

## Thresholds

*For I am grateful, her love makes me humble.<sup>1</sup>*

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,*

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Hamill, "Jubilate Sutra", from *Destination Zero*.

*sacred mysteries in each other's arms.*<sup>2</sup>

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

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*<sup>4</sup>:  
to light candles and draw you a warm bath;  
*to lie and talk together through the night*<sup>5</sup>;  
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.

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

<sup>3</sup> Rumi, "Sky Circles", tr. by Coleman Barks.

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

<sup>5</sup> 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*,<sup>6</sup>  
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**

From *Thresholds and Other Poems* (Apprentice House 2018).

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<sup>6</sup> 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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## **Toward Pittsburgh**

Night falls between mountain ridges,  
open car windows & 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 . . . .*  
Thin fog hugs the farm fields' edges;  
fireflies glitter the treetops:  
hold this moment, a little longer.

**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

Winner, Maryland Writers’ Association 2014 Poetry Contest, anthologized in *Synergy* (Apprentice House, 2014).  
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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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