

COUNTRYSIDE

A Collection *of* Photographs



MICHAEL JOSEPH

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DEDICATION

To the one who first loved me,
the many who contributed,
and all who may encounter this.

Thank you.

“My sheep hear my voice,
and I know them, and they follow me.”

Jesus of Nazareth





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FOREWORD

Creation and decomposition are balancing principles of nature's cycles. That which has grown will rot. That which was constructed will deteriorate. The impermanence of creation is presented through these images, shown in both stark and gentle contrast. A sense of time arises dramatically in these pages, perhaps evoking nostalgia, longing, mourning, or even anticipation. We see the decay of barns and the triumph of trees—once cut down to compose these very barns. What stood here before barns? Wigwams and longhouses built by the Indigenous peoples of Northeastern Turtle Island. Composed of tree and plant matter, those past structures have returned to the earth, while they are remembered by Native nations who continue to practice building them.

Here, the presence of history is unmistakable. How many stories can be told through these lands? How many conditions arose to create these barns and these emerging forests? Myriad elements combine to create a single thing, yet that thing is revealed as no thing. These projections of “natural” and “artificial,” of earthly vs. manmade—and all the fine distinctions between beings within the frame—slip away and fold into one another. What remains is an image of now and a memory of before: a projection of what was, a past gone, half remembered. A photograph of a barn is not a barn. The memory of a barn is not a barn. By the time you see this, dear viewer, the barns appearing in these pages may no longer stand in the field. They will surely pass back into the no thing that is their nature.

A barn is also non-barn. A barn is made of non-barn materials: wood, stone, nails, hinges, paint. A barn is used for non-barn purposes: storing food, drying tobacco, holding textiles. And yet, while it is built from such materials for such purposes, a barn is not identical to them. If a barn is not the same as either its materials or its purposes, then what is it? When does its form become a barn, and at what point in its decomposition is it no longer one? Perhaps it is a transient combination of form and function—something for sheltering and storing—whose form accompanies its function. When the function is needed, the form emerges. When the function fades, the form follows.

Amid the faded, the gapped, the tilted, and the toppled, new life emerges. The cycle continues: decomposition nourishes new forms that take shape. What will come after the barns? What already grows from them?

Jason S. Tosta, Philosopher

INTRODUCTION

Countryside comprises a collection of 246 photographs made over the past four years, from 2022 to 2026. Traveling alone in my Jeep Wrangler throughout New England and back and forth to Florida, I traversed back roads, byroads, and off-road paths, seeking the archaeological remains of weathered wood and rusted metal—the ruins and relics of a forgotten time. A time when life was slower and simpler, and when things were built with an emphasis on style and form, not merely function. The photographs in this book are arranged into six thematic chapters, each opening with a brief essay to establish setting and mood. I have invited six individuals with whom I have spent meaningful time, both professionally and personally, to contribute their reflections. Each narrative evokes memory—recalling a scent, a taste, a sound, or a feeling with which we may have lost connection over time.

The book opens with *Vanishing Barns*, a gathering of dilapidated country structures, followed by *Withdrawn Farmsteads*, featuring vast open fields and expansive skies. As the journey continues, you are brought into close view with *Enigmatic Fronts*, which flows naturally into *Majestic Silos*. From there, imagination takes hold in *Fractured Shacks*, an exhibition that invites curiosity and wonder. Finally, *Abandoned Relics* presents a diverse array of discarded farm tractors, equipment left behind in the wake of modern progress, weathered windows and doors, and the quiet discovery of cars and trucks.

Photographing abandoned structures and rusted relics is a quiet homage to the passage of time. Each subject stands as a monument, telling a story of labor, travel, and purpose now elapsed. The textures—flaking paint, twisted metal, shattered glass—capture decay with dignity. These images are not simply about ruin; they are about memory. They preserve the spirit of creation embedded in lives and landscapes. Through the lens, decay becomes poetry, and silence becomes narrative. In every frame, the past lingers—weathered, worn, and beautifully still.

A slumping barn in a field becomes a sculpture of perseverance. A sunken automobile beneath vines becomes a canvas of nature reclaiming steel. These neglected structures and discarded machines speak to resilience. They have endured lightning and storms, scorching heat and bitter cold, and, at times, long stretches of desolate silence. Through it all, they stand as testaments to human effort and ingenuity.

Michael Joseph, Photographer

COUNTRYSIDE

Amid a rolling field of wild grass and forgotten crops stood an old barn, weathered by time and the elements. Its wooden planks were faded and splintered, their once-vivid red now muted to a grayish hue streaked with trails of rust-colored moss. The roof sagged precariously, with patches of sky visible through the gaping holes where shingles had long since fallen away. Nature had begun to reclaim the structure—ivy snaked up its walls, and wildflowers sprouted defiantly through the cracks in its stone foundation.

