

Roberts and Shell: Rubbertop Review 12



twelve

RUBBERTOP REVIEW

RUBBERTOP REVIEW

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AFTER DARK

This issue of *Rubbertop Review* is like standing naked in the Glendale Cemetery eating a Galley Boy. It's absurd. It's macabre. It's out of your comfort zone but... it still tastes good. If you're from Akron, you know what I mean. This one goes out to the goth punks, the Square rats, the hipster horror devotees, and anyone who has had a Pabst Blue Ribbon in the basement of Annabell's. Killer thanks to the spikes and studs, Tom Mocarski and Paul Mangus; to the bubble, toil, and trouble, Mary Ozbolt, Bea Dickon, and Sam Imperi; and to the criminal mind, the one and only, Cris Shell. Now, go take a walk on the Ghoulardi side and turn blue with *Rubbertop Review: After Dark, Volume 12*.

Stay sick,

Rachel Roberts

Co-editor and whip, *Rubbertop Review*

I hope we can begin to figure this entire thing out, though we'll have to do it alone after this point.

Take care,

Cris Shell

twelve

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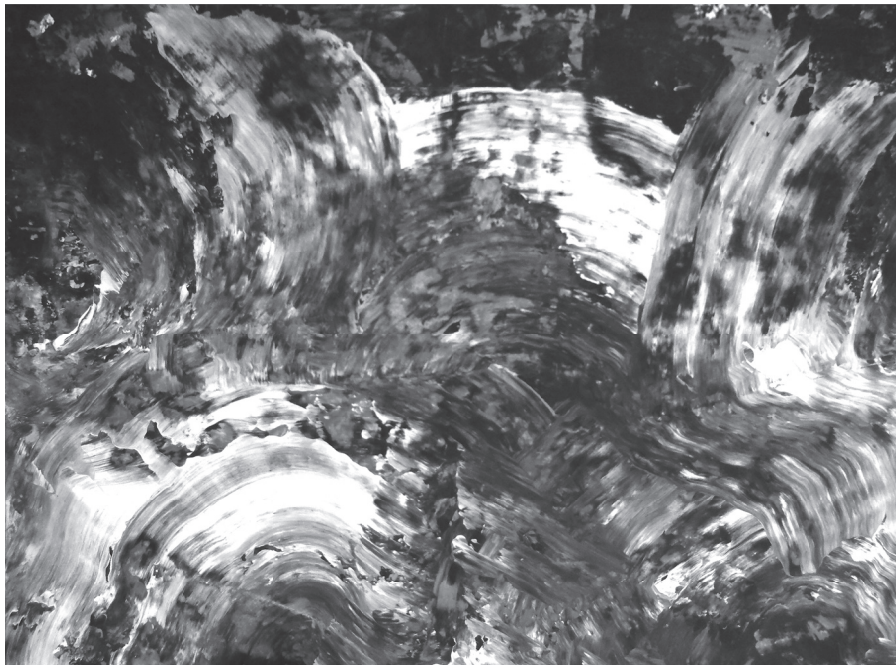
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Reflection of a Waterfall at Night *Renee Cohen*

Bad Night

The husband wakes up in the middle of the night to find that his wife is not in bed. They are in their late forties, married for 18 years. This is the first time anything like this has happened.

He gets up. The bedroom door is cracked. On the floor, there seems to be something shiny: a finger of water poking into the room.

He nudges the door open. The finger connects to a larger puddle in the hall. In the living room, the puddle becomes a pond. Even in the dark he can see a thin shore of mud, a beer can, bits of gravel and weeds.

“Hon?” he says.

From the kitchen he hears banging and slamming, wood crunching, sucking sounds of someone walking in wet shoes.

The husband creeps past the pond, hugging the wall to

avoid tracking mud, but he's kidding himself and he knows it. The floor is ruined. The pond fills the whole living room. It's just deep enough to ripple.

He reaches the kitchen door. His wife is standing in front of the open refrigerator, her arms braced against it as if to push it over. His wife cannot push over a refrigerator. Her arms and legs are narrow but soft. Her middle is narrow but soft, her shoulders hunched from computer work. The husband's shoulders are also hunched from computer work. His torso, too, is soft, like ground meat packed into casing.

Early in their courtship, maybe the third date, he took her to the movies. The critics had raved about the film, but he hadn't thought much of it. On the drive home, he asked his future wife what she thought. She said she didn't think much of it, but her voice was timid, as if he was the director and she didn't want to hurt his feelings. He waited almost a minute in silence before smiling and revealing that he was of the same opinion. Relieved, she flashed a smile back.

Soon afterwards they became a serious couple.

Now there she is, his wife, standing in front of the refrigerator. In the yellow light, he can see that she is covered in mud, from sneakers to crotch, from crotch to teeth. A plastic bag clings to her hair.

The woman is hungry, so hungry. Why isn't there any real

thing to eat in this house? Just bland things, pasta and sauce, bread and jam, nothing that can fill her up. And it was so cold and so dark, where she was swimming, and she swam so hard and so long. That's why she's hungry. She almost drowned, she had to fight for her life, to drag herself back to shore and climb out.

That, she sees, was her mistake.

"Honey?" the man says again.

That man, he won't stop bothering her. She will have to make him stop.

