

Vacancy Inspection, East Deep Run Road

*Once a colt has...been...taken away,
a part of its heaven stays here,
wandering from ghost to ghost barn*
—Julia Wendell, “From an Abandoned Farm”

Brittle weeds in the horse pasture reach above the top fence rail. Wind chimes in the empty stables clink and clatter in late October chill. Trees have turned, spilling like slow fire down the hillside away from here. Across the valley, winter fields’ emerald cover crops flow between stands of hardwoods and brush. The sky is a dull ache, a week-old bruise that won’t heal. Mud puddles in tire ruts where the trailer had backed up to the stables behind the house, scarring the ground in departure. Junk and debris scattered outside in the drizzle speak of panicked haste, bored vandals, the bank’s neglect: plaid shirt and a Carhartt coat left draped on a fencepost, satellite dish face down in the grass, an old tube television, screen shattered, marking the driveway by the dented garage door like a tombstone. Cowboy boots caked with dried manure stand frozen in a two-step by the foyer closet, kicked off after the final round of chores. Strewn on the floor, a 4H poster project on horseshoes. On one wall, a Mexican proverb: *It’s not enough for a man to know how to ride. He must also know how to fall.* A banner spelling *Sweet Sixteen* droops over the dining room table. Underneath a chair leg, a crushed party hat. They cut birthday cake knowing the locksmith was coming with the sheriff and eviction papers. Knife through icing. The next morning, cold math snaked its way up the hill slow as a funeral procession. Two vehicles: a county patrol car, lights off; behind it, a service van full of doorknobs and deadbolts. Outside the main bedroom window: a knotted American flag lashed tight to its pole, stars and blue canton choking against hollow metal under pewter clouds. Shreds of tattered red and white stripes flap in the breeze, halyard and snap hooks pinging an S.O.S. to an indifferent sky.

Matt Hohner

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Daisy Drive, July 2015

Taneytown, Maryland

Nothing blooms on Daisy Drive, two blocks off Main Street, edge of town. Every fourth or fifth home sits dark, a smile of row houses missing teeth. On each, a doorknob lock box and window paperwork: utility shut-off, eviction, vacancy, winterized plumbing. Here, plump boys chase each other with neon water guns; dogs run trenches behind rusted chain link. Unemployed pick-up trucks with stagnant mosquito pools stinking in flatbeds where tools used to rattle, leaves and sticks piled on the upstream side of their tires, languish like wrecks washed ashore in the recession tide. A gaunt woman's heavy-lidded eyes stare down her cigarette as I roll past her into this flung-aside galaxy at the loose end of time.

Previously secured. Perform interior inspection. The app says the gate's busted, mold inside, filth and grime throughout, animal feces, renovation of sliding glass doors incomplete, back yard storm damage, carpet removed. *Occupancy indicators: meters off; yard not maintained.* I tick off the wounds one-by-one, triaging the aftermath of an economic implosion. *Common areas, bathroom, bedroom.*

Afternoon sun spears into the kitchen. I ignore the holes in the drywall, get seven pictures of the gap where the refrigerator stood. *New damage: missing appliance. Location: kitchen. Estimated amount: six hundred dollars.* Outside, a round girl cradles a cat to her porch as I lock up under the shadow of a wind-bent oak cooling the cracked sidewalk where a child has chalked her dreams in pastels. Someone who cares has cordoned off her masterpiece, black and yellow caution tape waving in the breeze.

Matt Hohner

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Damage Repairs

She can still see the lump of him on the kitchen floor next to where we sit at the table to sign the forms to obtain the money for the rest of the repairs to the back rooms where the water damage happened when the tub overflowed after he started a bath, shot up, stopped breathing before he could turn off the faucet. I ask her to estimate how much has been repaired. She says about three-quarters; I write 80% to expedite the insurance company's release of the remaining funds, but I know the ruin is complete inside her. Total loss. I tick the boxes: drywall replaced, mold removed, wiring, flooring. There is no box for a mother's grief but a coffin. She stares at a spot on the floor by the sink. How does one fix the wrecked chambers of a heart? I imagine him fading, the ceiling fan turning cool air down on his face, the sound of water spilling onto the floor in the next room.

Matt Hohner

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Evidence

My last house at dusk. I stop on the road to photograph
a pick-up truck in a driveway, curtains in a window,
bony tabby they will leave behind to fend for herself,
picking her way through the high weeds looking for mice
by the dented azure walls of the backyard pool, its black
dead eye breeding mosquitoes and gazing Godward like
a cadaver, a moving van backed to the side door, its loading
ramp a hungry tongue lapping up a houseload of dreams.
The air snaps autumn, leaves in the woods across the road
the color of fire, the color of rust. Harvester reaps the field
behind the house, dust cloud lifting behind it into the wind
like prayer, like smoke from the earth burning under their feet.
They race to beat the locksmith, the sheriff, the agent from
Wells Fargo coming tomorrow at dawn. A child's face stares
out at me from the parlor as I upload her family into the bank's
ravenous maw. I hit send, handing over a little more of myself
to the lowering darkness, put the car in gear, and drive away.

Matt Hohner

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