

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;

rusty 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*, 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 Silence of Emma Gonzáles Teaches Us About Language

for Sam Hamill

In America, a young man learns that to kill is language enough. From the muzzle, which means to hush, to gag, the phonemes of his rage interject themselves into seventeen stories, ending in the smothered dreams of thirty-four parents. To mourn a child is to beg a hole in the earth for answers: What are we willing to endure? What act will be the unspeakable next? The absence of voices fills with the sound of blood congealing on a classroom floor. Outlines where a life used to be saturate with empty talk. A politician sweeps the room with the shrapnel of scripted gibberish. Such vapid discussion. How do we amend our narrative before we can't bring ourselves back from the dead? A young woman reads the names of her classmates, then stops, stands, says nothing. Heartbeats mark the time in the millions gathered to hear her. Cold wind cuts across the Tidal Basin, sighs through naked cherry boughs. The national breath. Bodies accumulate in the voids between words. We learn nothing when our silence lays our children in the ground. What, then, when a child lays our silence at our feet?

Matt Hohner

Longlisted, 2019 University of Canberra (Australia) Vice Chancellor's Poetry Prize. Published in *Silences*, the 2019 prize anthology.

Sarah

Loch Raven Reservoir, Glenarm, Maryland

How many years, your name in red, blazoned in spray paint on the jersey wall at Dead Man's Corner before the county straightened the curve, widened the bridge, replaced rust and rickets of iron trestles with concrete? The psychic told investigators to find your name near water and there they'd find the missing man. And so, when a detective spotted the ghost of muffler and tire haunting the tea-colored depths, his grey body still seat-belted in, upside-down, just past your crimson letters, the legend of you began. But someone who once loved you scrawled you in the color of blood, the color of hot heart, the color of ache on a dark country bend where land meets reservoir, where headlights gave you fame a few seconds at a time, where death lurked mere feet away for the drunk, the foolish, the too-fast, careening recklessly through the obscurity of their lives.

Matt Hohner

Semifinalist, *Heartwood Literary Magazine* 2019 Heartwood Broadside Series. Published 2019.

Hearkening

Simone – one who hears; one who listens.

Somewhere between the vault where she had kept a darkness locked up for years of her short life along with her gleaming medals (a tarnish she refused to dull the precious mettle of self), and a moment we all saw as grace in sparkling eye shadow and gleaming smile, her inner gyroscope teetered, even as she kept her balance, beaming to the world her light brighter than the sultry demons of fame, competition, wealth, and expectation. Something in the calcium and cartilage of her two dozen years began to ache and fray as she hurled herself, meteoric, upside-down above earth, her celestial body tumbling out of a history of performance and measurement, scores and calorie counts, podiums and violations—a regimen old as Eve’s footprints—so she ended the routine, stepped away to even her bars, align her spirit, wake from the dreams of millions that became for her a recurring nightmare, and, in her spinning, twisting, weightless state, located a distant point to stick her final landing in a spotlight of her making, grounded at last, arms raised victorious in a place uncrowded with spectators, listening not to the roar of an adoring nation, but to the singing of one voice deep within, perfect in her own judgment.

Matt Hohner

Published in *Vox Populi*, August 2021.

Rumbley, Maryland

*after Hooper's Island (oil on canvas 2019)
by Jonathan Nepini*

1.

Two inches of bay water ripple in the breeze across asphalt outside the tight cluster of houses, trailers, and fishing shacks approaching Rumbley, a settlement scratched on Tangier Sound, where the only traffic at rush hour is blue crabs scuttling across the double yellow lines and minnows scattering in the wakes of our tires. Road map converts to marine chart at high tide, ground gives way to saturation point, slurry, tenuous terra firma. Marsh grass and cattails bend in undulating unison, green waves spilling into the brackish shallows of tanned Goose Creek, the boggy stink of life renewing itself in wet mud, warm peat. August: redwing blackbirds flash fiery epaulets and trill across the flats in the summer sun's lazy, late evening angle, golden under passing clouds and the wide, blue, big Chesapeake sky.

2.

