

THE SURVEYOR'S DEBT

A Hidden Herald Microplay (Mounds Park, 1849)

Dramatis Personae

HERALD - the pigeon narrator (Karen)

SURVEYOR - a U.S. territorial surveyor (Alex)

DAKOTA MAN - a Dakota man living near the ridge ([Samuel](#))

GRANDMOTHER - a Dakota woman whose voice rises from the burial mound (Adrienne)

THE PLAY

Italics indicate soundscape.

HERALD

Soft wingbeats. A coo that becomes a voice.

Some places don't wait for you to believe in them. They speak first.

And if you're standing on the ridge at Imnīžaska: Mounds Park in 1849, well... you'd better listen.

Wind across the bluff. The Mississippi murmurs below. A tripod creaks. Charcoal scratches paper.

SURVEYOR

Alright... north by northeast... ridge elevation—

He hesitates, rubbing his thumb over a small brass compass.

Ira always said I should've stayed a carpenter. "At least wood doesn't bury its dead," he'd joke.

He exhales, steadying himself.

Let's get this right...

Stops. A low, resonant hum rises from the earth. Not frightening. Ancient.

What in the blazes—?

GRANDMOTHER

From within the mound, layered with earth, a soft drum beat.

Héčhetu Sni (Hay-Chay-Too Shnee). Not there.

SURVEYOR

Who's—?

Fumbling with gear.

Who's speaking?

DAKOTA MAN

A quiet prayer under his breath, unfinished as he notices the surveyor.

Wakantanka eciyatanhan Ate okinihan kin, wicaśa kin de Wawokiya kagapi...

Approaching.

You're standing on her resting place.

SURVEYOR

Jesus—

Collects himself.

I didn't see you. I'm with the territorial survey. I'm just marking elevations. Don't want buildings sliding down the bluff because I let em' get too high.

DAKOTA MAN

I know what you're doing.

The drum beat returns.

And she knows too.

GRANDMOTHER

Soft, insistent.

Move your line.

SURVEYOR

There it is again.
To Dakota Man.

You hear that?

DAKOTA MAN

Yes.
The drum beat gets stronger.

She's my grandmother. My *Unčí* (oon-chee).

SURVEYOR

Your—?

But she's—

DAKOTA MAN

Gone?
Shakes his head.
 Not from here. Not from this hill.

She's telling you the boundary is wrong.

SURVEYOR

Look, I'm just doing my job. I've got orders, deadlines—
He taps his map.

This line goes straight across the ridge. It'll be backyards.
 One continuous fence. A lotta fine houses; that's what the city
 wants.

GRANDMOTHER

Firm now.

Not through us. Not through Wakǰán Makǰóche (Wak-hann
 Ma-co-chay)

DAKOTA MAN

You can draw your line anywhere.
 But if you draw it here, you're cutting through our dead.

Through her.

SURVEYOR

Quiet, shaken.

Wait-this... this is a mound. Smaller, yes, but-I didn't know.

DAKOTA MAN

Now you do.

SURVEYOR

If I move the line... they'll ask questions. People won't buy plots with a crooked property line. I'll be costing em' money.

DAKOTA MAN

Then tell them the truth.

The land spoke.

You listened.

GRANDMOTHER

Gentle now. The Drumbeat softens and slows.

Hiyá (He-Yah). Not there.

DAKOTA MAN

She says don't put it there. Look. Put your left foot just a little further to the side. Feel that incline? That's wakhán – (Wak hann)sacred. You have to go around.

SURVEYOR

Alright.

Alright.

Exhales. Kneels. Erases the line.

I buried my brother last spring. I won't disrespect someone's departed kin.

We'll shift it. Maybe I can make the angle a little shallower.

Wind rises. The river breathes. The mound hum fades.

DAKOTA MAN

Thank you.

SURVEYOR

No.

Thank her. I don't need those bones on my conscience.

HERALD

Mounds Park remembers everything.

Both the debts that get paid-

and the ones that don't.

This surveyor made a choice to listen and now you can see the bluff, the mounds, with no houses.

The land spoke. He listened. And that's why the mounds still stand.

Wingbeats. The drum beat slowly fades out.