

## 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  
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**Matt Hohner**

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

## How to Plan for Peace Talks

Leave the Kalashnikovs at home. Take the kittens. Take cookies. Men who hate each other across fancy tables will still eat cookies together. Hang Picasso's *Guernica* from the largest wall and require all sides to pledge allegiance to the dying horse, the lightbulb, the screaming woman holding her wounded baby. At moments of impasse release the kittens. Dose the room with cute until they're laughing. When the warring sides begin to name their kittens, give every warlord a scoop and assign litter boxes. Play Bach's Cello Suites over their headsets instead of interpreters' translations of intransigence. Serve water from the last place each nation bombed. Serve it in vessels pulled intact from the rubble. Somewhere in the chaos of their mutual ambition, grandmothers tend garden plots. Serve them fruit and vegetables fertilized with the blood of children. For dessert, resolution served two ways: honey or vinegar. When they fail to choose, send them home with a colony of bees in each briefcase and guides on how to harvest honey. Make them fly coach, to bathe in the gaze and breath of the people they are about to kill.

**Matt Hohner**

Published in *Fahmidan Journal*, 2021. Nominated for a Best of the Net Award. From *At the Edge of a Thousand Years* (Jacar Press 2024).

## **A Trumpeter in Sumy Plays the Ukrainian National Anthem During the Russian Invasion, While in Baltimore, We Hold a Bake Sale**

At St. Michael the Archangel Ukrainian Catholic Church  
they are selling pierogis to raise money for their homeland

not because in a city nicknamed Mobtown we don't know  
the recipe for Molotov cocktails, or how to lob them at the

vehicles of occupying forces; not because in a city nicknamed  
Bodymore Murdaland we don't know how to kill fellow human

beings in close anger with frequent efficiency, or because we don't  
know how to write new anthems for young nations while being

bombed by a despot trying to erase us from the language of maps, but  
because sometimes we vogue to Michael Jackson in front of armored

police vehicles manned by uniforms from hostile neighboring counties;  
because an old woman in Ukraine walks up to a Russian soldier offering

seeds to fill his pockets so that sunflowers will grow where he falls;  
because here, sometimes, a Black man sees a White man struggling to pull

five hundred pounds of mulch to the register at the Home Depot and gives  
him a push without exchanging names past thank you, a handshake, a smile;

because we embrace the grace and dignity of freedom exercised in the lunacy  
of dancing in front of a line of guns held by men who would rather kill us

than know us; that it's easier to make the everyday heaviness of life collective  
than to watch one person struggle with it; that even battlefields will bloom again

where the dead lay now; that small, savory pastries can soothe hearts grieving  
for the Old Country, because every mother who has buried a son killed by violence

knows that ache; because we know that sometimes the best weapon against  
rocket fire bombardment from a dying empire is to bless the air with music.

**Matt Hohner**

Shortlisted, Live Canon 2022 International Poetry Prize. Published in the *2022 Live Canon Anthology*. From *At the Edge of a Thousand Years* (Jacar Press 2024).

## A Poet Sits Down to Write After a Massacre

*Tree of Life Synagogue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,  
October 27, 2018*

*“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”  
–Theodor Adorno*

The dead keep piling up and all I have are poems  
to wrap them in. Pockmarks across synagogue walls  
are a new font in a familiar language I refuse to utter.  
Men have begun again to speak in tongues syntaxed  
by phonemes of caliber and clip capacity: diction I  
will not assemble into sentences; sounds I cannot make  
into words. What color, the stripes being woven like old  
narratives into new camp pajamas? How many stars  
asterisk prayers into the bluest night? There is no  
metaphor for what I cannot abide; no pentameter  
for the sound of earth falling from the hands of love  
into a freshly-filled grave. My iambs are a pair  
of backwards-turned boots in the stirrups of a riderless  
horse. We measure the inarticulate grammar of fear  
in the steady metronome of newsfeed updates,  
punctuate the lulls between carnage with promises  
enjambéd in the wind. Cover my eyes with verses  
if you must. Bribe the ferryman with curses and dust.  
A poet’s contract is blood-inked, bone-stamped,  
ratified eternal at the frontier where hope kisses rust.

