

The Squat

*Detour, Maryland
January 2015*

1.

The house sits vacant at the end of a one-block rail town where the trains don't stop anymore, named for the route one didn't plan to take, hard by Double Pipe Creek, swell of Catoctin Mountains looming west, pick-ups lifted on knobby tires in driveways where faded NASCAR flags droop from porches, the sound of the river, tractor rattling in a field behind Main Street. It is Wednesday on Middleburg Road. No traffic, no people out, no trains.

I pocket the padlock from the back door, step over family pictures in broken frames on the mudroom floor, push past high school letter jacket on a nail into the kitchen. Stench of crab claws and shells spills from a bushel-sized bag in the corner fills the dark space like a tumor in the still air.

In the walk-in pantry, mice have chewed the corners off boxes of ramen and instant potatoes. Thin film of mildew and filth coats the counter and appliances. Debris spreads into the dining room where thieves have wrenched off the baseboard copper heat pipes. A pile of decade-old newspapers yellows on the table; a papier-mâché mask from a high school art class rests on a chair's stained seat cushion. Through the dingy window, stars and stripes wave in the breeze on the next porch over.

2.

Red, white, and blue stars hang from the stucco ceiling in the parlor above empty CD jewel cases, a discarded black hoodie, baseboard heaters missing their copper. A pile of old mail and eviction papers dumped in the foyer just inside the padlocked front door catches a beam of light from the outside, rustles in the languid air slipping in.

Upstairs, the rooms are chock full of debris, clothing,

cigarette butts stamped out in piles on dressers,
bare mattresses every room, cans of energy drinks
and empty beer bottles, junk food and pizza boxes,
toiletries and empty water bottles. In one room,
school editions of *Macbeth* and *The Crucible*
share space with curlers, a tin of Old Bay,
a make-up brush. In another room, a young
woman's winter coat hangs on a nail in the window
frame. Through the window, snow melts beneath
a veiled January sky by the bridge stretching over
the slow eddies of the creek into Frederick County.

3.

Amidst the flotsam in another bedroom with dark gray walls,
the rules to a drinking game scribbled into a notebook:
Don't forget to do a pregame war dance or take a shot.
Spill a drink team must chug opponents' drinks. Puke
on the floor you must clean it while humiliated
by all team members. Next to the notebook, the bent
photo I.D. card of a high school senior, valid until
November 2012, his fuzzy beard and mustache useful
at the mom-and-pop liquor store across the street
where they don't card, and don't care.

In the room where a young woman slept, among the
detritus of textbooks and clothes, cigarette butts,
soda bottles and cracker boxes, candles burned down
to shallow puddles of wax, a note from Sam to David
about his falling asleep and her hating it here,
about loving him and avoiding trouble,
about staying sane and hanging out and being bored,
about waking up, or not waking up.

In a young man's room, another note on crumpled
paper: *It is so hard to look at our family pictures*
& realize that things will never be like that again.
I've lost my family that I always wanted and
I'll never get that back. Am I standing amidst
the ruins of a failed escape, or the wreckage
of a family imploding? How many dumpsters
would it take to haul away the rubble of a life?
No lottery ticket or therapy could salve
the wounds of this house. How do bones knit
in a body in which all the bones are broken?

4.

Locking the padlock on the back door hasp,
a voice from over the fence: the neighbor lady
says sometimes she sees flashlights at night
next door, or maybe candles, and hears sounds
and people's voices and her dog barks all night,
but by morning they're always gone, and when
she calls the cops they eventually show up 'cause
Carroll County's still pretty much rural and all,
you know, and she's stopped calling since they
padlocked the back door the second time, and
when're they gonna put that house up for sale,
anyways? I miss havin' people next door
to talk to during the daytime.

I wish I could tell you, but they never tell me
anything, I say, and turn to document the storage
barn at the back end of the yard. The sliding clapboard
door is rolled open. On the dusty concrete slab inside,
an American flag twists in a heap beside two beer
coolers stacked on a discarded toilet. I take a few
pictures, search the app in vain for *symbolic scene*
and *perfect metaphor*, click send to complete
the inspection, trudge through cold muck
to the SUV, a yellow sliver of sun sawing
through the clouds at the horizon.

Matt Hohner