In the living room, reflected in the pond, the clouds are racing. Faster and faster, bringing the rain.

The Beginning of the End

was far less cinematic than we'd imagined. We wanted the quicksilver of fame: the survivor's story that any local news station would pick up to fill their quota for one night. But the headlines didn't read:
Four Girls Removed from Schizophrenic Mother; Turn Out Just Fine.

No one knew how two of us went to one foster home, two to another, or that we spent three days eating stale KFC biscuits and jellybeans in foster care. How we spent years picturing real mothers.

You know, the ones who smelled of lilacs, sent us across the street to gather apples for baking, and who smiled at the possibility that a Phoenix is made of paper.

The ones who'd flock to us, jackets in hand, ready to press us against their chests like we were heavy bibles. Surely, what we lived wasn't real.

Who could grow lilacs, anyhow?
Who could wait to open themselves as books do?

The girls, as you can imagine, would be okay, but who would be there to embrace the mother?

The one who'd make her oldest daughter call every man on a billboard in Yakima and beg for food like a feral dog.

The one who leaves the house every day for a job she doesn't have, who is on her toes threatening her kids with rolled up t-shirts and scissors.

The one who gives the last of her welfare check not to herself
but to anything that will make the voices in her head
become silent films.

The mother who, like yours, is now on a step ladder
in the living room, humming “God Bless America.”

The one who, like mine, is humming “God Bless America,”
while covering the windows in black garbage bags.

Soon, she will show me how to cover the windows.
Soon, she will show me how to wrap the dark like a gift.

The Mess in My Undercarriage

I once hit a dog with my car, and I cried for several days. It was summer, and I was on my way to the dentist, a chore I had put off for many years and one I have not put back on my schedule because I think that once I do they will tsk and wag their finger at me and ask why I waited so long, and I will have to tell them that the last time I was supposed to come I ran over a dog.

I didn't see the dog until it was too late. It was directly in front of me as I crested the hill and when my car struck it, it dragged the dog underneath until it came out the back. A stunning kind of horror that is experienced when a person who is very much alive encounters a thing that is very much dead enveloped me.

This horror did not caress me.

It jerked me in by my hair and wrapped its arms around

me and made me dumb. My hands shook, and my eyes leaked, and my lungs grew so small that not enough oxygen could reach my brain. And so, I stood on the side of the road crying and drawing raggedy breaths in through my mouth hoping to taste the tang exoneration but finding only snot and salt.

The dog had been beautiful. A bulldog. The kind with wrinkles on its face, and a waddle instead of a graceful gait. But its insides were now on the outside and it was no longer beautiful at all because inside things are not meant to be seen. When they come out in one long, exploding rush, it is an ugly mess.

I felt the sun hitting my face, a sign I was still alive. Shouldn't standing next to a dead dog disqualify me from romantic things like the heat of a summer sun?

A nice older man stopped, put on gloves, and drug the once living creature to the side of the road before giving me a sympathetic shoulder pat that said he wasn't surprised a woman was sobbing hysterically after hitting an animal stupid enough to gallop through a busy road. I didn't think the dog was stupid though. I bet he was a good boy, a very good boy. And who in the hell keeps gloves in their car to escort roadkill to someplace more comfortable? Did this man drive around looking for animals to drag from the

scene of their death to a place that is more convenient for those of us killing them? He seemed so prepared. So unsurprised. Had he taken a life too? I hope he threw those gloves away when he got home.

I would, over a year later, read about a dead deer in a book of poetry and think of that dog and that man and that summer.

It was the summer my parents divorced.

I would dog ear the book's pages. I would highlight stanzas so that entire pages were streaked with bright yellow lines and inky notes in the margins. I would pull it out when the need to cry over a death that was never mine opened me up and made me hollow.

The dog did thousands of dollars in damage to my car, but I only had to pay \$500 because I pay more than that every year for insurance, just in case I hit a dog or skunk or a bird that has flown too low to the ground. I did not drive my car to the place that fixes cars, but had it towed there, and I couldn't stop thinking that I wish I had cleaned it out because what would the people who fix cars think of the state of mine.

How horribly embarrassing to have dog hair and blood and remnants of a life strewn about my undercarriage.

The Bouquet of Cecilia

They come in bunches, Jean-
Pierre...wilting—in colors
like lead and rash and pesticide,
a lifetime dependency whose tiny
petals fall into my lap, mouth.
She's frail, frigid, they repeat—
dying like winterwood, legs tied
together in decay. Still, it's her
stare that gardens my 4AM. I would
like to wake her, but not to wake
her sleep, a knot needed for spine
strap on the stone floor, a wind
carrying me over bed, sidewalk,
fading—her hand reaching through
the window crack of soil, pulling
me to breathe; one grain of her hair,
hanging clothes—the little atoms
left somewhere, in bundles, final
flowers floating vaseless. In death
as with days, her black my bloom.

Reinfection

This is how we end.

In the earliest days
of the plague, I slept
with an AIDS educator.
From personal experience.
Every orgasm had the added thrill
of Russian roulette.
The Hollywood western
trope of the endless cylinder
held me in good stead.

We spent a lot of time in bed
naked. It was inevitable
she brought work home.
It was from her I first
heard the term. "AIDS is
a disease of reinfection."