This barn was more than just a ruin. It bore the weight of generations of memories. Decades ago, it was the heart of a bustling farm. The air once buzzed with the sounds of livestock, the laughter of farmhands, and the rhythmic creak of wagon wheels. It was a place of toil, but also one of warmth, where harvest celebrations were held beneath strings of lantern light and the scent of fresh hay mingled with the crisp breeze of autumn evenings.

However, as the years passed, the farm fell silent. The farmer's children grew up and moved to the cities, chasing dreams far removed from the soil. The animals were sold, the fields went fallow, and the barn was left to endure the passing seasons alone. Its walls creaked beneath the weight of memories, whispering stories to the wind as it swept through the broken windows.

Now, in its state of decay, the barn had taken on a new kind of beauty. Photographers and wanderers stumbled upon it and marveled at its resilience—the way it stood as a testament to both human effort and the inevitability of nature's reclamation. Though broken, the barn was not forgotten. It had become a monument to the passage of time, holding within its crumbling frame the echoes of lives once lived and the quiet promise that nothing, no matter how enduring, remains untouched by change.

The barn stood stoically amid a field of gold—weathered, splintered, and silent in its surrender to time. The vivid crimson paint that once adorned it had faded into streaks of rust, flaking away like echoes of bygone years. Its facade bore the scars of storms and seasons, each crack and chip etched into the wood like lines on an elder's face. Yet there was beauty in its decay—a testament to resilience and the relentless passage of time.

Beside the barn rose a silo, its cylindrical frame encased in corrugated metal stained with streaks of brown and gray. The curved walls caught the light just so, creating a subtle interplay of shadows that danced beneath shifting clouds. A faded emblem on its side hinted at a forgotten name—a farm, a family, a life once bustling with purpose. Birds had claimed its peak as their perch, their songs weaving a melody that seemed to mourn the silence below.

Together, the barn and silo formed a pair of sentinels—guardians of untold stories. They watched as the fields, once tilled with care, grew wild and unruly. Goldenrod and milkweed sprouted defiantly through the cracks of forgotten paths, reclaiming the land as nature sought its balance. The wind threaded through the barn’s broken slats and the silo’s hollow core, carrying whispers of laughter, labor, and life.

Yet, to those who stopped to look closer, the barn and silo seemed alive in their stillness. The warped wood and dented metal bore the fingerprints of history—of hands that labored to raise walls and store grain, of feet that trod paths now overgrown, of hearts that built a home through toil and hope. The decay was not merely an end, but a transformation—an embrace of impermanence, where beauty bloomed in places worn and weathered. Time seemed to stand still around them, and their facades became mirrors not only of what once was, but also of the inevitability—and even the mercy—of letting go.

The narrow beams of light shining between the sideboards are all that illuminate this arid, dark space. Speckles of dust, seemingly defying gravity, float through the air, while drifting particles catch the light and cast shimmering reflections. A swoop of barn swallows, exhibiting their aerial acrobatics, soars in twisting and turning courses between the light shafts and rustic framework. For a moment—not a second more or less—time stands eerily still. The silence and suspense create an adrenaline rush.

I can feel my heartbeat pounding in my chest and hear it ringing in my ears. Then suddenly, without warning, a curious feline that looks as though it has but one life left springs from the shadows and pounces on me like a mouse. His hiding place has been compromised. Hay flies all around us, and fear is replaced with laughter. We both head out the door, where we stand safely in the pasture grass, relieved to catch our breath. He soon loses interest in me and discovers butterflies flitting about the flowering field. I regain my composure and turn my attention back to making photographs.

In Connecticut and throughout America, the barn is a quintessential landmark with very few rivals. The red building with white crisscross doors remains a prominent and iconic structure. Who among us, while living in or visiting the countryside, has not

murmured “moo-moo” or “oink-oink” at the passing sight of one? Artists have long used the image of the barn to add nostalgia to their works of art. Storytellers have created novels and films in which both fictional and nonfictional characters have occupied barns as places to sleep, hide away, work, love, play, teach, and ponder.

The history of barn design in the newly settled world of America drew inspiration primarily from British origins; however, Germany, the Netherlands, and other cultures contributed their hallmark influences as well. Traditionally, the English barn was constructed with three main aisles and a threshing floor for processing grain. That remained standard until the early 1800s, when the focus shifted toward producing more milk and meat for city markets. Soon thereafter, basements were introduced to separate animal operations from manure, creating a healthier environment for livestock.

