

GONE COUNTRY

A Collection *of* Photographs



MICHAEL JOSEPH

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DEDICATION

To the truth, the way, and the light.
Thank you.

“What a caterpillar calls the end of the world we call a butterfly.”

Eckhart Tolle

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Mercy + Grace

It's not all about I, me, and mine.

Us, we, and ours is all it's about.



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FOREWORD

A Soul's Journey Through the Lens

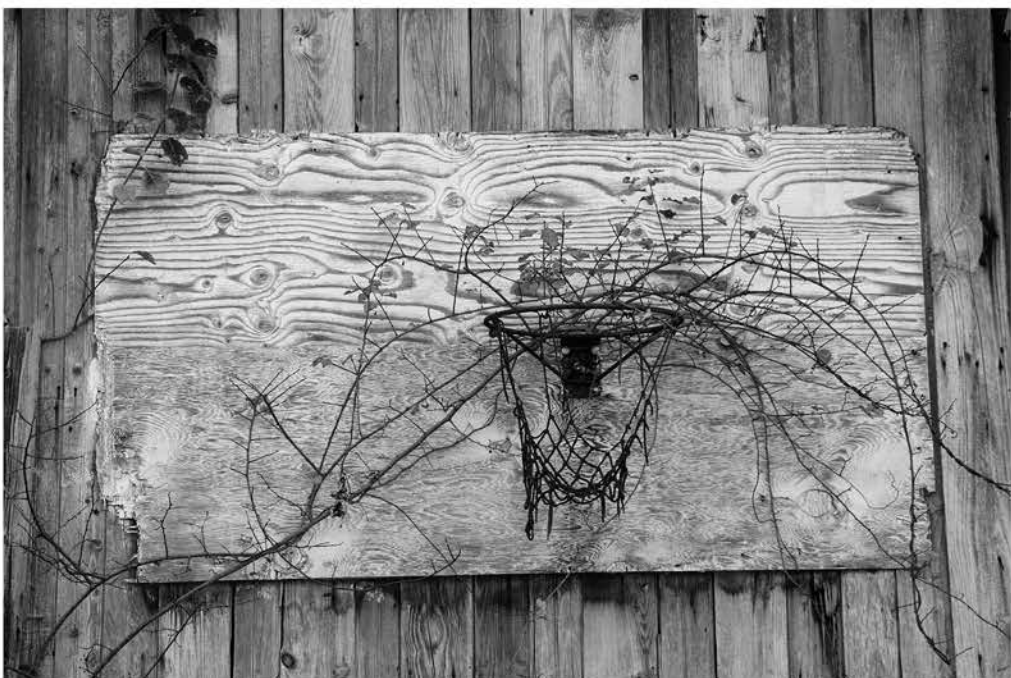
This book is more than a collection of photographs. What you will find in these pages is not just art—it is a journey of healing captured frame by frame. Each photograph speaks of resilience, of presence, and of the sacred moments that often go unnoticed. Michael Joseph has an eye that doesn't just see—it feels. It appears evident that he honors life in all its fragility and magnificence.

I have the deepest respect for Michael, not only for the photographs he creates and the stories that he tells, but for the soul behind them. He has walked a path few can comprehend, carrying the weight of his bereavement with a quiet strength and an open heart. However, looking through the lens of grief, amid the dark shadows, he discovers light again.

In *Gone Country*, he peacefully and lovingly invites us to slow down and to see more deeply. He calls us to remember that even in the most broken places, beauty waits to be seen, and spirit waits to be heard.

His photographs and words reflect not just fleeting moments in time, but significant moments of transformation. It is a soul's journey back to joy guided by spirit and rooted in grace. Truly, a testament to the power of the divine. It is my hope that as you turn these pages, you too will feel the tranquility, depth, and quiet wisdom that has shaped this book—and the remarkable heart behind it.

Lori Wadsworth



INTRODUCTION

Gone Country comprises a collection of 206 photographs that I made during the past three years from 2022 to 2024. In that amount of time, and making it through the change of seasons, I have made many excursions to all four corners of Connecticut. I have traversed the back roads, by roads, and off roads seeking to discover old barns and relics of a forgotten time—the archaeological remains of weathered wood and rusted metal, vanishing barns, decrepit windows and doors, and abandoned cars, trucks, and tractors. The photographs have been carefully arranged into six thematic chapters: Beyond Broken, Off the Beaten Path, Field of Dreams, Putting Up a Front, Make Good Fences, and Long Cold Winter.

Each chapter opens with a short story to support the subjects overall, to set a mood, and to provoke thought. In my colorful literary prose, you may recognize that I harken the spirits of those great minds and characters for whom I have fond respect and draw inspiration—John Steinbeck, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman. The narrative conjures our memory to recall a certain scent, taste, sound, or feeling with which we may have lost connection over time. Sometimes these memories can be painful—if so, my agreement is not to abandon you. Right around the corner, just up ahead, slightly out of sight, I will bring you to a pleasant experience and together we will come through, embracing joy.

Prior to making these countryside photographs, I spent thirty-five years photographing metropolitan architecture across America and many international locations. Somehow, I was only mildly distracted by the noise and confusion going on around me and seemed to thrive on it. That said, I was a lot younger then and in a different frame of mind. Now, I have literally “gone country”—seeking refuge from a life-changing experience which brought me back home to Southington, CT.