I didn't understand, took her
words on faith until a scientist
pooh-poohed them. "There's
no such thing. A virus is a virus,
you have it or you don't." The forum
voiced agreement. The wisdom

of the crowd. I weighed,
pondered, kept my mouth
shut. Didn't think to look
in obvious places.

It took me more than twenty years
to find the nineteenth-century truth
of how things change, yet still stay
static. HIV is like a randy
boy just out of his teens. Sloppy,
loose, ready to roll the genetic dice
as many times a night as biology
and libido will allow. Mutation,
like death, is inevitable.

The strains add up, the body
already weak lays out the welcome mat.
What infernal cocktail is shaken
in the blood? It is a devastated
fingerprint, unique, profound.

This is how we end.

Room 4198, JFSB

When I saw you at the bar on Center Street
I choked, my words fell like apples.

You plucked the ripest ones, wrote poems in hushed
tones, promised we would read them together.

Green leaves gave way to browning autumn, your words
became muscat vines around my neck. You

declared that though your wife thought you were rotten,
it was rotten grapes that made the sweetest wine,

and I bit into your words, smiled, gagged acidic verses
from your mouth, told myself the taste of you

gets better over time. Under balsamic moon, we stumbled
to my house, fell onto lipstick-stained couch

where I stroked your hair as you mumbled, She doesn't
get me like you do. I wish I could take you to Spain,

write you the story you deserve— Let me buy you tickets.
Your lips pressed my throat, I suffocated

Under couch pillows, my body a blank page you sign
your name on. I closed my eyes until dawn

touched the tops of trees and your lips touched mine
in goodbye. You vowed to call with the itinerary,
said you wouldn't forget. You must have taken a wrong
turn on a canyon road, gotten a new phone,
a number short your old one. When Spring's wildflowers
return to the mountain side, I walk past your office
on campus notice a petite brunette opposite your desk,
bright eyes tangled in the weeds of your words,
wonder if you will take her to Spain,
wonder if you already had.

Night Sky Jennifer Frederick



The Shower

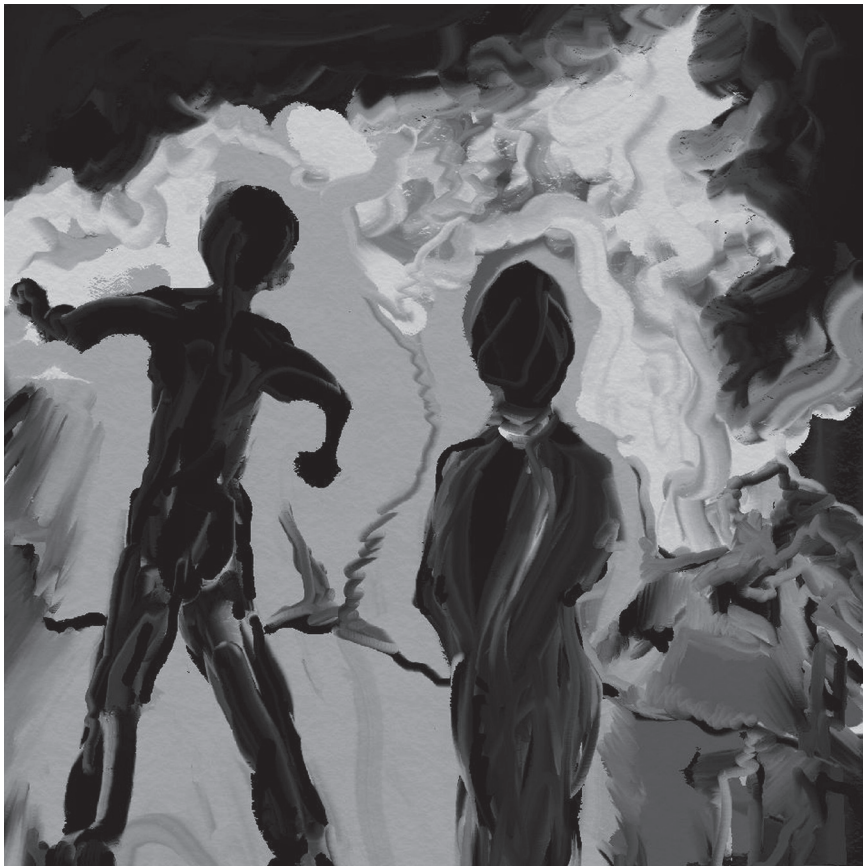
It's winter.
The water runs cold
She is about the blizzards
She imagined as a child
How she'd think of herself trapped
And far from home, the spring
With its gentle rain never coming,
Those summers with their nights
Of heat lightning
Court and spark...

Moonshine

distillery in the afternoon
all I am is still now
glimpsing winter in
the haze-grey wringing out
Orion's Arm. I siphon
flashbacks of Nashville
neon-luminous & silver
oil spills & belt buckles,
bouquets of lumber
through the funnel of
lonely months.

Ole Smokey sends me
smiling into the snapshot of us
tipping back plastic cups,
thumb-sized & laughing
all the way to when
we'll meet again,
Junebugs rhinestone the twilight
& crickets harmonize swamp
cooler nights balanced on two
legs of a porch chair.

