



The Year I Learned the Backstroke

James Hannon

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In *The Year I Learned the Backstroke*, James Hannon takes us from Vermont to Munich, from Sarajevo to the Poconos, from prisons to cathedrals to the National Mall as his poems explore questions of family, history, and social justice. His probing eye, keen and never still for too long, is not afraid to look into the darkness of human nature—where “there is no axis mundi, / no tether, no rules”—to seek out what light may be left to find.

—Nick McRae, author of *Mountain Redemption* and *The Name Museum*

James Hannon’s first collection invites us to enter into his compassion for self and others. With language succinct yet casual, he mines experiences as parent and child, teacher and student, tourist, lover, betrayer, friend.

These poems thrive on irony (“my suffering / their iniquity / divine justice”) as well as juxtaposition (“the love of ice cream / the iconic baseball team”). Some draw on a psalm-like repetition, others on the rhymes of childhood, but most fall into the easy rhythm of short lines of free verse. Often a sense of metaphor carries the poems in unexpected directions.

Tell me about yourself— of how you felt when you finally stopped crying three days after the divorce was final, when you saw the sun break through a cloud and were grateful, not at all embarrassed by the trite quality of your rebirth.

The Year I Learned the Backstroke offers a harvest of vivid reflections layered with self-examination, a labor of love toward both present and past.

—Jessie Brown, author of *Lucky* and *What We Don’t Know We Know*

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