

The Saw House

Triadelphia Road

June 2015

Enter through the back door into a ballroom, thin curtained windows, floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace, parquet floors. Tucked in a corner, a spiral staircase, disappearing helix twisting between floors, its steps like a maple seed helicoptering through a strobe light. Notice a pile of remote controls on a built-in wall of cabinets. Turn left into a pink room, single dining chair left behind, stacked picture frames leaning against the wall, an elegant cadenza. Into the dining room, front of the house, collapsed drywall panels and subfloor from the drooped ceiling, chandelier's broken arm dangling. Umber flutes of fungus sprouting from the moldering baseboard puff spores into the stale light at the slightest tremor. Hold your breath and scamper into the hallway: butter-yellow paint flecked and cracked, stair risers streaked with water stains, a Rorschach's test of black mold splotches run the length of the foyer wall and up the stairway.

A door swollen shut in the heat. Shoulder it. Shiny steel medical examination tables and heavy surgical equipment greet you like alien sentinels. Biohazard waste buckets, wheeled x-ray machines and lights, breathing machines and anesthesia monitors arranged neatly. A row of cages along a wall. This was a veterinary clinic. Breathe. There are no carcasses. No zombies. No human experiments. A woman's bachelor's diploma lies tossed on an exam table. University of Denver. 1973. Metal tags never unpacked from a cardboard shipping box on the counter of the reception room await furry necks.

Turn again into the kitchen: red Formica counters, black appliances. Close the window someone left open. Lock it. Do not open the refrigerator door. Turn the electric stovetop knob to off.

Climb the spiral staircase. Now, a bedroom with new carpet striped with vacuum cleaner tracks, a luxury main suite with a screen door to the outside. *To a breezeway?*

This is another wing of the house. Take the breezeway to a warped door, unlocked, and reenter the disaster zone. Paint peels from the window ledges and doors in sheafs like parchment, like sunburned skin. A ceiling fan sags like a claw in a carnival game, poised to pluck silence from the musty air over an empty bed frame, its flaccid blades wilted from years of damp. This room sits over the dining room. Enter another bedroom: weightlifting bars, a TV remote, buckled carpet, mold. Down the hall, a boy's room: a pile of bedding, elephants on the peeling wallpaper, artwork from elementary and middle school wrapped in cellophane drafting vellum. A few stuffed toys on a closet's top shelf. So much of a life discarded.

Outside, the air begins to lift and drop the canopy of oak branches next to the house. A storm approaches, west. Finish up, lock the door behind you, upload the photos and e-form. Fat drops start pattering the windshield. Weeds and high grass bend and nod in the rain. Imagine the waterfall down the main staircase as you pull away from another wrecked life, into the sweltering, sticky deluge of a mid-Atlantic weekday afternoon.

Matt Hohner

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Bachman Valley Road

Carroll County, Maryland

Summer 2014

The driveway has a mohawk
of tall weeds between the wheel paths
that scratch the undercarriage of my SUV as I
bounce past a chunk of roadbed missing like a
tooth-gap where tendrils of tree roots clutch
at the sky, toppled during last night's storm
that killed two boys at the nearby Christian camp.
At the foot of the hill, a gaunt fox vanishes into
corn eight feet high. Branches and twigs cover
the gravel path up and around to the hilltop;
deep shade from the pounding sun,
quiet but for birdsong and insects trilling
in the shadowed streambed trickling
beside the neighbor's pasture.

In the clearing at the top, three steel
trash barrels rust amidst ashes of half-burned
wrappers and cardboard containers. An ailanthus
tree sprouts from inside a barrel. Truck tires
and bulging trash bags skirt the foundation
beneath the bleached porch railing.

Off by the edge of the woods, a child's
wooden pirate ship playhouse dry rots
in an ocean of vines in the humid afternoon.

On the porch, bags of clothes, a face-down
bookshelf and three years of children's
magazines clog the way to the door.
A kitchen trash can filled with empty
wine bottles. A stack of unopened bills
fading in the sunlight.

Trash and debris spread across the linoleum:
boxes for frozen pizzas, crackers, and Bagel Bites;
Tupperware lids and tubs, newspapers two
years old, a can of spray air freshener.
The cabinets are half-cleared of dinnerware.
Pots tumble on the floor. Animal turds pile
in the sink four inches deep. Spatulas and spoons,

cookie jars, a coffeemaker, all tossed
on the cold stovetop.

