

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 2018. Forthcoming in my next collection with Salmon Poetry (Ireland), 2023.

Worn

The boy was something mommy wouldn't wear....
—Pearl Jam, “Jeremy”

Ten years is a long time to wear what doesn't fit. It grabs, pinches, itches, sags, saps you just to put it on. You tried to quilt together a family, first by turning to this cast-off, orphan child of another, left on consignment for you by God, or so you told me, and I believed. And what, then, of your daughter, the child you never thought would grow inside you? Your mother's words at her birth: *now you are cursed with one of your own*; perhaps my sister's image, your face in the mirror, wasn't the look you'd sought after all. Wedding dress. Formal eveningwear. Maternity blouse. Mom jeans. You even tried on college, bought the gown, mortarboard, and tassel, but a career was just too much maintenance. By now you'd have retired a master teacher with full benefits, but commitment wasn't your style. After ten years, a family became too tight. You didn't love how it felt on you, and so you sloughed off that heavy burden, tossed it on the front lawn, set it alight. No clingy child weighing awkward on your hip, no ring to unbalance an otherwise matching set of fingers. I often wonder if in your mind, perhaps when you dream, you sneak back to that closet of a former life to try on those old clothes, spin in the mirror one last time, and ponder how you'd look now, had you learned how to make *mother* and *wife* match with a life you never quite wore with confidence.

Matt Hohner

Published in *Prairie Schooner*, 2019. Forthcoming in my next collection with Salmon Poetry (Ireland), 2023.

The Silence of Emma Gonzáles Teaches Us About Language

for Sam Hamill

In America, a young man learns that to kill is language
enough. From the muzzle, which means to hush, to gag,
the phonemes of his rage interject themselves into seventeen
stories, ending in the smothered dreams of thirty-four parents.
To mourn a child is to beg a hole in the earth for answers: What
are we willing to endure? What act will be the unspeakable next?
The absence of voices fills with the sound of blood congealing
on a classroom floor. Outlines where a life used to be saturate
with empty talk. A politician sweeps the room with the shrapnel
of scripted gibberish. Such vapid discussion. How do we amend
our narrative before we can't bring ourselves back from the dead?
A young woman reads the names of her classmates, then stops,
stands, says nothing. Heartbeats mark the time in the millions
gathered to hear her. Cold wind cuts across the Tidal Basin,
sighs through naked cherry boughs. The national breath.
Bodies accumulate in the voids between words. We learn
nothing when our silence lays our children in the ground.
What, then, when a child lays our silence at our feet?

Matt Hohner

Longlisted, 2019 University of Canberra (Australia) Vice Chancellor's Poetry Prize. Published in *Silences*, the 2019 prize anthology. Forthcoming in my next collection with Salmon Poetry (Ireland), 2023.

Sarah

Loch Raven Reservoir, Glenarm, Maryland

How many years, your name in red, blazoned in spray
paint on the jersey wall at Dead Man's Corner before
the county straightened the curve, widened the bridge,
replaced rust and rickets of iron trestles with concrete?
The psychic told investigators to find your name near
water and there they'd find the missing man. And so,
when a detective spotted the ghost of muffler and tire
haunting the tea-colored depths, his grey body still
seat-belted in, upside-down, just past your crimson
letters, the legend of you began. But someone who once
loved you scrawled you in the color of blood, the color
of hot heart, the color of ache on a dark country bend
where land meets reservoir, where headlights gave
you fame a few seconds at a time, where death lurked
mere feet away for the drunk, the foolish, the too-fast,
careening recklessly through the obscurity of their lives.

Matt Hohner

Semifinalist, *Heartwood Literary Magazine* 2019 Heartwood Broadside Series. Published 2019. Forthcoming in my next collection with Salmon Poetry (Ireland), 2023.

Hearkening

Simone – one who hears; one who listens.

