

Green Valley Road, Keymar, Maryland

*Scarecrow on a wooden cross, blackbird in the barn
Four hundred empty acres that used to be my farm
--“Rain on the Scarecrow,” John Mellencamp*

A small American flag stuck in a fencepost by the road hangs in tatters, white stripes disintegrated 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 corpses 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 tank fire extinguisher 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 hanging by a shoulder, 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.

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