

Saratoga Passage, August 2014

Whidbey Island, Puget Sound

Up late, I watch the Perseids etch their brief furies through high, cold, moonlit air. My wife of eleven years, partner of twenty-one, sleeps in the room behind me. Three stories down, the salt tide slides away from concrete bulwarks, slips quietly back into itself: the air's fragrance leavens with life and decay as twelve hours of water give way to rocks maned with kelp, sand rivulets emptying under carcasses of hundred-year-old driftwood, and the distinct whiff of an uneaten fish, speared by talons and dropped, bottom-sunk until now. In two days I will be forty-three. I know nothing of my birth, hold no narrative of my making, nothing of the weather that day, what you wore, who drove you to the hospital. Above, particles ricochet in skips and scratches through the dark emptiness between stars. I must have been like these: a brief interrupter of cycles, growing for nine moons, released out of you and away into space, gone but for an umbilical scar, fading into the sea of darkness and memory, covered by the rhythm of tides, washed by time into something smooth you carry, but cannot touch. A loon at the bend trills across glassy currents; sound of wingtips in flight touching calm water. The soft heartbeat of waves lapping the receding tideline grows fainter as the frozen cosmos delivers hot specks into fleet fire. I listen as ocean and moon sway their eternal slow dance, one drawing the other closer, then releasing. I have known this pulling-to and letting go, the profound momentary ripples, the desolate stillness that follows. I have known the searing white heat of entry into this world alone.

Matt Hohner

Shortlisted for *The Moth* International Poetry Prize 2015, published in *The Moth*, Issue 20, Spring 2015 and *The Irish Times*, Friday, April 24, 2015; winner, 2015 *Lascaux* Prize in Poetry. From *Thresholds and Other Poems* (Apprentice House 2018).

Beaver Dam, 1987

On a hot day in June when you are fifteen
or sixteen and male in mid-Atlantic humid
America, you do things with your friends
like decide it's a good idea to go swimming
at the quarry, so you get beer, park a half-mile
away, and sneak in the back way from the railroad
tracks in broad daylight, buzzing hard from the beer
and your own bold, youthful stupidity, striding
like kings out of the woods by the tracks
past the swimming pools to the old lake,
no one the wiser, and at forty-four you forget
what you talked about while you teetered
on and off the rails, chugging cans of Coors
and listening for trains, remembering only
that it felt right and good, and that the universe
had made that day for you, that the sun beating
on your skin was kind, lighting the world just so,
for you, granting you permission to do whatever
the fuck you wanted, that paying six bucks each
at the gate was an outrage, the cloudless sky
reflecting your dumbass conscience, as you
jostled to the T-bar swing, the rocking steel
buoys, the fifty-foot diving platform that plunged
you deep into the cool watery twilight where the sun
failed to reach, and you paused with two strong,
full lungs to remind yourself of something you'd lost
long, long ago, before kicking toward the surface
and the waning afternoon for air, for another jump
while there was still time, for one more leap
into the hazy, forgiving, ageless perfection
of the time of your giddy, clueless lives.

Matt Hohner

Honorable Mention, 2016 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award sponsored by the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College, published in *Paterson Literary Review*. From *Thresholds and Other Poems* (Apprentice House 2018).

Curfew

After the Baltimore riots, April 27, 2015

From the Old French, *covrefeu*, literally, [it] covers
[the] fire. See *cover*. See *fire*. Hear the church bell
toll the hour to cover the hearth fire with ashes
to prevent conflagrations from untended fires.
His eyelids swollen shut; the police van a sealed casket.
The lids of ten thousand prescriptions, empty pill-bottle
shells looted from pharmacies under flickering streetlight.
See what burned under the cover of night, what simmered
under the cover-up. See smoke signals rise at sky's edge.
Spell it with a blanket that covers and uncovers. Spell
conflagration. Write *the destructive burning of a building,*
town, or forest in blood-soot across the underbellies of ten
thousand vacant clouds. Spell *mayday*, that muscle-sear
of rage. Spell *justice*, that bitter ache. Hear sirens long
into the dark hours, then the odd quiet of empty streets.
Taste the legacy of corpses in the embers glowing at dawn.

Matt Hohner

First place, 2016 *Oberon* Poetry Prize and published in *Oberon Poetry Magazine 2016*; shortlisted, Fish Poetry Prize 2016. From *Thresholds and Other Poems* (Apprentice House 2018).

How to Unpack a Bomb Vest

Start with the vest itself, each pocket stuffed with scriptures and explosives, hatred and nails, belief and batteries. No. Start with prayer on Friday, or Saturday, or Sunday. No. Search online for where the materials and the rhetoric were bought. No. It's at the hardware store, the mosque, the chatroom. Begin with an olive tree, a way of life, a desert sky. First, learn a language spoken for thousands of years. Learn its words for forgiveness, for war, for love. Learn every word for revenge spoken by anyone who has seen a drone. It is scrawled in the concrete dust of Aleppo, in pockmarks across the walls of Baghdad. The source bubbles up from the ground, black, thick, pungent. Start with the forests of dinosaurs. No. Start with the treasuries of the west. Look in your gas tanks for the instructions on demilitarizing sleeveless tops. Drink the poetry of nomads and scholars for a taste of old bloodlines and darkness. Walk the back alleys of grievance in the shadows of pyramids. Cover yourself with hijab and begin with apology. It is there, in worn carpets and stained coffee cups, in bombed out hospital wards and torture cells. Dig a hole six millennia down through generations of soldiers' bones and sacrifices to God, deep in the cool earth between two ancient rivers, and get in it. This is where you will find the directions for grace written in carbon, written in breath, written in songs whose lyrics the dead have long since forgotten.

Matt Hohner

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Toward Pittsburgh

Night falls between mountain ridges,
open car windows and headlights on,
lullaby of tiresong beside cow farms,
faded Mail Pouch Tobacco billboard
painted on the side of an old barn.
Fragrant alfalfa breath of summer
darkness settles like gossamer hands
enfolding a postage-stamp grass meadow,
edge of the woods by the interstate
south of Breezewood and the Turnpike;
U2's "Promenade" pulses low on the car stereo,
and you, behind the wheel, steady as years.
Light by quiet light, Edward Hopper's America
nestles into its small, white, box houses,
blue glow of computer and TV screens
spilling out through upstairs bedroom curtains.
Slide show, seaside town. Coca-cola, football radio,
radio, radio, radio, radio, radio
Thin fog hugs the farm fields' edges;
fireflies glitter the treetops:
hold this moment, a little longer.

Matt Hohner

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