Somewhere between the vault where she had kept a darkness locked up for years of her short life along with her gleaming medals (a tarnish she refused to dull the precious mettle of self), and a moment we all saw as grace in sparkling eye shadow and gleaming smile, her inner gyroscope teetered, even as she kept her balance, beaming to the world her light brighter than the sultry demons of fame, competition, wealth, and expectation. Something in the calcium and cartilage of her two dozen years began to ache and fray as she hurled herself, meteoric, upside-down above earth, her celestial body tumbling out of a history of performance and measurement, scores and calorie counts, podiums and violations—a regimen old as Eve’s footprints—so she ended the routine, stepped away to even her bars, align her spirit, wake from the dreams of millions that became for her a recurring nightmare, and, in her spinning, twisting, weightless state, located a distant point to stick her final landing in a spotlight of her making, grounded at last, arms raised victorious in a place uncrowded with spectators, listening not to the roar of an adoring nation, but to the singing of one voice deep within, perfect in her own judgment.

Matt Hohner

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When the Media Say Health Care Workers Are on the Front Lines in the Battle Against COVID-19

for Antoinette Antetomaso

I think of my grandmother, a nurse
in a U.S. field hospital in Europe
in WWII. She would remind us
every conflagration is absorbed in
injury by people, suffered by scarred
survivors and uncountable dead. She
would look us full in the face with her
steely green eyes, teach us the difference
between fighters and fixers, that health
care workers wait behind the front lines to
receive us with medicine and grace in our
most graceless hours. She would show us
with hands that bathed wrist-deep in chests
of shredded men that we are the soldiers
in this most personal of battles, our bodies
the front lines of a war against an unseeable
foe, silent invader of lungs and throats, that
we expose ourselves to a crossfire hurricane
of infected breath and touched surfaces each
time we venture out, that our homes are bunkers
against the spread. She would tell us to hunker
down and wait for a needle of mercy in the arm,
a cease-fire of safety signed with a syringe, for
church bells and sirens to herald the all-clear.

Matt Hohner

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**Poem for the Dead at Tuam Beginning
and Ending with a Line from U2's
"11 O'Clock Tick-Tock"**

I hear the children crying
from Tuam's soil, finger
bones clutching earth
where a breast should be,
mud filling mouths instead
of milk, gnarled roots weaving
through ribcages to silence
the harp strings of their breath.
I hear them cracking under
the weight of shame levelled
by an angry God made of men
most unkind, the grief in a
mother's voice, the faint echo
of their name soaking into silt
where an ear should be to hear it.

And what of the ones unblessed,
gone before sacrament, limbo-
bound to an eternal nowhere,
stolen sons and daughters of no
God, lost in the bureaucracy
of heaven, unwritten in the ledgers
of the saved, in the silence of time?
What now, but to see their faces,
fathers spinning off into space,
mothers' womb scars bearing
witness like ancient stories
written in ochre deep on the
walls of dark places and kept
safe? What now, but to take up
the chorus of the dead wandering
on the salt wind, floating over the
windowsills of the living, singing
soft as wings, *take me home?*

Matt Hohner

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Rumbley, Maryland

after Hooper's Island (oil on canvas 2019)
by Jonathan Nepini

1.

Two inches of bay water ripple in the breeze across asphalt outside the tight cluster of houses, trailers, and fishing shacks approaching Rumbley, a settlement scratched on Tangier Sound, where the only traffic at rush hour is blue crabs scuttling across the double yellow lines and minnows scattering in the wakes of our tires. Road map converts to marine chart at high tide, ground gives way to saturation point, slurry, tenuous terra firma. Marsh grass and cattails bend in undulating unison, green waves spilling into the brackish shallows of tannined Goose Creek, the boggy stink of life renewing itself in wet mud, warm peat. August: redwing blackbirds flash fiery epaulets and trill across the flats in the summer sun's lazy, late evening angle, golden under passing clouds and the wide, blue, big Chesapeake sky.

2.

