

Woodsboro Pike

Frederick County, MD

I imagine her at these windows, looking out at fields in neat rows under a thin muslin of snow a week into the new year, emerging soft into the May air, ready for the combine in early November. She would know how the scene changes over the year, the exact angle at which the spring sun pulls the crops up out of the soil, how the summer heat ripples above the greening soybeans, how the shadows lengthen after Halloween and the tourists and commuters no longer stop for apples and pumpkins at the farm across the road. I imagine her sitting on her front porch gazing at the hills Maryland calls mountains, arching round and low, slumbering in the blue haze distance.

I picture her giving away more eggs than she sells from the coop behind the garage where the swifts come and go from nests built since the people and the chickens left. I open the garage door to enter and a pair of swept wings, all points and angles and speed, bursts in with me and circles frantically for the way out, orbiting my head and the dead air inside, its twittering protests loud and panicked, until it shoots through the rectangle of light in the doorway and flits up and out over the back fallows, dissolving into the tree line just past the train tracks. I recall the pigeon that found its way into our house the week my wife and I moved in, my father telling us how it was good luck. I imagine a woman in this house watching the dark miles of road, waiting for headlights to slow and turn at her mailbox late at night, for the last rays of sunlight to reach back over the Catoctins, for the afternoon wind to pick up ahead of dark skies approaching.

Matt Hohner

Published in *Pittsburgh Quarterly* / *PQ Poem* online poetry feature, August 2020.

Tydings Road

Eldersburg, MD

He moved everything he needed downstairs to the first floor, the house a corpse, its organs pulled by gravity closer to earth, sinking through the body cavity of walls and framework ribs, bedrooms drained of life like collapsed lungs. He'd become a malignancy the house could not sustain, draining resources like a cancer. He lived on squirt-can EZ Cheeze, peanut butter out of the jar, and crushed ephedrine pills in the kitchen cabinet. Empty beer and energy drink bottles, cigarette filters, crumbs, and ash litter the folding card table in the breakfast nook. The sinks and toilets have been winterized, body-bagged in cellophane and blue painter's tape. The dead-battery dirge-beeps of smoke detectors: sound of a house flatlining. On the kitchen counter where grimy dishes sit stacked like shelf fungus, a hand-written note: *I love you daddy merry Christmas. Big hugs love you!* Some of the furniture has leaked out onto the front lawn, piled by cleanup crews for hauling away.

Sunset slants into the front room, its warm amber arranged neatly through the window frame into squares and arched half-circles on the opposite wall. In the foyer, a hard-drive tower, shoes and work boots, a dried bouquet of roses, unopened envelopes from the bank sent through registered mail. Next to a mattress on the living room floor, a stack of textbooks on financial management supports a carton of half-eaten, dried lo mein and an open bottle of Coke.

Across the street, a woman arrives home from work, shoulders her laptop bag, cradles groceries through her front door, ignores the carcass among her neighbors rotting in plain sight.

Matt Hohner

Published in *The Blue Nib*, Issue 41, March 2020.

Green Valley Road, Keymar, Maryland

A small American flag stuck in a fencepost by the road hangs in tatters, disintegrated white stripes and stars rotted out from a blue field now the color of nightfall; the few red stripes left, once the color of blood, droop, aged and faded to pewter and tin. Delicate Queen Anne's lace, milkweed and chicory, lambsquarter and horseweed, dark pokeweed berries and crimson spears of curly dock all riot unchecked in the wrecked tangle of horse pasture out back by the barn. The insurgent wild claims its caliphate amidst the neighbors' manicured fields. Ashen, warped fence boards crack in the sun; weeds spill through the fence where the plywood shed leans at angles toward the ground.

There is no hay in the barn save for straw strewn about; horseshit's left in a few piles in corners—a parting gift to the creditors. The door swings wide to the air and wind, nothing left alive inside to shelter from weather or predators. Rabbit hutches bent and empty, stalls' floors swept and dry. A fishing net resting on a line of nails on the wall; BB gun collecting dust on a work bench. A red Radio Flyer wagon still as a corpse sits where it was last towed, the child's laughter long since disembarked. Cowboy boots worked sweat-soft and dingy slouch on a shelf next to a baling hook. An old liquid fire extinguisher tank rusts in a corner. Up in the hayloft, a tire swing sways gently like a pendulum in the warm breeze through gaps in the slat walls and warped tin roof, measuring the slow tic of abandonment, the half-life of memory.

Pushing past the broken patio door: piles of clothing and toys and countertop appliances in the basement, dumped there for the last haul in their flight away from the disaster. Bare rooms upstairs, the calendar on the kitchen wall last turned to a new month five years ago, dates circled, times, places, and peoples' names scribbled in squares they never got to cross off. Unfinished kitchen remodel, leather bomber coat slumped on a chair, boots and shoes on the floor of the closet by the front door. The earth twirled and traveled through space and the money dried up. The house became the bank's and the animals and humans all had to go. What remains: a thudding hush, cobwebs across the basement stairwell, the smell of stillness. A flag on a fencepost the color of bruises, the color of shrapnel.

Matt Hohner

Published in *This is What America Looks Like: The Washington Writers' Publishing House Anthology*, Caroline Bock and Jona Colson, eds. (2021)

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

Published in *The Honest Ulsterman*, 2020.

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

Published in *The American Journal of Poetry*, July 2020.