

At the Edge of a Thousand Years

Home, then, where the loss is: the rusty ports of the sun.
—Thomas McGrath, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*

for Baltimore

1.

Living is difficult
where slow tides undulate
and locomotives roll through
 like subterranean monsters,

where buoy bells chime,

 where fluorescent gas tubes
light highway tunnels toward the polished harbor
 silhouetting factories closed forever

and stadiums where millionaires entertain nouveau gentry
 who forsake cheering for chatting into cell phones.

2.

Difficult,
this tiresome closeness of red-brick row houses
 and edgy race calm that belies a seething anger,

 scarred, bone-thin dogs guarding weedy yards in dead-end alleyways, hackles
raised, growling through chain link fences.
 Only a matter of time.

 Perpetrators of the present versus past victimization:
the courthouse crumbles
 from neglect of law, decency; from a history of bad raps
and selfishness disguised as need.
 Lack of justice preferable to cohesion.

Pollution has made the sunsets more beautiful. The city
 delights in grand summer evening sky,
adds emphysemic coughs
 to the cacophony of traffic, sirens, shouts, gunshots.

3.

Remove the hard shell,
push the viscera aside,
crack through cartilage
to get to the meat,
to the soft tissue
that propels the creature
sideways and backwards
out of prehistory
and into another
carnivorous millennium.
Eat or be eaten.

(It is thought

that the blue crab's cannibalistic behavior, coupled
with over-predation by creatures higher on the food chain,
may aid in its own extinction.)

4.

A sugar refinery's red neon sign swirls
reflected on black mercuric waters. A skimmer boat cleans the surface
of trash, oil-slick rainbows and dying fish,
their gills gasping for air.

Break the membrane of what you see, what you
think you see. Submerged in the pitch-dark
undulating currents:

the barnacle rot of old pylons standing in bottom heaps of oyster shells;

rusted shackles thrown from hometown clippers
built for speed—for smuggling slaves—
buried in the soft silt;

the obsolete machinery of heavy industry
tossed into the grime of bygone piers;

debris shoals

of labor unrest,
Civil War riots against federal troops,
gun battles with British ships;

the skeletons of sunken boats

resting in their sulfuric graves
alongside unfound flood victims
washed down the Jones Falls in the days before the city
entombed the river in concrete and pipes.

5.

Away from this,
toward the bay,
the modern marine terminal's giant steel torsos
unload boxcars full of clothing and electronics
made by Chinese dissidents in forced labor prisons,
fast and expensive cars made by well-paid Germans,
fruit from half a world away,
and the occasional false bottom stuffed with kilos of cocaine
and ultrapure smack, all bound for the addicted consumer streets of Baltimore,
Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Richmond, Charlotte.

Freight trains and eighteen-wheelers roll from here into the nation.

The engine keeps churning.

There is nothing to do
but listen closely, learn to harmonize
and hum along
or perish.

6.

The difficult task of neighborhoods divided:

one prays
for hot water, for the poison
to silence the scurrying inside its walls,
for a living wage,
for a grocery store,
for a decent school;

another
erects electrified gates,
hires armed private patrols,
smokes its big cigars
behind home security alarm systems,
drives its Land Rovers to work

over cobblestones of privilege
to a job it earned by being born well.

To achieve commonality of purpose,
compassion in this low rise from swampy port;

to be more than this,
to *live*.

7.

To peel off the formstone,
remove the bricks,
expose the soft center.

In the predawn twilight of another long century,
at the edge of a thousand years,
to make it work,
to get done the stuff of life in a tenuous world,
to restrain the worst of our demons
out of necessity, out of fear
and knowledge of consequence,
at least for now.