The house on Goose Creek is not on it, but in it, on pilings a hundred yards from shore. The server at The Hide Away Grill says legend has it the place was a party shack during Prohibition. If you knew the code, you earned passage across to the ladder up and into another world. Asked what happened there, she shrugs. "What's illegal on land might not be the same out in the bay," she twangs. "But no one really knows—or they won't say," she adds with a wink. She says cars parked at the dock late at night flashed their headlights three times, waited for a light on the house to answer with three blinks, listened for the hum of an outboard, looked for the widening vee of a boat's wake to ferry the people across to where secrets happened, the sound of inhibitions slipping fading before it reached the ears of the law lurking on shore. Now a story in the quiet gloam, its shingled roof and brittle board walls weather grey by the far shore, nestled where marsh meets tide, where the laws of men, state, and God once melted away in wind and water, the moon's primal pull, the ebb and flow between sweet desire and better judgment.

Matt Hohner

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A Good Guy with a Poem

I hadn't finished editing the poem
I wrote about Atlanta when Boulder,
Colorado happened. They're buying
guns faster than I can write poems
about the messes they leave behind,
faster than I can rhyme history and hope.
Shots from firearms make holes in chests
more often than vaccine shots penetrate
arms. It seems I'm more likely to catch
a bullet in the head than COVID-19.
If only I could buy an automatic poem
maker to metaphor the shit out of the gun
lobby. Walk up on it like a motherfucker
picked the wrong corner to do his business.
Bust a simile in the 2nd Amendment's ass
for being unpoetically vague. Such glory!
I'll be Doc Holliday with a six- shooter
of jargon-piercing allegories. I'll have
shoes and stadiums named after me.
I'll make the front of the Wheaties box.
Fans will recite my poems before every
baseball game instead of singing the Star
Spangled Banner. They'll crawl my poems
across the LED walls in Times Square.
The President will beg me to share my verses
with him over breakfast at the White House.
My statue will stand astride the entrance
to Baltimore's Inner Harbor. They'll name
the moon after me. I'll direct the tides.
My face will feature prominently in every
sonnet written between lovers. I'll finally
prove how every problem in America can
be solved by a good guy with a poem.

Matt Hohner

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You Learn a Friend's Friend Has Died

for Marty

And you feel in that gauze of shared grief a wind rise
and move around you, across your back and shoulders,
pushing the image of a man into the bluing distance,
shrinking smaller with each blink, so you reach for
that fading silhouette tumbling toward a furthering
vanishing point, and in the grasping you manage
to clutch some torn edge of your life with him, some
lesson or laughter, some sharp hurt you'd forgotten
until just then, and you begin to mourn not those snippets
and scenes, but even more so, the ones you've long
since forgotten—murky, gray seas between green islands
rising in the muffling fog—and you want that earth
he was for you, that solid ground, that sunlight through
the silver maples congregated alongside the old chapel
on his father's church grounds dappling your bare feet
at noon, where you've sat yourself once again in the shade,
eleven years old, waiting for him to return from Sunday
service wearing his brother's maroon hand-me-down tie
from the widest year in the 1970s, plaid polyester pants
flood-high above his ankles, the aroma of his mother's
brunch of bacon and eggs and bread and jam and butter
emanating like love, or stability, from an open window
in the old stone house up the hill, and you lean back
against the thickest trunk in the grove, and at forty-six,
you know he won't be coming home, so you linger here
in this meditation, locusts rasping in the canopy above,
before standing, brushing the damp soil from your
cut-offs, and taking the quiet sidewalk back to the lens
of your life now, a hard-earned semi-clarity at middle age,
September crickets punctuating the moonlight filtering
through the woods in the ravine across the street,
a neighbor's dog barking weakly into the darkness.

Matt Hohner

Honorable Mention, 2017 *San Diego Poetry Annual* Steve Kowit Poetry Prize. Published 2018. Forthcoming in my next collection with *Salmon Poetry* (Ireland), 2023.