

Thresholds

For I am grateful, her love makes me humble.¹

1.

I have learned that grace
arrives in moments and pulses,
clear true notes that cut through
the static and noise of everyday life.
I have found that to surrender myself
completely is an act of liberation,
that to ask of you is not to steal.

I have seen love transform
misery to comfort, anger to joy.

The year September eleventh
buried the anniversary of our first date
under piles of dust and bone and smoking steel,
I reached up through my grief and despair
and found your hand; I cried out and heard
the sound of your voice, the peace of love
answering through the din of steeling
rescue beacons and screaming men.
The act is done. The ache remains. We endure.
The anniversary of a beginning, not an end.

We carry each other over thresholds
of weakness and doubt, dress our wounds
with bandages of faith, wear our scars
with dignity and hope. This love is defiant.
This love is real. This love is possibility
in a world of negation. This love is a gift
we give to each other for the other's sake,
to fill each other through the gift of self.

This love is a promise kept, a meteor storm
born years ago and far away, falling to earth,
as certain as November's bright leonids,
through black cold toward each other,
our selves fusing as one doubled thing,

¹ Sam Hamill, "Jubilate Sutra", from *Destination Zero*.

*sacred mysteries in each other's arms.*²

We fall into a love renewed every day.
*We fall, and falling, are given wings.*³

2.

Where the rooms were once empty
in the old brick house on the edge of urban woods,
the rooms silent, the walls lifeless and cold,
our conversations spill through open doors,
water bangs in the pipes, and a tide of boxes
swells and recedes as the old is put away
and gifts for a new life arrive.

*Lately I've developed a taste for the quiet life*⁴:
to light candles and draw you a warm bath;
*to lie and talk together through the night*⁵;
to fold spinach and portobellos into omelets
while you sleep in on Sundays; to sort laundry
while telling jokes; to know the specific creak
of the hallway floorboards as you move about
getting ready for work. To share this life
of infinite moments. To know I am not alone.

Storm clouds lumber east in midafternoon.
Across College Avenue the seventy-foot black locust
tosses green leaves into the humid gusts, its boughs
nodding and swaying as the sky thickens with rain:
recalling years ago, the storm we raced north into Utah
as darkness and lightning closed in around our car.

The edge of the Grand Canyon, your face soft
and golden and glistening with sweat, fingers
of sunlight reaching down through evening clouds,
hot air punctuated by the croaks of ravens
riding the dry thermals in concentric circles
up from the red and ochre cliffs. Fugitive
hours now ephemeral flashes, drifting
further away and into the past.

² Kenneth Rexroth, "Inversely, As the Square of Their Distances Apart",
from *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*.

³ Rumi, "Sky Circles", tr. by Coleman Barks.

⁴ Su Tung-p'o, from *Selected Poems of Su Tung-p'o*, tr. by Burton Watson.

⁵ Ibid.

Expansive. Unconquerable. Undeniable.

Our first night in our new house, cool odor
of damp soil sifting through the window
after heavy rain, a lone fox barking hoarsely
in the wooded ravine as we drift off
to the swollen shush of Herring Run.

Endless cycle. Clarity of time.

3.

In the blink of your hazel eyes
I live a thousand lifetimes;
in your tears, I die a thousand deaths.
Your sighs are those of an archangel
gazing on a world gone mad.
I am elevated by the words you speak
and humbled by your daily kindnesses.
Your laughter heralds the birth of a million stars;
the cadence of your stride marks the beat of my heart.

Hyperbole. Exemplar. Simple truth.

I aspire to your gentleness, take solace
in your smooth and ageless patience.
I celebrate the privilege of your presence
minute by blessed minute. I become familiar
with a gratitude I have never known.

In the scintillation of your movement through space
you leave behind the essence and hope of all the saints
and wandering spirits in this most unholy time;
In your words and deeds you give me strength
in the wasteland of this savage and wretched planet.
In this *secret communication of untellable love*,⁶
I am soothed in my darkest hours of desolation.
When I call out your name, o holy and blessed wife,
I hear myself improved in the echo of your reply.

Matt Hohner

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⁶ Kenneth Rexroth, "She is Away", from *In Defense of the Earth*.

To A Poet of the Three Gorges

It is evening: cold wind, late November,
east side of Baltimore's harbor. In the display
window of an upscale home furnishings
boutique, an old wooden ox cart wheel,
circa 19th century China, mounted
on an iron stand: prized salvage
from the flooded towns and valleys where
the Yangtze carved deep into millennia,
cascading through culture and time.

I think of Tu Fu, turning his ear
to the gibbons' howls reverberating
deep in the three gorges, his skiff
moored along the shore, verses coming
like lanterns at night, borne by the dark currents,
lifeblood of heritage, surging past his bow.

Downstream, a new power flows from the river,
its megawatt hum echoing off concrete ramparts.
The old voices, now whispers, drown in waters
rising to light cities of millions where, once,
men in simple wooden boats and carts
delivered the news one verse at a time.