The slow rush of until then
ambers this bitter kick
of age & allegiance &
I'm in my California kitchen
sipping every time I've said goodbye
to the south, bootlegged a version
of heritage less cruel
for my consumption. What's taxing
is avoiding harder pasts,
filters through which toxins sift.
How we'll meet again is this-
translating honeysuckle vines
from the seams of our veins.



**To hell with his poor mother's back,
he was going to step on the cracks anyway** *Dave Sims*

Keepsakes

I have a place for this. The most perfect place. On the mantle, next to my commemorative plates from the 1984 Olympics. Right beside Mary Lou. That's where it belongs. I was just keeping it here so I don't forget it.

That? No, I couldn't throw that away. That came in a box of tea I bought seven years ago. The month Anna graduated from high school? So it's kind of sentimental to me. Besides, it's blue and blue is my favorite color.

That sock. I love that sock. I know its partner is here somewhere. Yes it has a hole, but that can be patched. I just need to find my sewing kit. Let me know if you see it. It's red and plastic and square.

What are you doing with that bag? I don't want to get rid of that. Actually, no, it's not just a bag. Take a second and look at it. It's a Rego bag. From before they went out of

business? Somebody will want that. It's probably the last one there is on the entire planet. So it would be silly to get rid of it. I bet if I put it on eBay I'd get at least five dollars. Of course I have a computer. It's in the bedroom. Under my Christmas sweaters.

I don't need to keep everything. There's a lot here we can give to Goodwill, I'm sure. Nobody needs this much stuff. But no, not that. Pretty much anything but that.

Oh, I've been looking for this! I'm so glad you came over to help me clean because I never would have found it. There were Sucrets in this tin once. The kind he used to eat like candy. Here. It still holds the scent. Smell. Nice, right?

Please don't take those. Well, I want them. I know they're not my size. But they were on sale for seventy-five percent off. Seventy-five! And there's nothing wrong with them. Perfectly good sundresses, size eight. You don't see a deal like that every day. They're for Anna. Next time she visits, I'm going to give them to her. She'll come. I just have to clean, first. That's what you're here, for, right?

Yes. Okay. Toss it. I don't care.

Wait.

Can I see that again?

Actually, funny story about this coffee mug. He bought it for me on vacation in one of those colorful boutiques along the boardwalk. I can fix it with some glue. It's around

here somewhere. Let's...here...set it down. We'll come back to it.

Oh my. Well, that *is* sad. So sad. When Whiskers didn't show up for his Meow Mix, I guess I knew. But I hoped maybe he just ran away. That maybe he was over at the Micklelesons' farm or something. Geez. He's pretty well preserved, isn't he? Can we bury him in the backyard do you think? I don't want him to end up in a landfill or something. I'd like to keep him close. So, let's just bury him in the backyard under the magnolia tree.

Isn't that precious? What is it? Haven't you ever seen a Hummel figurine before? No? Well, that one there is "Bjorn, the farmer." Look at his fat punim. How innocent, that ceramic boy. How do they do that? Capture a moment like that? I wish... Anyway.

Let me see. Are you serious? Two hundred and fifty dollars? Huh. It's the rebate check on that water heater he put in, back in oh-six. Don't suppose it's still good? No, I didn't think so.

Can I talk to you about something? I was just outside. Look what I found in the dumpster. Who threw this away? Well, can you tell me why? Oh, for heavens... don't you know they put those dates on there so you have to buy more all the time? Applesauce never goes bad. Never. Also, I had to take this box of old shoes out of the trash, too. They just

need a good scrub. And the Monopoly. And the case of used Ace bandages. You never know.

Well, now I am glad I had you come over. Can I see it? Look! It's us. Howard and me. I remember this! It's from our trip to Pymatuning, in 1987. It used to hang on the wall above the couch, which is somewhere under that pile of pants, there. That's Howard and me at the Pymatuning Dam. I was so thin! Oh. I'll have to find a special place for this. Thank you. I had forgotten.

He didn't leave because of the mess. I know that's what Anna thinks. But it's not true. I think he had one of those, wadayacallits? One of those *fugues*. You know, where people forget who they are and wind up walking a hundred miles and living under a bridge somewhere? It happens. I heard about it on the news before the TV got covered. Sometimes peoples minds get all muddled up and they just walk away for no reason.

That stays. Non-negotiable. It's not broken. It just needs a little glue. So let me know if you see the glue. Then we can fix that and the mug.

Can't get rid of that. I love that movie. Haven't you ever seen it? It's Beta-Max? Really? I thought it looked smallish. Well. I guess it goes with collectables, then. Over there, next to Anna's Pretty Ponies.

I think we're making real progress here. Thank you for

helping me.

When did it start? I couldn't say, exactly. It was so gradual, you know? You never notice when you add one or two new things to a room. You turn your back on it, though, and pretty soon you're completely surrounded and you don't know how it happened. But I know if I ever need something, it's here. Somewhere. That's comforting. I guess after Anna went to school. Sometime around then. It was always clean when she was around. She went to Indiana. That's two states away. Long drive. I'd have kept her here forever if I could.

