

Triptych

*Star tissue . . . makes up the universe. Old wounds torn open, crafted
carousels of stars unraveling at lightspeed through spacetime.*

—Marc Alan Di Martino, “Star Tissue”

Eastern Shore, Maryland

I. Driving to See My Mother Alive for the Last Time

The sky is tatters and rags over Delmarva’s wide, flat fields where autumn geese whirl down into the corn stubble next to Route 50. Hard north wind tears what’s left off oaks and poplar trees. Creeks swell like hematomas after last night’s storm. Rain lingers in gusts like spittle. I am driving to see my mother alive for the last time. I think of the things I will not say but harbor behind my teeth, sparing her the brunt of a hurricane of words, a bomb cyclone of hurt four decades in the forming. Ages have passed since she cast herself off, drifting further toward the horizon over tides and years, expecting me to bridge the distance each time, my obligation to meet her at each new port where she dropped anchor. I dig deep for an act of grace for the undeserving, umbrage lingering in the air like the odor of marsh rot. Mashing the accelerator across Nanticoke’s wetland shallows battered by the icy gale, I point into a familiar squall that, by now, I’ve learned to navigate like a seasoned waterman. Heeling in crosswinds reaching across my beam, tacking through headwinds, I pray for the direction to shift, to square the yards and fill my sails, for following seas to carry me to calmer shores.

II. Confessional

1.

Entering your room I find you sleeping, more skeleton than flesh, skin hanging from your brittle bones like torn curtains. Your open mouth shows the gaps in your teeth where a smile once lived, black keys on an unused piano whence harmonies once sang forth in another lifetime

gone to memory and loss. I wake you. We talk. At first we catch up: details and updates, how you broke your hip, your Parkinson's tremors, your brother's cataracts and suicide attempts and his fights with your incorrigible husband, my wife and her work, my job. In the hospital's antiseptic air, you reveal the truth about your leaving us, years in the keeping, a light switch for a lamp dark for four decades finally clicked on in a room within the walls of the crumbled ruin of our family we've avoided entering, wise to the bruising from stumbling around in the gloom of a heart space without illumination. Perhaps in your narcotic fog after surgery a barrier has fallen, dissolved in the urgency of what might be a deathbed confessional of sorts, your tremors lurking in fried nerves to jerk you around in a grotesque last dance with St. Vitus once the medication fades, your frame now too frail to haul the burden of your secret.

2.

It wasn't a falling out of love as you'd wanted us to believe, not a simple cooling from something warm and alive to an icy, dead realm, but a shifting of orbit toward another body in your universe, a drift toward another man who refused to leave his wife for you after you left us. And so, having left the wreckage of three lives and self-exiled in the void, you floated until another damaged world pulled you into an orbit that was good enough. You owe the three of us more than feeling stupid for giving up a good family, and a good life. It's not just about what you lost. Perhaps one day you'll find an apology in the asteroid belt of your heart. Perhaps in the dark matter of your conscience enough atoms of enlightenment will rub together to show you yourself in full glow, and you won't need a telescope to spot it. I won't hold out for the rebirth of something once brilliant that has long since collapsed on itself; this last burst, this final quasar of candor will have to do when you finally go black forever.

3.

I emerge from the hospital lobby into the heavy, acrid stench of chicken shit and offal emanating from the neighboring poultry processing plant on the banks of the Wicomico River. Evening stretches fire across cirrus clouds lingering in the departure of a late autumn Atlantic storm churning away from Delmarva's low floodplains. Venus and Jupiter, planetary namesakes of the gods of love and thunder, rise into the dimming sky like diamonds spilling from the waning slivered moon, its thin shard ablaze with clarity

reflecting the receding light of a star I know is there but cannot see.

III. Gravities

The rising crescent moon glows, a sharp pair of silver forceps pinching a chunk of darkness, Earth's planetary shadow cast across a powdery desert ball of rock orbiting Earth. Light pulses from stars already dead in their constellations through eons of cold, soundless indifference to my tired eyes. I think of my mother's freshly broken hip, of distance, how celestial bodies sometimes cleave from each other's gravity, drift off, disappear. So much dark matter between us. News from my sister of her fall streaked like meteors across my smart phone, luminous particles remaining long enough to write themselves in cyberspace before vanishing into the black of my screen. How fleeting, those ten years she spent with me before shooting off into her own cosmos, moving further away as I've aged, her influence on my trajectory growing weaker. In thirty-eight years, the moon's estrangement from Earth has increased by the length of a ten-year-old boy.* Astronauts say moondust, pulverized remnants of a molten body shared with Earth long ago, smells like gunpowder. I think of pointless destruction, the odor of war. I imagine two clouds of interstellar magma and gas, body and breath, congealing and reforming separately. Such blank proximity in the frigid void. Such silent yearning illuminated by a fledgling sun. One of us broke away, cooled, and died, having never fully lived. One of us has fought to flourish in a vacuum ever since.

Matt Hohner

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*The moon drifts away from the earth at a rate of 1.49606 inches per year, or 58.85 inches in 38 years, about the height of a tall ten-year-old boy.

Worn

The boy was something mommy wouldn't wear....
—Pearl Jam, “Jeremy”

Ten years is a long time to wear what doesn't fit. It grabs, pinches, itches, sags, saps you just to put it on. You tried to quilt together a family, first by turning to this cast-off, orphan child of another, left on consignment for you by God, or so you told me, and I believed. And what, then, of your daughter, the child you never thought would grow inside you? Your mother's words at her birth: *now you are cursed with one of your own*; perhaps my sister's image, your face in the mirror, wasn't the look you'd sought after all. Wedding dress. Formal eveningwear. Maternity blouse. Mom jeans. You even tried on college, bought the gown, mortarboard, and tassel, but a career was just too much maintenance. By now you'd have retired a master teacher with full benefits, but commitment wasn't your style. After ten years, a family became too tight. You didn't love how it felt on you, and so you sloughed off that heavy burden, tossed it on the front lawn, set it alight. No clingy child weighing awkward on your hip, no ring to unbalance an otherwise matching set of fingers. I often wonder if in your mind, perhaps when you dream, you sneak back to that closet of a former life to try on those old clothes, spin in the mirror one last time, and ponder how you'd look now, had you learned how to make *mother* and *wife* match with a life you never quite wore with confidence.

Matt Hohner

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