The next improvements included windows and cupolas, which significantly enhanced lighting and ventilation. Barns grew increasingly imposing in size, with further advancements such as haylofts constructed on upper levels. Because barns were purpose-built structures, they were erected in many different shapes and sizes and were often categorized by roof design. In time, barns became sources of pride not only for farmers, but also for surrounding communities and travelers alike. The barn was indeed the centerpiece of the farm.

Most often, when a family first settled on a farmstead, the barn was the initial structure to be raised. Families would live in the barn until they had the time and finances to build a proper house. By the late 1800s, barn construction focused primarily on hay storage and milking cows. Many other farm functions were relocated to smaller outbuildings throughout the property. These new and improved landmark barns became vastly larger to store immense quantities of loose hay and expedite the milking of large dairy herds.

Industrial technology advanced rapidly in the early 1900s, and hay storage gradually became obsolete for these old behemoths. Traveling along the backroads and away from the interstate highways of America, one can still see them with their graceful lines collapsing and their bright colors faded. Over time, the barn was rendered increasingly useless, and farmers were no longer interested in maintaining the haggard old structures. A common mentality of the new era became, “Use it and dispose of it.” Numerous barns were torn down, demolished, and replaced with modern facilities equipped with advanced technologies.

On occasion, ingenuity and creativity still prevailed. Some barns were saved, repurposed, and renovated into beautiful homes and businesses. More often, however, they deteriorated and fell victim to the harsh environment and the elements. People began

to take notice of the disappearance of the quintessential American roadside attraction. Across the nation, continuing efforts have been made to secure funding for the rehabilitation and preservation of many worthy buildings and properties.

In Connecticut, 115 land trusts with more than 39,000 members protect over 62,000 acres of valuable open space. These trusts work to conserve habitats, secure water quality, and ensure land remains available for future generations. They also protect family farms and ranches, address climate change, and help build healthy communities. Several organizations are dedicated to land conservation and the preservation or adaptive reuse of old barns. The Lyme Land Conservation Trust, for example, operates a new barn that serves as the John Pritchard Conservation Center. The barn houses offices, a conference room for meetings and small events, and a stewardship barn for workshops.

The Northern Connecticut Land Trust preserves and protects more than 1,900 acres of natural resources, sponsors outdoor activities on its properties, and supports efforts to improve local habitats, maintain farmland, and provide recreational opportunities. In these times of economic and social upheaval in America, the barn and other iconic structures remain important. Perhaps there is no other symbol quite like the barn—one with the power to evoke the strength and agricultural heritage of the nation. The barn epitomizes the determination and cohesiveness of rural communities. Above all, it conveys a sense of well-being that many modern Americans find increasingly elusive.

The disappearing American barn is an emotional reminder of how precipitously times are changing. These iconic structures, once symbols of rural life, are vanishing due to urbanization and modern farming methods. Restoring old barns can be challenging; however, preserving these pieces of history remains paramount. Saving barns is not merely an act of nostalgia—it is a commitment to preserving a cultural legacy that gives voice to the agricultural roots at the heart of America.



VANISHING BARNS

This book explores the barns, structures, machinery, and vehicles that were once essential to daily life in the eastern United States, yet now rest in quiet solitude. Many of us have passed these landmarks without a second glance. In modern life, we often associate abandonment or retirement with loss or a lack of purpose. Michael Joseph resists this instrumental view. His photographs invite us to pause and recognize the history embedded in these places. Through the lens, he offers renewed perspective where others simply pass by.

Countryside gently guides us into this way of seeing. We slow down and begin to accept these structures as they are, without the impulse to restore or reclaim them. They become echoes of another time—reminders that all things move through cycles of use and rest. Contemporary culture rarely encourages us to think beyond our own lifespans. The objects we produce are seldom made for longevity; when they break, they are replaced rather than repaired. This was not always the case.

Perhaps this is why we dismiss these aging structures as little more than roadside debris, overlooking the lives they once supported. We are uneasy with aging and eventual endings. Yet in *Countryside*, these quiet images of objects at rest after decades of labor invite us to reconsider that discomfort. These relics have fulfilled their purpose; nothing more is required of them. Their years of work were full, and what remains now is a state of stillness.

As you move through this book, take in not only the subjects but also the surrounding calm. Each photograph becomes a meditation on impermanence and endurance. To capture these images is not merely to document, but to show reverence. The land holds them without judgment, allowing them simply to be. In turn, we are invited to slow down—to move between present and past, and to notice the quiet stories they carry. In their stillness, these remnants suggest that beauty lies not only in what once was, but in what remains.

Ariana Vazquez, Editor

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