What is that? Seriously, I don't even remember buying that. What would I need with a miter saw, anyway? No. It couldn't have been Howard. I never knew him to use a tool in his whole entire life. Not even a hammer. If I cleaned up the box, I could probably sell it. Or give it to one of my nephews. Better put it over there until I figure out what to do with it.

I know it looks like trash to you. But I'll read those newspapers. As soon as I have time. What if I miss something important? No. I have to read them. They're from oh-six? Really? Well. Still. Just stack them neatly by those National Geographics in the plastic wrapping.

That's a goldfish bowl. I was thinking of getting goldfish.

A program from the 1988 Ice Capades. You can't throw that out. It's from the Richfield Coliseum. See? The Coliseum

isn't even around anymore. That might be the only evidence it ever existed. If I didn't keep it how would we ever know it was even ever there?

I know. I know. Trust me, I know.

I'm not keeping all of this. I can't. I can't live like this. Who could? That's why I asked for your help.

Okay, then, I will. I can get rid of something right now. How about...

Well. Let's see. Let's see. I don't know. How about... how about those boots? Over there under the Winter jackets. Those were Howard's boots. I guess I don't need to keep those. They'd never fit me and they're too big for the nephews. Yes. I'll get rid of those boots. See? I made a decision. I told you I could do this. Yes, it feels good. It does.

Oh, dammit. They're stuck. Help me, would you? Just pull. Here. They're stuck under these jackets. No, just pull them off and I'll try to jimmy them out from under. On three. One. Two... Three!

Nope. Still stuck. I don't know what that smell is. No. Whiskers was the only cat. A squirrel maybe? Here. Just move these...

Oh my God!

Oh.

Is...

Is that...

That's Howard.

The boots are still on his feet. Yes. That's Howard.

Oh God, the jackets and the magazines and that old chair. It all fell on him. He told me. He told me one day, this junk would bury us. And it did. It buried him.

He's been here the whole time. He didn't leave at all.

Oh God.

Oh Howard.

I'm...

What's that?

In his hand? What is that? It looks like...

It's the glue. Huh.

I'll put that over here. By the mug.

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Dirty Little Roots

I have a ferocious dislike of country club golfers. I cannot explain this antipathy, but I feel it every time I see their little carts putting around the hilly green. I imagine the men (for it is always men) complaining about their wives and inventing new ways to shit on their employees (for it is always men with underlings). I despise their khaki pants and polo shirts in varying pastel colors and their shoes which are sometimes sneakers and sometimes not. I imagine their conversations start with a lip-curling simper about the stock market or GDP or some other thing I don't understand or have any real desire to.

My eyes roll of their own volition. I think there must be something wrong with me because the metallic taste of inequality rises onto my tongue and sears it like a brand. A brand that says, "I GREW UP POOR!" And perhaps that

is the root of it. Perhaps my long, spindly roots are so sunk into poverty's soil that the gated community, of which I am not a member, makes my dirty, little root legs stretch and scream into the silent, dark earth.

I imagine worlds behind the gates. Worlds of marble and gleaming white teeth and skin leathered by the sun. Worlds of fast cars, and hollow laughs. Worlds of name dropping and trading favors. And if I had to think on it, I would notice that once the gate is opened and the grandeur is stripped away, its humanity is not much different than the little corner store of my childhood.

Golf carts are dual exhaust pipes and white teeth are oil stained fingernails.

But it's different dammit because the way each got to their plane of existence is uneven and the injustice of it feels unbearable.

I do not know the plight of every golfer in his khaki shorts and shoes that are sometimes sneakers and sometimes not. Perhaps he worked and clawed his way up some metaphorical ladder to get behind the gates. Perhaps manicured hands hide the stains of tunneling underneath to gain access. But I can't help but think how much more pleasant those hilly greens would be if golf carts had racing stripes.

A Murder of Crows

is a handful of pills that glitter
like pearls in your palm. The motel sign
beside the road in the last town, too
far to turn back now. Is alone at
3AM staring in the mirror
for an answer that isn't there.
A promise that cannot be kept.
The car that flips and rolls. A focus
unblinking on your back and drawing
a bead. Is your arm pinned beneath
the wreck as flames spread and heat
reaches out to take your foot, your leg,
to add your all as smoke to the sky.
Is the fallibility of systems,
but singles you out when you slip
into the gears, and is all your fault
when you bleed like rain. The mistake
you won't live with that opens the next
door and closes the one behind you.
The beating through a blanket that leaves
no marks. The promise of obsidian
eyes outside your window that see you
awake or asleep, even now.

Escape Room

Every escape room starts with not knowing you're in a room you need to escape. You think it's still light out when you arrive, but this is a parlor trick. Bill Clinton's pictures are hanging on the walls in some kind of chaotic shrine, and each time you glance inside the frames the man changes into another man your mother swears is her father. You've dressed yourself in tolerable flannel, but you're wearing those futile socks from the 90s that never held their elasticity and slid down into your shoes causing physical discomfort. The only thing more discomfoting is the embarrassment of wearing such atrocious socks. In this room, you're a child. You're not wearing shoes. You've only got the socks. The carpet is wet. The room isn't large. Isn't small. In fact, it's no bigger than your twelfth year of life, so it seems easy to escape from, but this, too, is a trick. Next to the shapeshifting Bill Clinton is a hand-me-down clarinet and a middle school band director screaming at you to pick up and *play the fucking thing already*. He doesn't care that it's cork-less. There are hairdryers, oh yes. Even their warmth can feel wrong under enough wretched candlelight. But you came equipped: discount bologna, a gold mouse pendant with ornate reading glasses, one Lisa Frank neon spotted cat folder, two scrunchies. Here's what you know now: hidden in the room is a key to unlock the door. In order to find the key, you have to first smash every invisible pot, snap every bone. The bones are inside the body of your dancing mother. Maybe, if you were a man, you could have escaped.

