

# Bachman Valley Road

Summer 2014

1.

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 toppled tree roots  
clutch at the sky after 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  
play house with ship's pegged wheel 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.

2.

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. A pile of turds  
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.

### 3.

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.*

### 4.

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.

**5.**

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.

**6.**

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.

**7.**

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.

## 8.

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

**Matt Hohner**