**Matt Hohner**

Winner, 2019 Doolin Writers’ Weekend International Poetry Prize (Ireland). Published in *The Irish Times* February 27, 2019. From *At the Edge of a Thousand Years* (Jacar Press 2024).

## The Unreeving

*Green Hill Cemetery, Berryville, VA  
November 2, 2022*

*for Steve*

Strange now to see your name carved in granite,  
an absence of stone marking where a man's life  
became memory. I still catch myself replaying  
your last lone act of flight, untethered, the run and leap—  
but in that moment I am on the cliff, reaching,  
desperate in the wake of your silence. Unable  
to grab you, I lose balance. The wall of red rock  
scrolls past faster and faster, the canyon road  
far below rushing towards us, the wind roaring  
in our ears, the sudden black of impact, the pile  
of you crumpled across cold asphalt. I picture  
the arc of your trajectory, your surrender to gravity  
betraying your miles of rope, climbing harnesses  
left behind. I imagine a bin full of ascenders,  
carabiners clipped to a runner slung on a nail,  
unpartnered belay devices stopping nothing  
from falling, helmet now a mere decoration.  
Tracing my fingertips over your birthdate, your  
death a decade ago today, letters and numbers  
become holds in the escarpment of your gravestone,  
my hands feeling for a fissure in your façade  
to hang onto even now, so long after you let go.  
Red-shouldered hawk pierces the quiet from an oak  
at the edge of the cemetery. Sun descends behind  
a veil of cirrus wisps. Cool breeze shakes leaves  
the color of ochre, chocolate, and blood, the color  
of the orange shirt you wore that day, until they release  
their summer-long grip and flutter gently to ground.

**Matt Hohner**

Longlisted, Live Canon 2023 International Poetry Prize. Published in the *2023 Live Canon Anthology*. From *At the Edge of a Thousand Years* (Jacar Press 2024).

## Chemo

*for Corinne*

I ask her what color the poison envenomating her veins will be, and she says clear, but we agree it should be blue or neon green, an alien serum meant to almost kill her in order to kill the tumor growing inside her skull, pushing on the backs of her eyes, crowding her brain, filling her sinus cavity, cloaking her ability to smell. The doctors say it is the size of a Snickers bar. By the third round of treatment, her body will feel it: mouth sores, a tongue that tastes of mercury, vomiting, immune system dissolving, hair releasing from her scalp like the leaves from the oaks and dogwoods outside. After nine weeks dancing on the near shore of the River Styx, there will be five more of proton radiation fired through her face to shrink the damned thing further. We joke of *Star Wars*, Dr. Luke Skywalker, of Yoda guiding the beam from the operating room corner, staff in one hand, his other little gnarled hand raised in benediction like a little avocado Moses. Then, maybe, surgery to cut what remains out of her, and we laugh about Egyptian pharaohs, long nasal hooks, sarcophagi. I say *damned thing* because *olfactory neuroblastoma* belongs in a poem as much as it belongs in a person. Besides, I'd rather say Snickers bar, and we laugh until we ugly-cry as we imagine putting her head in a microwave, melting the misplaced confection: chocolate, caramel, nougat, peanut chunks like nourishing boulders borne by a sweet post-nasal pyroclastic flow as she tilts her head back to relish such a delectable gift. How she would simply get up from her treatment chair, walk out into the crisp daylight, savor the fragrant ribbons of spices wafting from a taco truck on the corner, the pungent harbor at ebb tide, the warmth of her own miraculous breath.

**Matt Hohner**

Second place, 2021 Fish Publishing International Poetry Prize (Ireland). Published in the *2021 Fish Anthology*. From *At the Edge of a Thousand Years* (Jacar Press 2024).