In times of ailment, there is nothing more healing than getting with family and keeping faith. I simply needed to be still and listen to that inner voice of guidance. And for that, there was no better place to be than outdoors. Getting into harmony with nature soon lifted my spirit and I grew inner strength and courage. Over the countless saunters, I discovered a renewed photographic interest—a subject that I seemed to identify with. In a relative way, the old barns and rusted cars represented the “brokenness” that I personally felt. However, that feeling miraculously would change in due course. I now know with certainty that love does not have to end, that it continues if you want it to—it’s just in a different form, and in fact, it is formless.



GONE COUNTRY

The narrow beams of light that shine between the sideboards are all that illuminate this arid and dark space. Speckles of dust seemingly defying gravity float in the air and drifting particles of light cast shimmering reflections. A swoop of barn swallows exhibiting their aerial acrobatics are soaring in twisted 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 are causing an adrenaline rush.

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

In Connecticut and throughout America, the barn is a quintessential landmark that has very few rivals. The red building with the white crisscross doors is a prominent and iconic structure. Who amongst us, living in or visiting the countryside, has not murmured out “moo-moo” or “oink-oink” at the passing sight. Artists have long used the image of a barn to add nostalgia to their works of art. Storytellers have created novels and movies in which the main characters in both fiction and non-fiction have occupied the barn as a refuge to sleep, hideout, work, love, play, teach, and ponder there.

The history of farmers designing barns here in the newly settled world of America acquired inspiration from their primarily British origins; however, Germany, the Netherlands, and other cultures added their hallmark influences as well. It was standard for the English barn to be constructed with three main isles and a threshing floor for producing grain. That was so until the early 1800’s when the concentration turned to producing more milk and meat for the city markets. Soon thereafter, to separate animal operations from manure, basements were established, which made the barn a healthier environment for livestock.

The next improvements to be added were windows and cupolas, which effectively improved lighting and ventilation. The barns were now rising in imposing size with even further advancements as haylofts were constructed on an upper second-floor level. Barns, being purpose-built structures, are erected in many different shapes and sizes. They are typically categorized by the design of the roof. As it came to be, the barns were viewed with pride by not only the farmers, but by the surrounding country folks and travelers. The main attraction of the farm was indeed the barn.

Most often, when a family was first inhabiting a farmstead, the barn would be the initial structure to be raised. They would live in the barn until they had the time and finances to build a proper house. Barn construction in the late 1800's was now mainly concentrated on hay storage and milking cows. It was common that many other farm functions were situated in smaller edifices throughout the farm compound. These new and improved landmark barns were becoming vastly larger to store massive amounts of slack hay and expedite the milking of large herds of cows.

Industrial technology was making rapid advancement by the early 1900's and hay storage was becoming a thing of the past for these old behemoths. Traveling on the backroads and off the interstate highways of America, you can see them with their graceful lines collapsing and bright colors faded. Over time, the barn was rendered somewhat useless, and the farmers were no longer interested in maintaining the haggard old buildings. A common mentality of the new era became "use it and dispose it." Numerous barns were torn down, demolished, and replaced by modern forms with advanced facilities.

On occasion, ingenuity and creativity could still be witnessed. Some of the barns were being saved, repurposed, and renovated into beautiful homes and businesses. However, mostly they began to deteriorate and fall victim to the harsh environment and elements. People did begin to take notice of the disappearance of the quintessential scenic American roadside attraction. There are continuing efforts across the nation to safeguard funding for rehabilitation and preservation for many worthy buildings and property.

In Connecticut, there are 115 land trusts with more than 39,000 members, protecting over 62,000 acres of valuable open space. These trusts work to conserve habitats, secure water quality, and ensure land is available for future generations. They also protect family farms and ranches, tackle climate change, and build healthy communities. There are several organizations dedicated to land conservation and utilizing the old barns. The Lyme Land Conservation Trust has a new barn which serves as their 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 over 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 days of economic and social upheaval in America, the barn and other iconic structures remain important. Perhaps there is no other symbol like the barn, one that has the power to invoke a feeling of the country's agricultural history and strength. The barn epitomizes the determination and cohesiveness of its rural community. And above all, the barn declares a sense of well-being that we find elusive as modern Americans.

The disappearing American barn is an emotional reminder of how precipitously times are changing. These iconic structures, once a symbol of rural life, are now vanishing due to urbanization and modern farming methods. Restoring old barns can be quite a challenge; however, it is paramount to preserve these pieces of history. Saving barns is not just about nostalgia; it's about upholding a cultural legacy that gives a voice to the agricultural roots that are the heart of America.

I suppose I see stories of beauty and brokenness. Side by side with heartache, suffering, and tragedy, there also can be beauty, joy, and love. I somehow have a feeling of hope when I encounter an old barn, knowing for sure it has weathered many storms. Storms that I know produce character and beauty, evident in the time-worn wood. It stands through wind, snow, sleet, and torrid heat. I see the will to survive. The barn symbolizes shelter and warmth on a frigid winter night. And it bursts with productivity and life in the summertime with radiant sunshine.

Often in life, we just want beauty without the brokenness. I was not raised on a farm; however, I have plenty of life experience to know it doesn't quite operate that way. Surely an old, weathered barn can be a representation of deep brokenness, yet simultaneously one of timeless beauty. Right here and now, amongst the untidiness, the heartache, and the brokenness. In the middle of it all, my intention is hope. To fill the vacant hole with love. And truly, the way I knew how to do that is through a relationship with Jesus.



BEYOND BROKEN

Amid a rolling field of wild grass and forgotten crops, there 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 in the cracks of 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 under 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 with 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 would stumble upon it and marvel at its resilience, the way it stood as a testament to both human effort and the inevitability of nature's reclamation. The barn, though broken, 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, is untouched by change.



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