On the countertop, an upside-down toaster oven, dirty
plates, a box of unused checks. Silverware vanishes
into something grey-green and hard as granite
in a bowl left behind mid-spoonful when the bank
man arrived with the cops and the locksmith.

Tear-away days on post-its tile a cabinet door,
each one carrying an inspiring quote in cursive.
Neat rows and columns perfectly spaced,
ending on Monday, March 1, 2010.

Anasazi ruins. Lasceaux cave.
Croatoan carved in tree bark.

In the living room, a hand-me-down tube TV,
sofa askew, rap CDs spilled across the cushions.
Garbage bags and boxes brimming with children's toys
gape where they were dropped. Brown sheaves
of spider plant on the dusty mantle. A bank box
of finances and real estate listings by the coat closet:

It's What Carroll County Living Was Meant to Be.

Monopoly game open on the floor, its rainbow money
fanned in a rough circle, pewter game pieces glinting
in the window light like pulled fillings.

Collect unemployment. Lose your turn. Lose your house.

Blue painter's tape marks an X over the toilet seat
where the plumbing's been winterized; trash can
on its side, coughing out dirty diapers and Kleenex,
women's pads and tampons; child's underwear
and a pink beach towel on the rug; shampoo
and women's styling brushes tossed in the tub.
One adult toothbrush and two children's
dangle in the wall holder over the sink.
No aftershave. No men's razor.
A brighter circle where a can
of shaving cream sat. Cascading
from the closet shelves, a pharmacopeia:
acne cream, KY lubricant, antacid,
a box of lancets, deodorant.

Raccoon footprints trundle past curls
of dry feces, make-up kits, and soiled cotton
t-shirts on the bare mattress and box spring;
empty drawers and broken glass from the
dresser mirror and an unused condom scattered
on the bare hardwood where the carpet
was torn up; women's clothes and shoes
piled in a heap in the corner.

Two photos among the shards on the dresser:
a young man in scrubs, ball cap backwards,
his chinstrap beard pulled into a tired smile,
gazes tenderly into a sleeping newborn's face,
tiny hand gripping a thick forefinger of a hand
made for bricklaying and fighting; next to it,
later and bigger, the same baby crawls on a rug,
a retriever's bent head meeting the baby
nose to nose, each sniffing each other, unsure.

On the window ledge, two champagne flutes
sashed with white tulle bows and filled
with silvers of chocolate kisses catch
the lean light of the afternoon.

The boy's room is strewn with plastic hangers,
an overturned tiny desk built for fidgety small legs;
constellations of shiny stickers drift in clusters
like galaxies across the blue walls. A toy
police car on surveillance. A cleaned-out
chest of drawers in the corner.

A vinyl wall decal of Cinderella's Castle
adorns the long fuchsia wall of the girl's room.
Pink-and-purple backpack, a pistachio-green
sock, pink and white plastic flowers in a vase
on a white particle board dresser. A row
of plastic hangars in the closet. One
untied shoe, its laces reaching across
the carpet for its mate on the window ledge.
A yellow magic marker. A pair of little
snow boots, tossed aside.

No magic wand. No glass slipper. No gilded carriage.
No prince to kneel and shoe a delicate foot.

Fiberglass insulation and cellophane sheeting sag
like shrouds from joists in the basement ceiling.
An upended workbench. An antique sideboard
filmed in mold. More children's toys, a power drill,
a dog's chain tied around the iron support pole.
The hood of a pickup truck leans against an unfinished
wall frame. Washing machine and dryer both yanked
from the wall; on the door of a refrigerator adorned
with N.R.A. and beer stickers, a note scribbled in red:
Close the door you fucking money hole.

Limp flag of plastic sheeting lifts and pirouettes
in the cool air breathing in from the rectangle of space
where thieves removed a window. I think of the tricolor
twirling under the Arc de Triomphe, *ce drapeau est
suspendu à un arc de la défaite*. In the silence between
the shushed ruffling I think of Wyeth's gauzy linen
in Brandywine windows long ago—will-o-wisp
of human emptiness, abandoned ghost of heartbreak.