Duck and Hover

Two ducks are walking into a bar.

(Stop me if you've heard this one before...)

As they begin to walk in the building, a black Jeep screeches to a halt just feet from them onto the sidewalk.

A man in aviator sunglasses rolls down the passenger side window with a serious look on his face.

He leans out the window towards the ducks, who are now staring in confusion at the vehicle.

The man says, "Hey, you two look like you're on quack."

The ducks share an annoyed look with one another. The man in the car is not funny. They have heard this joke before.

Noticing the man in the car's aviator sunglasses, the ducks, in tandem, reply by saying, "Hey Top Gun, shouldn't you be cruising in a plane instead Mav-dick?"

The ducks smirk at this retort. The ducks are not very funny, though. The man in the car has heard this reply before.

Immediately, the man in the car yells, “Are you insulting me? How about we fight about it?”

The ducks are in no mood to fight. The bar has the song “Tequila” by Dan + Shay on the jukebox. They wanted to order tequila, and listen to “Tequila.”

The ducks simply reply, “no,” and turn to go inside.

The man in the car then says in a low growl, “You’d fight us, unless you’re chicken.”

The ducks are suddenly mad. They are not chicken. They are ducks.

The ducks hate chickens. Chickens killed their uncles in the Great Duck-Chicken Wars of Tyson in 1987. The ducks know what they have to do now.

Both ducks begin to run, charging at the black jeep.

The man in the car grins. Suddenly, the car begins to float.

The ducks are now in awe. They attempt to stop their enraged charges, stumbling as they brake to a halt.

The black jeep is now hovering thirty feet above the ducks.

The ducks feel dumb now. Almost as dumb as chickens.

Almost. They really laid an egg on this one, they think.

They could try flying up to the car. But they are tired and the man in the car has already ruffled their feathers. They

want this to end. They turn towards the bar.

The ducks do not get far.

A green beam shoots down from the underside of the black jeep.

The ducks look up. This does not seem good.

Quickly, the ducks are covered in the green beam.

They begin being sucked towards the black jeep.

We should've stayed in and watched Friends reruns, think the ducks.

They both ponder how Ross never deserved Rachel.

The ducks turn to one another, a mere two feet from the vehicle now.

"They weren't on a break," they say.

Thump.

The ducks slam onto the floor in the back of the Jeep.

They blink, disoriented.

As their vision clears, they see the man in the aviator sunglasses standing above them.

Next to the man in the aviator sunglasses is another man in sunglasses, but his sunglasses are regular sunglasses not aviator sunglasses.

He must be less of a douche, think the ducks. But probably still a huge douche.

Past the two standing men, one of the ducks glances over to the front of the car.

He can see that the glove compartment is open on the passenger side.

He nudges the other ducks and glances toward the glove compartment, subtly urging his friend to look.

There is a book sitting in the glove compartment. It is a copy of Infinite Jest.

The ducks chuckle a bit. The man with aviator sunglasses is definitely the bigger douche.

The men in sunglasses are confused by the ducks' laughter, but ignore it.

Now it is the men in sunglasses' turn to laugh.

They are going to probe the ducks, say the men in sunglasses.

The ducks are offended. The men in sunglasses didn't even offer to buy them dinner.

The ducks also do not want to be probed.

One duck thinks maybe if he found the right girl, one that he wanted to marry, it would be okay. The other duck thinks maybe after a couple glasses of wine with a woman who looked like Hillary Clinton wearing a do rag it would be okay. But definitely not by men in sunglasses.

The ducks respond at the same time, "How about instead of probing us you guys maybe just don't probe us?"

The men do not look like they are about to agree to this offer.

“What if we give you a peek at the good stuff, and then we can go on our way? We’ll even let you take a couple pics. Flash allowed.”

The men in sunglasses yell, “We are not *guys*, we are aliens!”

The ducks don’t really care. The probing thing seems a little more important right now.

“Can we at least have a tour of the car or something before it goes down? Or up? Or in and swirled around a bit? We’re new to this whole about-to-get-probed-in-a-floating-car thing,” say the ducks.

The alien men in sunglasses face each other. They do not smile.

They turn back to face the ducks.

“No,” the men respond tersely. “There is not much to see.”

The men in sunglasses do not acknowledge the copy of Infinite Jest.

It’s never been opened, the ducks deduce. Typical. They chuckle again a bit. They almost forgot that these are alien douche men.

“And what about the neighborhood?” the ducks ask, “Is it family friendly? Hopefully it’s in a good school district at least.”

The men both point out the window.

They say, “Well, if you look to your left, you’ll see the

Emperor of the Universe.”

“There’s an Emperor of the Universe?” say the ducks in confusion.

“Yup,” answer the men in sunglasses, “rules the entire universe.”