Matt Hohner

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The Devil Is Beating His Wife

We said growing up, every time
it rained while the sun shone,
that poor woman's tears falling
through the sunlight, the devil's
house on a block we couldn't see,
black eye of cloud overhead
and missing tooth of air
between curtains of deluge.
We blamed her in our calloused
naiveté, thought her a fool
for marrying him, her eternal
hell no different than Mrs. Sibley's
five doors down, who wore new
bruises every week, whose
husband guarded his Ford Pinto
like a well-known secret, shouting
at us kids if we played too close to it,
something dangerous and flawed
that he washed and waxed weekly,
something prone to explosions
if damaged just so, a precious
firebomb glittering after rain
that he wouldn't let anyone near.

Matt Hohner

Finalist, 52nd *New Millennium Writings* Award (Poetry) 2021, published 2022.

Putty Hill

for Kevin

As I approach a half-century on Earth,
only an hour has passed since I was fourteen,
watching *The Breakfast Club* on the VCR, wolfing
down popcorn on Kevin's living room floor in 1985,
licking butter and salt from my fingers, then afterward
his father asking which character each of us resembled.
Kevin and his brother Pat chose the jock and the nerd,
and I answered, *a little of each, but I guess the rebel
because he's angry*. I imagine that same floor where
only a week ago, his mother found him dead, and I think
of his father's shattered heart. I remember how strong
we were in each other, sounding like an approaching storm
on our skateboards as we kicked away at the alley beneath
us, a three-part harmony of urethane, wood, and concrete,
the womb-like soft humidity enveloping our bodies, heat
radiating off the asphalt as the three of us busted new tricks
late into the August night, dripping sweat across the darkness
like signatures, barking shins, skinning elbows and knees,
scraping palms under the parking lot light poles in the office
complex behind their row house. How I savored the cool
wind rippling my soaked t-shirt as I pushed my way home,
blood trickling from new wounds staining my socks while I
picked gravel from the heel of my hand. The braille of raised
scars and dents in my shin bones tells the story of the earned
joy of those boys, those almost-men. We were all gods then.

Matt Hohner

Longlisted, *Live Canon 2021 International Poetry Prize*, published in the *Live Canon 2021 Anthology*.

The Diamond Oceans of Jupiter

I would give you Jupiter's aurora,
born not from solar particles crashing
into its planetary magnetic fields
like wind through a lyre's strings,
but from its own voice, radio waves
singing into the galaxy, sound turned
visible, glowing ballad of a giant
more breath than body, where lightning
pierces clouds of carbon, forming hot,
pure, crystal raindrops that fall for miles,
liquefying in the pressure to fill a vast
glittering ocean of molten diamond. I
would give you a glimpse of this, draw
you up on wings of time and space to drink
it in, together. How the light from the far
flame of our sun must sparkle and dance,
of and only for itself, in a place no human
will ever visit, claim, or make their own.

Matt Hohner

Published in Washington Writers' Publishing House *WWPH Writes* biweekly online feature, February 14, 2023.

Man Jumps on Hood of Car, Smashes Windshield to Get at Errant Driver

*Inner Harbor, Baltimore
March 22, 2023*

You aren't helping the narrative, Tom. What will people like Tucker Carlson and the ghost of Anthony Bourdain, junkie-trotting the east side after scoring a bag of bad heroin, say when you refute their claims that our city is dead, that there be monsters on our map that must be avoided by out-of-towners and White suburbanites terrified of Black folk? But there you were, standing on the hood of a man's car, bloodying your knuckles and kicking in the windshield to pull the driver out, not to slash his throat for hurling epithets at you for squeegeeing his precious glass, but because he'd driven *into* the Inner Harbor, and that's what a father, or a cop who doesn't make the headlines for the wrong reasons, or in your case, a sous chef at Phillips Seafood does before the dinner rush in a place nicknamed Charm City when no one, or everyone, is looking, to save a life. No one will speak of the bystanders who tossed a life ring into the frigid water to pull you both out, either, but that's also what we do here, for each other. Tomorrow morning, the news will speak of a mass shooting on the west side, one dead, five injured. The regularly scheduled program will return to *if it bleeds, it leads*. But I saw you, Tom. I saw what you did before returning to work to filet the day's catch, shuck oysters, and get the crabs ready for steaming.

