

Rumbley, Maryland

after Hooper's Island (oil on canvas 2019)
by Jonathan Nepini

1.

Two inches of bay water ripple in the breeze across asphalt outside the tight cluster of houses, trailers, and fishing shacks approaching Rumbley, a settlement scratched on Tangier Sound, where the only traffic at rush hour is blue crabs scuttling across the double yellow lines and minnows scattering in the wakes of our tires. Road map converts to marine chart at high tide, ground gives way to saturation point, slurry, tenuous terra firma. Marsh grass and cattails bend in undulating unison, green waves spilling into the brackish shallows of tanned Goose Creek, the boggy stink of life renewing itself in wet mud, warm peat. August: redwing blackbirds flash fiery epaulets and trill across the flats in the summer sun's lazy, late evening angle, golden under passing clouds and the wide, blue, big Chesapeake sky.

2.

The house on Goose Creek is not on it, but in it, on pilings a hundred yards from shore. The server at The Hide Away Grill says legend has it the place was a party shack during Prohibition. If you knew the code, you earned passage across to the ladder up and into another world. Asked what happened there, she shrugs. "What's illegal on land might not be the same out in the bay," she twangs. "But no one really knows—or they won't say," she adds with a wink. She says cars parked at the dock late at night flashed their headlights three times, waited for a light on the house to answer with three blinks, listened for the hum of an outboard, looked for the widening vee of a boat's wake to ferry the people across to where secrets happened, the sound of inhibitions slipping fading before it reached the ears of the law lurking on shore. Now a story in the quiet gloam, its shingled roof and brittle board walls weather grey by the far shore, nestled where marsh meets tide, where the laws of men, state, and God once melted away in wind and water, the moon's primal pull, the ebb and flow between sweet desire and better judgment.

Matt Hohner

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