Winter 2015

Snow patches recede into themselves next
to the foundation, revealing what they left behind:
stuffed yellow ducky by the burn barrels, wooden
crab mallet stamped "Stolen from Salerno's,"
beer bottles and plastic take-away containers.
Hand-written on a cowry shell frozen
on the porch edge: *Trisha / Ocean City, MD*.
Tiny calcium house, stolen from the sea,
its occupant, too, long gone.

Wind slices between the ribs of oaks;
dim sheets of lead and steel slide across
a fading February afternoon.

Inside, the air is hard and still. Someone has
scooped the trash on the kitchen floor into
the trash can from the porch last summer.
Someone has flipped the whole bed—
mattress, box spring, and frame—
onto its side and against the wall.

More fiberglass bunting droops
from the basement ceiling. The hood
of the pick-up truck is missing.

Slow decay. An ache the hand
can't find by pressing.

*Damages and condition: Board basement
window—theft peril. Personal items inside.
Personal items outside. Remove debris.*

Close the door you fucking money hole.

Spring 2015

Over barbed wire from the road, through a naked
stand of hardwoods, the white cinder blocks
of the house gleam in the cloudless mid-day.
Snow plows have knocked down the mailbox.
Turn left halfway into the curve at the break
in the guard rail. Drive past the old white-washed
farm house and yellow chicken coop by the stream.
Bear right at the rusted tiller onto what's left
of the driveway. Take it easy up the rutted
hill and watch for the hole on the right pulled
out by the tree that fell in the storm that killed
those two boys at bible camp last summer.

The sun heats the inside of the truck. Outside,
the soft air stinks of new life, of neighbors
spreading manure in the cornfields behind
growling machinery large as cinema monsters.
Robins riot among the oaks and poplars.

Everything is as it was in winter.
This is what limbo is, this inert stasis.
This the Hades Odysseus cursed.
No children's art on the refrigerator,
no family gathered at the kitchen table,
no fire in the hearth. The Monopoly game
remains open. The plastic phantom suspended
in the basement turns and sways in the shaft of light
and pollen wafting through the missing window.

I set about each room, taking rote photos
to document the aftermath of a catastrophe.

Vesuvius entombed the Pompeians in each
other's slumbering arms. What smoke billowing

on the fiscal horizon went unheeded here?

All around, shoots push their green up through
loose forest leaves. Calves bleat from their pastures.
Farmers corduroy their soil with seed rows.

Cacophony of hope, April's cruel insult,
rises up the lonely hillside.

Autumn 2015

Left of the driveway past the farmhouse, soybeans
yellow in the waning sun. The trees have begun
sloughing off the green for their true selves: candle
flames rising into a sapphire dome. The chunk
of driveway missing from the downed oak
has been filled with gravel, the dead tree
bucked into firewood.

Cresting the hill, the burn barrels are gone.
The grass is cut short a hundred feet out from the house.
The old tires and stuffed yellow ducky and cowrie
shell, gone. Where the bookshelf lay face-down
for twelve months, her magazines bleeding
across the porch, cold bare concrete. All the junk
and debris decaying in the yard since the eviction
has been hauled away.

My old vacancy certification fading for a year
on the kitchen door has been replaced by new papers,
lettered in red and black and white, spread across the
kitchen window neatly-spaced, confident, powerful:
*Winterized. Presence of mold. No trespassing. This house
is property of the department of HUD and is not for rent.*

Pressing my face to the windows, I see bare floors
in the kitchen, a clean stove, space between cabinets
to take a new refrigerator. Games, clothing, sofa,
television all gone. Sorrow and hurt, trash
and debris of a lost life, removed.

In the children's rooms, bright coats of pink and blue
await fresh dreams and brighter constellations.

Realtors' business cards decorate the counter where
feces and a half-eaten last meal once coagulated

like a crime scene. The basement window is now
boarded, secure. Through another low window,
the fiberglass raiment falling from ceiling joists
is now tucked neatly back in place. The garage,
once filled knee-deep with toys and clothes
and boxes, now empty, awaits cars. The
dancing wraith of plastic has vanished.

October's gentle, sweet earth-scent reaches
the clearing, up from the wooded stream bottom.
Each breeze sweeping the high canopy shakes loose
a steady leaf shower of umber and gold.

Cows bellow in the next field over, their voices echoing
with aimless need across the muting countryside.

Matt Hohner

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