Matt Hohner

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The Maximum Effective Range

for the victims at Virginia Tech, April 16, 2007

The diameter of the bullet is .22 inches
and the distance of its maximum effective range
is thirty yards, but further when fired by anger
fueled with paranoia, curving with the earth,
falling in a graceful, parabolic arc, unlike these
thirty-two dead, one suicide, twenty-six wounded.
The muzzle flash of a Walther P22 discharging
one hundred rounds is orange; the results maroon,
spilling out into a hallway from under a dorm room door.
In an expanding color wheel of panic and space:
thirty hungry ambulances, three hundred terrified parents,
a shocked nation of three hundred million.
But the old man who holds the door closed against the fury,
inches and moments from death, sixty-two years removed
from the six million dead of Auschwitz, of Buchenwald,
reduces the maximum effective range in a classroom considerably,
while the echoes of the shots and the moans of the dying
carried by the howling winds of that day
reach distant shores far across an ocean named for peace,
and the maximum effective range of the sounds
somehow amplified and heard by heaven,
washes over the ears of an unrelenting God.

Matt Hohner

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Confirmation

for Klaude

Penance

What is the sound
of regret through the wind
at sixteen feet per second?

Absolution

Your feet, empty
as beams of light.
Your smile a dead
giveaway.

Resurrection

The stone moved aside.
An empty tomb.
She found your burial clothes
laid out neatly on your bed.

Age of Discretion

You must have wanted
as I stood with you
before Christ.
You must have known.

Lead us not.
Lead us not into.
Lead us.

Sanctum

*In a car. On a lot. In the daylight. You paid the boy.
You hated yourself. Your prayers were flagellants.*

Persecution

*You were drunk in the car when they pulled you over.
They brought you before the judge. You were guilty. You fled.
They crucified you in the news. I denied your name to myself.
You were drunk in the car when they pulled you over again.*

Facing hard time, you knew it was time to go.
If only Judas were there to kiss you goodbye.

Contrition

Heart burst like water.
Ribs caved in like jars of clay.
Teeth exploded in shards.
Brains become jelly.
Bones become dust.

*Accipe signaculum doni Spiritus Sancti**

A note left behind on the seat of a car on a bridge over the river.

Ascension

Now, the quiet trees. Now, the darkness.
Now the odor of iron and wet stone
rising in the cool June air.

Matt Hohner

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*Be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Oysters

At night—the soft shuck of everything on earth softly sliding away into space.
--Mary-Alice Daniel, “Hyperreality”

Every now and then you emerge from the soil,
exhumed out of the darkness by a backhoe
on a street in Baltimore. There you are. A body part,
serial-killed by history. An ear who last alive heard
the water-muffled splash of steam-driven paddle wheels.

A layer of flat calcium flakes under the asphalt
and macadam, under bricks and cobblestones.
Strata of progress. Archaeology of amnesia.

On a February rainy night in Annapolis you beckon
from ice in market stalls and raw bars barnacled in your
old-man skin, haired by algae, moist protein bodies inside,
dressed ugly, but the locals’ lusty gazes shuck you with their eyes.

Bullets punched outboards and chests
over you. Men died for your flesh.

A beach on the Wicomico down from Salisbury where
the old packing plant once stood: kayakers tread your bones
to get to the tannin’d currents racing past. Women’s hands
eighty-years dead last held you, dispatched your silent,
blind, bivalve lives inside with a poke-slip of their knives.

John Smith said he could walk across your shoals at low tide.
You have run aground many a foolish captain who lost track of you.

Once your legion filtered the whole bay in days; now
it takes you a year. There’s mercury in the mud. There’s lead.
How do you taste without that metallic after-singe?

Give me that cool glide at the back of my throat.
Give me your pornographic flavor.

I’ll eat you until my blood runs silver.

Matt Hohner

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Hail Mary

By now the trees have sloughed off
most of summer. Streetlights in the old
neighborhood glow at 4:00 p.m. It is
early November. Thirty-four autumns
ago, we lined up at scrimmage on that perfect
gridiron flat field next to Babcock church
in a raw, driving rain. Two oaks thick as cannons
goal-posted one end zone; two silver maples,
the other. Someone's deep route right, close
to the sidewalk sideline, found the water
pipe with icy, wet toes. Someone's shoe,
the overlooked dog shit. Big Sean Shankle's
one-miss 'ippi-two-miss 'ippi-three-miss 'ippi blitz
count was fast, but your rubber crazy legs never
let him sack you. You were Jim Plunkett.
You were Johnny Unitas.

In three weeks you will be dead two years.
Rather than think of you taking flight
from the edge of Eldorado Canyon,
I remember that beaten-smooth pigskin,
mid-sky, a Hail Mary issued into the wind
as Sean flattened you into the soft muck, my
stiff, numb hands raised in supplication into
the storm of you, diving into your twilight
to make one last miracle catch.

Matt Hohner

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