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## On Michael Hogan

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*If You Ever Get There, Think of Me*

Michael Hogan

Emerald City Press, 1975

Tempe, Arizona

\$1.50, paperback

*Soon It Will Be Morning*

Michael Hogan

Cold Mountain Press, 1976

Austin, Texas

\$5.50, paperback, signed

In these two chapbooks, Michael Hogan continues the work he began in his first book, *Letters For My Son* (Unicorn Press, 1975). Hogan, now released on parole, was in prison for some nine years, convicted of armed robbery, involuntary manslaughter and forgery. I mention these biographical facts not because they are important to the reading of the poems, but because I can't deny that I first approached Hogan as an oddity. With the same curiosity that makes me love gossip, I thought I would read these poems and find out "what it was like" to be a convicted prisoner, get a "feel" for life on the inside. Certainly Hogan does present some of the realities of prison life, and in vivid detail, but no amount of poetry reading will ever make me *know* that kind of institutional life, that denial of freedom.

What I did learn from these poems was something about myself. Hogan's themes are the inescapable ones of personal vulnerability, the difficulty of family relations, loneliness, concern for others, and the necessary acceptance of things as they are. For a prisoner, these kinds of human responses are heightened in a special way. From a poem about the stabbing death of a fellow inmate and poet ("For A Prison Poet," *If You Ever Get There*):

He was killed because he forgot fear;  
because when looking at the sparrow perched  
on a concertina bale  
he learned to see the bird and the barbed wire.  
Even worse, mornings when the sun  
raged against the white walls of the compound,  
he was able to see only the sparrow.  
From then on his days were numbered.

Somehow Hogan keeps taking these kinds of risks, exposing himself through attention to the life around him. He never falls into self-pity or self-congratulation, staying more or less in the background as he focuses on his fellow prisoners, the guards, people remembered from childhood or two old men watching the sky.

*Soon It Will Be Morning* is the stronger book, the poem more carefully done as Hogan continues to work on his sharp clear style. His ability to gain imaginative insight shows itself again and again in these twenty poems, some of them quiet beautiful lyrics. Shifting viewpoint, Hogan writes out of concern for the son he hardly knows:

December 18, 1975

You meet your father after nine years.  
At least that's who they say he is.  
So you look for something in the eyes or mouth,  
you speak quickly putting him at ease.  
Everyone thinks this visit is important.  
But they don't know about the dream.  
They don't know that you are in the dream  
and also the one dreaming.  
He hugs you and that seems important,  
so you hug him back.  
You know there should be something  
familiar in all this.  
You are a boy embracing your father.  
You are that same boy watching yourself  
embrace your father.  
To think that somewhere nine years ago  
you did this in the same way,  
doesn't make it more real.  
Still, it is difficult to leave at the end  
and, even when the guard comes  
and the chairs are pulled back,  
you do not awaken.

And then this, the last poem of the group:

January

You are alone. You are more alone now  
than you have ever been.

Somewhere, at the back of the house perhaps,  
or from a drain on the garage roof,  
water is falling.  
The rush of water seems a long way off  
but the rain is close and the uncaring wind.  
And the cold following you from one room to the next  
is close.

Your father lies awake  
staring at the dry ceiling of his cell.  
You cannot pull his features together.  
His face, pale and transitory,  
is like snow melting now beneath the elm tree.  
It brightens once and is gone.

These poems do what good poems should do—leave a full silence  
behind them. But I want to include one more. This because I like it;  
because it shows how Michael Hogan keeps on.

Passing Through Virginia

The boy balanced on the big root  
watching the helicopter seeds of maples  
spin like dying insects  
is waiting for life to begin.  
He doesn't suspect that his green eyes  
are more alive  
than those speeding by him in cars.

It is difficult to learn  
not to be waiting and thinking:  
surely the best days of my life  
are yet to be lived somewhere else  
any place but this  
is where love is and where  
life will truly begin.

The crickets know nothing of such things.  
Out behind the garage in the high grass  
among the helicopter wrecks  
of spun-out maple seeds  
they sing of this day,  
this summer that is all their lifetime.

*Sylvia Clark*