

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.

Note from an Adoptive Mother in a Baby Book, or Actual Results May Vary, with Addendum

*You really cannot imagine how happy you have made us. We waited for you for a long time, and are so thrilled that you are here. God has really answered our prayers. I hope I will be a good mother to you, and that you will love us as much as we love you, even after I decide in ten years to leave you, your father, and your younger sister, who your father and I will have three years from now, for the toothless jerk who, with his clueless wife, gave you a framed image of Jiminy Cricket and Pinocchio (how appropriate) for your coming-home-from-the-adoption-agency present. I mean, look, a mother can only take on so much full-time accountability before she gets bored and tired. My limit will be ten years. That'll be sufficient preparation for your teen years and the rest of your life, right? *Things happen and people change*, I'll tell you when you're ten. I'll reveal the whole truth when you're forty-eight. Anyway, that's the deal, and now I'm going out onto the back porch to smoke a cigarette.*

Matt Hohner

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Grace

to a birth mother, 1971

I don't know what to call you. Not *Mom*,
since you didn't raise me. You loved me
enough to know you couldn't, that a chance
was the best gift you could give me. I don't
know if you saw or held me after you gave me
into this world, or if the doctors and nurses
whisked me away like something excised,
a tumor plopped in a tray, a thing best not seen,
though I'm sure you heard me cry, knew I
was alive, that your life could resume unheaved
by a moment nine months prior, cradled all those
interrupted moons by pelvis, sheltered by ribs.
Whatever the circumstances, whether you chose
or were forced to bear me, I honor your fortitude,
your power. Faint echo, blurred face, touch
relinquished to the mercies of time, I thank
the myth of you. Perhaps some lost part
of me would recognize the clear sound of you,
unmuffled through your ocean womb, your
seawall skin. Years would wash away like blood,
tears dispersing into a lifting air, all the brine spent
and scattered between us returning its tart crystals
back to the earth. Our shared wound closing, together
we would praise and bless the scar that remains.

Matt Hohner

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Origin Report

The e-mail appears in my inbox.

Subject: *Your results are in.*

Twenty-eight days, one full lunar cycle from my fiftieth birthday, nearly a half-century since my adoption at five months old.

I think of oceans and blood, salt and sweat and tears, protein soup swirling the world, a nucleotide ebb and flow old as carbon and rock, a name borne by the elements since the Big Bang, speaking itself in whispers as it spreads warm across the sand at my feet. Knowledge arrives as ones and zeros, coded electronic pulses on a computer screen through eons and light years, spinning galaxies mile-marked by stars in the living void, a blessing of dust, my entirety in microns.

I stand at the event horizon where self meets self, the vanishing point of my origins. With the touch of my finger, I click to open, wait for a new me to load.

Matt Hohner

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Dear Person in an Office

From an E-mail sent on the 50th anniversary of my adoption

*I am an adoptee seeking to unseal my records,
a mystery to myself, my origin story cloaked
in a language not covered by the Rosetta Stone.
I seek a beginning, the lost Book of Genesis
in the Old Testament of Me, to uncover fossils
of my being before I emerged from the amniotic
abyss, washed up like storm debris, a ragged pair
of claws scuttled on the sands of a silent shore.
I seek names and information, the pasts of two
families, the fill-ins to blanks in my form(ation),
some ink trail regarding my birth parents, etc.
I do know that I will eventually need a drink,
a hug, therapy or counseling, a court order
to get my records opened to me, since I was
adopted in Maryland after 1947, a discard
missing the rest of the deck for half a century.
I have visited the Department of Human Services
website, where the State of Maryland serves its
humans, and viewed the various forms required
to know myself, electronic requisition affidavits
for self-knowledge in lieu of stories of who I am
told at the kitchen table over breakfast, clinical data
entry points, teraflops of ones and zeros coursing
through fiberoptics like songs carried on cyber wind.
Which forms do I need to complete, which laying-
bare of myself at my most vulnerable place shall
I present to the swords and spears of truth and mail
or e-mail back to you to get the ball rolling (not
unlike Sisyphus) on this important matter? And
how do I avoid being crushed by the boulder of fact
careening down at me as it reaches the base of the
mountain of my lifetime where I stand to receive it?
I can print the forms, complete them, and return
them by mail or email—whichever is the proper way.
Thank you in advance for handling my personal request
with the professional detachment of clerk in a cube farm,
devoid of judgment or interest other than doing a job,
a lineman on a pole repairing frayed ends after a storm,
restoring order, power, and light to my darkness as
thunder echoes from a horizon still flashing in chaos.*

Matt Hohner

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To a Foster Mother

*Baltimore County Department of Social Services
Location unknown*

A half century has turned since you held me, stared into these eyes with a charity reserved in the knowledge I was wanted by a hopeful couple whose love was my destination after a gauntlet of bureaucracy and paperwork, social workers' visits and record checks, interviews and stamps and signatures, the bang of a judge's gavel closing the door behind me. But in that brief dreamtime between birth, the giving up, and the going home, I was yours, fed, cleaned, swaddled, and held close, your breath and heartbeat my wind and drum, your voice like birdsong on a short hilltop stopover on my early migration from limbo to life. I was too young to know your scent now, though I must have enthralled in you each day as you spent time with me, that most precious human gift. Had you known that I would squirm and cry in discomfort against the chest of the woman whose hands received me—awkward intuition—that she would leave the family that became mine a decade later, you might have held me a moment longer, hummed one last measure of the song ending between us, given me one final, lingering, selfless gaze from eyes of kindness I cannot remember.

Matt Hohner

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