The ducks turn to their left.

They gasp.

“The Emperor of the Universe is a goose?” they shout, turning towards one another.

“Yup,” the aliens reply.

This is bad, the ducks think. Geese are worse than chickens.

They turn to each other once again.

Their looks say it all. The ducks know what they are thinking.

This is the reason rice cakes existed. The Emperor of the Universe is evil.

They never thought any food that was both dry and flavorless could exist until they ate rice cakes. Never again, they said, after eating rice cakes.

Rice cakes still haunt them in their sleep at night sometimes.

The Emperor of the Universe begins hissing, and then, for no apparent reason, begins honking at nothing and flies away.

The ducks shrug off this occurrence and return to the

matter at hand.

“Can we get a description of the probes before we see them? We want some preparation.”

“No,” say the men, “we want you to be shocked.”

No kidding, think the ducks.

The ducks probe on with their question, however.

“Are they sharp? Or dull?” they ask. “Are they shaped like fingers? Is ‘probe’ just a term for your fingers? If so, that kinda seems like cheating.”

“Shut up!” The alien men scream.

They are no longer amused.

Time to probe some ducks.

The men turn around.

Oh god, think the ducks, it’s going to be their fingers isn’t it.

The men shuffle around a bit in the pockets behind front car seats.

Soon, they each pull something out of the pockets and turn to the ducks.

The ducks are relieved that it is not the alien men’s fingers, but what they see looks even more horrifying.

The men are holding thin metal devices that have spirals at the ends.

Yikes, think the ducks, they didn’t even guess spiral shaped probes.

Those are going to make for a bumpy ride.

The men take a step forward, then another.
This is the end of our ends, think the ducks.
As the alien men near, however, the ducks quickly turn to each other.
Their looks of fright are soon those of realization.
They remember now.
They both had rope in their back pockets.
They had just left rodeo school before they had walked to the bar.
They had been so excited for Tequila and tequila that they almost forgot about their weekly cattle roping class.
The ducks laughed.
They also remember that for this week's lesson they had practiced on plastic cattle replicas that didn't move.
The ducks easily roped the cattle and their teacher gave them both gold stars.
Their classmate Gene couldn't even hit the cattle.
Gene sucked.
The teacher even let Gene stand right in front of the plastic cattle and drop the rope onto one.
Gene still missed.
The week before, Gene came to class and the teacher told Gene he had to leave.
The teacher said Gene smelled so bad that he was a health risk for the class.

Gene cried and ran away then.

The ducks laughed some more.

After their laughter subsided the ducks looked forward again.

The urgency of the moment returned to the ducks' minds.

The ducks were about to get spiral probed in a floating car by a couple of douche alien men wearing sunglasses.

Quickly, the ducks sprung to action.

They were a little nervous.

They had never lassooed moving targets before, only the plastic cattle.

They hoped that they could rise to the occasion, but it would require confidence.

They pulled the rope out of their back pockets, twirled the lassos in the air, careful not to hit the roof of the vehicle, and thrust the ropes forward just as their teacher had instructed them to do.

The lassoes circled around the men, sliding smoothly over their torsos.

The ducks tugged back on the ropes confidently and the lassoes tightened upon the men.

Thwack.

The men and their sunglasses slammed to the floor of the car.

The spiral probes fly out of their hands and roll away.

The men are stunned, unable to speak in the moment.
The ducks glance to the front of the car and see a big
button.

It says, "STOP HOVER."

The ducks walk forward and press the button together,
smiles painting their faces.

The car begins to float downward, and soon lands softly on
the ground outside the bar again.

Triumphant, the ducks turn to each other.

In cool macho duck hero voices the ducks say in unison, "I
guess being a duck may really be all it's quacked up to be."

Still laughing, the ducks untie the rope constraining the
alien men.

They are no longer worried about getting their ends
upended.

The ducks hand the men back their sunglasses. They ask,
"hey, do you like tequila?"

The alien men reply, "the drink or the song?"

The ducks don't say anything, but give slow nods and
knowing looks to the alien men.

Two ducks and two aliens walk into a bar.

the ryan phillippe chess set

bought used at a garage sale in tampa
from a woman with a most clear
and present case of alcohol-induced dementia
redolent of capri slims,
she says caveat emptor, kid
and clicks her heels, turning volte-face in a plume

at home the box is opened
all of the original pieces are intact
chiseled plastic
white knights
golden youth rooks
castle sculptures
abdominal thickets
white black spin suck squares breezed over in crystal meth
black light dreams...
a slow track of flamenco guitar eating at your heart...
then the first check
the king on the move...
check again, in the voice of Ryan
he says goodnight sweet pea
and devours you like a flytrap
cloaked in the soft veneer of 1999
and you become a part of the game
for sale at the next stop
Ryan says we're all in this together
The k swiss kids nod in the affirmative
and yell checkmate as the chandelier bursts with
assistant hockey coaches in doc martens

the k swiss kids further distract you
with silver chromies and an all-synthetic hot pocket perfume
you are transfixed
wait
(the sound of a struck match)
Ryan walks in
Checkmate

Disintegral: Fall Back *Emily Rankin*



Godflesh

Personally, I think that everyone should smell their own flesh being cooked at least once. I've been to every "self-help" grifter and drug-happy psychiatrist that society could spit at me, and yet I've never had a greater boost to my confidence than the realization that I must taste good. Sure, it's dangerous, and I'll admit that the whole thing is pretty sickening when you stop to think about it. However, the same could be said for football and anal sex, and those activities are cornerstones of American culture. It's all hypocrisy, all part of the great rosy lie behind these United States of Suburbia, the idea that if you just shut up, sit still, and be a good, normal little boy, then one day you'll grow up to be a good, normal little man, with a comfortably numbing office job, a white picket fence, 2.4 children, and a wife who's secretly afraid of you. Then, and only then, will your life begin.

