchers were brought out, covered with white sheets. But the sheets clung tight to the bodies and you could see that both their mouths were open wide, like they were gasping for breath. The sheets made caverns, and from that you could see where their noses were. Donald was standing behind Tim and I. "I recognize her," he said. "I recognize her by her nose." She had a long, pointy nose, Donald said, that when you could see its skin, was wrinkly and red, with holes like pin-pricks dotted across the end. And later he told us that he had seen her beaten up once, she had stumbled out of Dale's, on Murray Avenue, and someone in the bar had beaten the shit out of her but she just sat on the pavement with her back against the front wall of the bar and didn't turn her face away, and anyone who wanted to see could look at the welts and scratches that had been left on her face, and the places where her forehead met her scalp where clumps of hair had been torn clean away.

About Adam Roger

Adam Roger has stories in or forthcoming in New Orleans Review, Juked, Twelve Stories, and Cream City Review. He is the author of [U.S. Navy Pirate Combat Skills](#), a humor book.