

## 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**

Published in *Free State Review*, Fall/Winter 2021.

## **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.

## **This Poem Has Been Sanitized for Your Protection**

This poem is organic, macrobiotic, made with 100% recycled, post-consumer language, and trigger-free. Surface meanings have been scrubbed clean with disinfected phrasing. References to sadness, massacres, mistreatment of people and Mother Nature have been replaced with images of gentle, fluffy animals doing cute things with babies. Theme and tone have been thoroughly vetted by a panel of experts, clergy, and business leaders so as not to threaten the status quo. Diction and syntax were generated using renewable energy. All negative thoughts have been converted to the American Dream. No one will die in this poem. Everyone will go to heaven. Every word in this poem is a military or professional sports hero. This poem can be played on any format radio station. Reading this poem out loud replenishes rainforests and coral reefs. Its carbon footprint is negative. Whales sing this poem to their young. Whispering this poem resurrects forgotten tongues and extinct species. This poem is child-safe; none of its easily recognizable allusions to western culture contain nuts, wheat, eggs, meat, gluten, sugar, salt, pesticides, herbicides, or lactose. Your aunt from Des Moines will ask you for a copy of this poem. Every metaphor is food-safe, hypoallergenic, anti-microbial, and certified fair-trade. This poem will never be censored on Facebook. These lines will be used in speeches by kind and benevolent world leaders because no one can argue with clean poems. This poem extols beautiful things without being specific, because safe poems use words like *beautiful* and everyone loves them. This poem will look good in a gold frame on your living room wall. Read this poem at weddings and funerals. You wish you wrote this poem, and you could have, because it's safe, and good, and beautiful, and everyone loves it.

**Matt Hohner**

Second Place, 2021 Vivian Shipley Poetry Award, published in *Connecticut River Review*, 2022. From *At the Edge of a Thousand Years* (Jacar Press 2024).

## **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**

Published in *Rise Up Review*, Summer 2021.