The house on Goose Creek is not on it, but in it, on pilings a hundred yards from shore. The server at The Hide Away Grill says legend has it the place was a party shack during Prohibition. If you knew the code, you earned passage across to the ladder up and into another world. Asked what happened there, she shrugs. "What's illegal on land might not be the same out in the bay," she twangs. "But no one really knows—or they won't say," she adds with a wink. She says cars parked at the dock late at night flashed their headlights three times, waited for a light on the house to answer with three blinks, listened for the hum of an outboard, looked for the widening vee of a boat's wake to ferry the people across to where secrets happened, the sound of inhibitions slipping fading before it reached the ears of the law lurking on shore. Now a story in the quiet gloam, its shingled roof and brittle board walls weather grey by the far shore, nestled where marsh meets tide, where the laws of men, state, and God once melted away in wind and water, the moon's primal pull, the ebb and flow between sweet desire and better judgment.

Matt Hohner

Published in *Here | Not Here: Art and Poetry of Place*, Salisbury University Art Gallery, 2020.

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. Such glory!
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 direct 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*, 2021.

You Learn a Friend's Friend Has Died

for Marty

And you feel in that gauze of shared grief a wind rise
and move around you, across your back and shoulders,
pushing the image of a man into the bluing distance,
shrinking smaller with each blink, so you reach for
that fading silhouette tumbling toward a furthering
vanishing point, and in the grasping you manage
to clutch some torn edge of your life with him, some
lesson or laughter, some sharp hurt you'd forgotten
until just then, and you begin to mourn not those snippets
and scenes, but even more so, the ones you've long
since forgotten—murky, gray seas between green islands
rising in the muffling fog—and you want that earth
he was for you, that solid ground, that sunlight through
the silver maples congregated alongside the old chapel
on his father's church grounds dappling your bare feet
at noon, where you've sat yourself once again in the shade,
eleven years old, waiting for him to return from Sunday
service wearing his brother's maroon hand-me-down tie
from the widest year in the 1970s, plaid polyester pants
flood-high above his ankles, the aroma of his mother's
brunch of bacon and eggs and bread and jam and butter
emanating like love, or stability, from an open window
in the old stone house up the hill, and you lean back
against the thickest trunk in the grove, and at forty-six,
you know he won't be coming home, so you linger here
in this meditation, locusts rasping in the canopy above,
before standing, brushing the damp soil from your
cut-offs, and taking the quiet sidewalk back to the lens
of your life now, a hard-earned semi-clarity at middle age,
September crickets punctuating the moonlight filtering
through the woods in the ravine across the street,
a neighbor's dog barking weakly into the darkness.

Matt Hohner

Honorable Mention, 2017 *San Diego Poetry Annual* Steve Kowit Poetry Prize. Published 2018.

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*.

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.

Remembering “The Jar” On the Eve of Another War

1991, 2022

Doug, Joél, Rich, Darryl, and I sat on the roof of the building in downtown Baltimore housing “The Jar,” Doug’s art studio and performance space above the carpet store that displayed a permanent sign reading, *Temporally Closed for Remolding*. Ears ringing after Jawbox played a blistering, post-punk music show, condensation and sweat dripping from the ceiling pipes, we decided at 2:30 a.m. to flick the cockroaches scuttling along the low wall on the front edge of the roof onto traffic on Charles Street below. It was no small feat of skill after several Rolling Rocks to bounce one off the windshield of some hotshot’s BMW convertible. We were deities bringing plagues from the sky, powerful on the high cliff of our urban heaven where angry angels belted out buzz-saw hosannas into the humid air of a small room, while half a world away, night vision goggles and gunsights scanned a desert landscape for heat signatures, signs of movement in a war about to begin.

Matt Hohner

Published in *Vox Populi*, 2022.

Sunflowers

March, 2022

An old Ukrainian woman speaking poetry
and curses offers a Russian soldier a bag
of seeds, metaphors him into fertilizer
and soil, into oblivion. In his eyes, he
sees his own grandmother, keeps his
words respectful, Kalashnikov on safety.
She sees in him a battlefield sprouting
sunflowers where he will die, a future
swath of earth festooned with bright faces
turning towards the day as it wings across
an endless sky, met at the horizon by a sea
of living stars, golden splendor exploding
into the welcoming air in peace, rooted
in the ribcages of someone else's grandsons.

Matt Hohner

Highly Commended, New Zealand Poetry Society International Poetry Competition 2022, and published in their anthology.

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.