Matt Hohner

Finalist, 2023 *Breakwater Review* Peseroff Prize, published 2022.

Sweet Briar Plantation Burial Ground

The sign reads, innocuous, carved and serified font, lichen and undersized in a small mown dell at the edge of awareness, no arrow pointing the direction into a darkness history knows is there, where a patch of red clay the color of hemorrhage has rubbed bare on a slope facing the grove of hardwoods and pines. Skinned knee. Blistered hands. Flesh opened in daily conversation with the overseer's angry and selective God. Walk the path into the forest, into quiet stasis, into a past of shadows. Come to a clearing thinned of trees, rough and unkempt. An iron gate, rusted and latched, stands fenceless, holding no one in, keeping none out. The only way those here could escape was into the ground. A rock with a bronze plaque names them *founders* next to a sign showing a map of numbers and ovals marking where they lay. One could do the work, search the county archives for ledgers of property bought and sold, learn their names, make them more than chunks of quartz and granite. But the rock reminds us that its makers bend the past to suit the present, scrub the truth to rhyme with words like convenience, expedience, closure, erasure. In a lexicon sourced from the River Lethe, *mass grave* becomes *monument*; *slaves* become *founders*. Call them *more than sixty stones*, call them *more than a dozen unmarked burials indicated by depressions* in the Earth. Call them *families* versus *family groupings*. Call them *mother, father, daughter, son*. Call them. Nearby, a cardinal sings *Here! Here! Here! Here!* as a late-day breeze choruses the green canopy. Slant sun reaches its hands through oak and black locust into the soil holding ribcages and names to lift them up and anoint them in a future light for which they prayed and died, waiting.

*Sweet Briar College, Amherst, Virginia
Juneteenth 2022*

Matt Hohner

Shortlisted, The Bedford 2022 International Poetry Award, published in their anthology 2023.

The Wren

for those seeking refuge

We saw him one last time before he disappeared
for parts south, having spent all summer under
our porch roof at night where the brick support
columns gave a corner for him to sleep on. Such
faith in us, knowing his vulnerability, risking harm
for shelter, his trust somehow having been earned.

Tired, feathered ball hunkered under one eye
or the other, he was gone every morning before
daybreak at the first notes sung from the treetops,
reappearing most evenings, a small dark being
covering his eyes from the porch light.

We learned to give him space, accommodate
his hours, leave the front door shut while he
slept. The mail could wait until the next day.

And so it was over the long, rainy summer until
the first crisp October dusk he did not return,
the absence of such a small presence suddenly
a vast region within us, our porch emptier
than before he arrived, the sharing of our life
with him having not been a sacrifice, but a blessing.

Matt Hohner

Published in *Bealtaine Magazine*'s "(Un)Belonging" themed issue, 2022.

Drone God

The video is silent. The bomb smaller than a trenching tool. It falls to the ambient sounds of your home, the neighbors' children playing outside in the street, autumn birds calling to each other in the trees. The bomb, adorned in blue and gold stripes, shrinks towards two men in a foxhole curled close like twins in a womb, colored in the drab palette of battle, the hue and shade of the soil that will consume their bodies. You are God, or what's replaced Him, above it, watching the bomb descend like a terrible word from your mouth, like spittle. The bomb blasts inches from the men's knees. Debris kicks up towards your face hovering over the scene. Dust shakes loose in a cloud from the ground surrounding them. As the smoke clears, one man drags himself out by an arm, legs kicking, faltering. The other lurches and rises, fumbling in concussed stupor. Your last glimpse of the men is the moment the end of the first man's left arm blossoms bright red where his hand used to be. Outside your window, children laugh and squeal on scooters, on skateboards, on bicycles. Steam creaks in the warming radiators. A breeze shakes leaves loose from the trees, showering the children in confetti of gold, umber, auburn, crimson under a cloudless sky.

Matt Hohner

Published in *Rattle: Poets Respond*, 2022.

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. It would be
glorious. 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 own 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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