

A Poet Sits Down to Write After a Massacre

*Tree of Life Synagogue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,
October 27, 2018*

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”
—Theodor Adorno

The dead keep piling up and all I have are poems
to wrap them in. Pockmarks across synagogue walls
are a new font in a familiar language I refuse to utter.
Men have begun again to speak in tongues syntaxed
by phonemes of caliber and clip capacity: diction I
will not assemble into sentences; sounds I cannot make
into words. What color, the stripes being woven like old
narratives into new camp pajamas? How many stars
asterisk prayers into the bluest night? There is no
metaphor for what I cannot abide; no pentameter
for the sound of earth falling from the hands of love
into a freshly-filled grave. My iambs are a pair
of backwards-turned boots in the stirrups of a riderless
horse. We measure the inarticulate grammar of fear
in the steady metronome of newsfeed updates,
punctuate the lulls between carnage with promises
enjambéd in the wind. Cover my eyes with verses
if you must. Bribe the ferryman with curses and dust.
A poet's contract is blood-inked, bone-stamped,
ratified eternal at the frontier where hope kisses rust.

Matt Hohner

Winner, 2019 Doolin Writers' Weekend International Poetry Prize (Ireland). Published in *The Irish Times* February 27, 2019.

A Trumpeter in Sumy Plays the Ukrainian National Anthem During the Russian Invasion, While in Baltimore, We Hold a Bake Sale

At St. Michael the Archangel Ukrainian Catholic Church
they are selling pierogis to raise money for their homeland

not because in a city nicknamed Mobtown we don't know
the recipe for Molotov cocktails, or how to lob them at the

vehicles of occupying forces; not because in a city nicknamed
Bodmore Murdaland we don't know how to kill fellow human

beings in close anger with frequent efficiency, or because we don't
know how to write new anthems for young nations while being

bombed by a despot trying to erase us from the language of maps, but
because sometimes we vogue to Michael Jackson in front of armored

police vehicles manned by uniforms from hostile neighboring counties;
because an old woman in Ukraine walks up to a Russian soldier offering

seeds to fill his pockets so that sunflowers will grow where he falls;
because here, sometimes, a Black man sees a White man struggling to pull

five hundred pounds of mulch to the register at the Home Depot and gives
him a push without exchanging names past thank you, a handshake, a smile;

because we embrace the grace and dignity of freedom exercised in the lunacy
of dancing in front of a line of guns held by men who would rather kill us

than know us; that it's easier to make the everyday heaviness of life collective
than to watch one person struggle with it; that even battlefields will bloom again

where the dead lay now; that small, savory pastries can soothe hearts grieving
for the Old Country, because every mother who has buried a son killed by violence

knows that ache; because we know that sometimes the best weapon against
rocket fire bombardment from a dying empire is to bless the air with music.

Matt Hohner

Shortlisted, Live Canon 2022 International Poetry Prize. Published in the 2022 *Live Canon Anthology*.

Chemo

for Corinne

I ask her what color the poison envenomating her veins will be, and she says clear, but we agree it should be blue or neon green, an alien serum meant to almost kill her in order to kill the tumor growing inside her skull, pushing on the backs of her eyes, crowding her brain, filling her sinus cavity, cloaking her ability to smell. The doctors say it is the size of a Snickers bar. By the third round of treatment, her body will feel it: mouth sores, a tongue that tastes of mercury, vomiting, immune system dissolving, hair releasing from her scalp like the leaves from the oaks and dogwoods outside. After nine weeks dancing on the near shore of the River Styx, there will be five more of proton radiation fired through her face to shrink the damned thing further. We joke of *Star Wars*, Dr. Luke Skywalker, of Yoda guiding the beam from the operating room corner, staff in one hand, his other little gnarled hand raised in benediction like a little avocado Moses. Then, maybe, surgery to cut what remains out of her, and we laugh about Egyptian pharaohs, long nasal hooks, sarcophagi. I say *damned thing* because *olfactory neuroblastoma* belongs in a poem as much as it belongs in a person. Besides, I'd rather say Snickers bar, and we laugh until we ugly-cry as we imagine putting her head in a microwave, melting the misplaced confection: chocolate, caramel, nougat, peanut chunks like nourishing boulders borne by a sweet post-nasal pyroclastic flow as she tilts her head back to relish such a delectable gift. How she would simply get up from her treatment chair, walk out into the crisp daylight, savor the fragrant ribbons of spices wafting from a taco truck on the corner, the pungent harbor at ebb tide, the warmth of her own miraculous breath.

Matt Hohner

Second place, 2021 Fish Publishing International Poetry Prize (Ireland). Published in the *2021 Fish Anthology*.

Mob Hit at the Ark Ramp

Towson, MD, June 1986

One morning the summer of my fifteenth year, skateboarding alone at the halfpipe in Timmy Tadder's back yard, I began to see cop cars pass by. And cop vans. And more cop cars. County and state police and unmarked cars and one ambulance driving slowly like a hearse. I was sure they were looking for me. They had me dead to rights on the deck, full pads on, sweat dripping from my helmet, shirt soaked through, Agent Orange blasting from Tim's boom box. Maybe it was the punk rock, the all-day back-and-forth roar of polyurethane wheels on plywood, the grating sound of metal on concrete pool coping that sent the neighbors dialing. I froze. But they kept driving past the halfpipe to the end of the cul-de-sac. I stopped counting cars at twenty and went back to my agenda of nailing ollies to fakie and boosting my backside airs. Still, I thought, a bored, observant cop might detour into Timmy's driveway and take my board because he could, but the procession of Crown Victoria Interceptors rolled past, disinterested. Later in the afternoon, the ambulance rolled slowly back up the road, escorted by a police car, emergency lights dark, sirens silent. That night, the news said the body of a man who lived at the end of Timmy's road had been found on the horse trail in the nearby woods with a hole in the back of his head. Executed. His wife had heard men's voices in their garage before he left for an early round of golf, assumed they were his friends. They never found out who killed him, or why. And I had gotten away with another session on the Tadders' halfpipe, my airs a bit higher, still a month from landing my first ollie to fakie, the cops none the wiser of the ongoing crime being committed in plain sight on an otherwise quiet and safe suburban street, where everyone was friendly and worked hard. Where that kind of thing never happened.

Matt Hohner

Winner, *Sport Literate* 2018 Anything But Baseball Poetry Contest. Published in *Sport Literate* 2018.