But I'm not a man, I'm a philosopher, and my life began from the moment I learned how to scream. The only excitement in these normies' lives is that of police procedurals and divorce, but I can feel my heart thrashing inside my ribcage like a tyrannosaurus in heat. They can gorge themselves all they like on their high fructose corn syrup, but I can taste the salt of my own sweat as it rolls down my face in heavy drops. From the desperate heaving of my lungs to the searing pain within my nerves, every last inch of me is so spectacularly alive. Now, don't get me wrong here - lying naked and alone in a dark oven is not how I initially planned to spend my Sunday afternoon. But life is short, and it's even shorter for those who truly love it. As for me? I intend to love every part of it I can.

I could go on - trust me, I really could - but my train of thought has just been interrupted by the sound of leather boots descending down a flight of wooden stairs. Must be the leader of the cult who kidnapped me; Only religious authorities take such rhythmic, self-important steps.

"From the prisons of the mind, the Godflesh rises!" the cultist announces in a thunderous voice. See what I mean? Fuckin' love that guy. I was wondering earlier if he was punishing me for stabbing one of my kidnappers with a meat thermometer, but now he seems like the kind of dude who had been planning to cook me and eat me either way. With

the sound of a click, harsh light begins pouring into the darkness as the oven door is pulled down in front of me. Cool, fresh air flows through my overheated lungs as I gaze into the room around me. There are no windows here, only a single sickly yellow overhead light and a few lava lamps. The floor is coated in stained beige carpet, and the only other objects in the room are an empty bookcase, a small, grey CRT TV, and a tipped-over Super Nintendo.

“Wait, am I about to be cannibalized in some asshole’s mancave?” I wonder aloud. As if on cue, two leather boots enter the frame, and the cult leader kneels down to observe me from just a few inches outside of the oven. His body and most of his face are completely covered in a purple cloak that was seemingly fashioned out of a bedsheet, like if Barney the Dinosaur became a klansman.

“Do you cherish what you are?” he asks in an unexpectedly gentle tone. I open my mouth for one of my famously witty comebacks, but to my surprise, the words refuse to come. There is a perverted sense of certainty in his voice, like he’s reading off a script, staring through the cut-out holes in his bedsheet while he waits for me to remember my lines. His eyes remind me of my first foster father’s - soft and round with warm brown irises, filled with nothing but love and the capacity for violence. I can feel his gaze penetrate me, looking through me as if I am nothing, as if I

am hollow.

I answer his question by jamming my thumb into one of his eyes. His eyelid reflexively closes around me, but it's too late - I've already pierced his lens, and blood bursts onto my nail like a stepped-on packet of ketchup. He recoils backward, staggering wildly as he rises to his full height. I begin to frantically crawl out of the oven, but he kicks me back in with his heavy boot, slamming my head against the stainless steel. Then, he forcefully closes the oven door, and I am plunged once more into darkness.

"Well, there goes that escape plan," I chuckle to myself. Another drop of sweat leaks in between my lips, but the consistency is a bit different this time - more viscous. I trace the origin of the drop with my tongue to find that it isn't sweat at all, but a single tear that somehow escaped my notice. As I wipe away the tear with my blood-soaked thumb, I recall something Larry once said to me while we were out dumpster diving together on East 8th street.

"Y'know, kiddo, you're a real firecracker," he smiled through his thick grey beard and missing teeth. "But firecrackers don't last too long out here". At the time, I spat at him, thinking he was trying to tell me to be someone else like one of this country's petty fascist cops, but in truth he was only stating a simple fact. I am a firecracker - beautiful, brilliant, and temporary. I never belonged in this world, and

there's only so long it could tolerate me before finally snuffing me out. The bleeding at the back of my head is coming in full force now, and I shut my eyes in pain. Maybe it's just my certainty that I am going to die an early and excruciating death in here, but something about this oven seems a lot less cozy than before.

And yet again, my inner monologue is so rudely interrupted by the obnoxious stomping of leather boots. These steps are different from the leader's, though - they're less rehearsed, more hurried.

"The - the eye of the Revelator!" one of them gasps. Must be my handiwork he's referring to.

"Worry not, my suckling pigs," the leader replies. "The Godflesh does not judge. Their love is merely tasted in screams." The other cultists give sighs of relief, which then quickly transition into excited giggles. I raise my head again, my heart pounding due to more than just the heat.

"What a great attitude!" I say to myself, a grin spreading across my face. Forget that uncharacteristic self-pity from before - who said death had to be somber? I will die as I was born, a happy accident...because after all, there's nothing quite as exciting as the last explosion of a firecracker. I can feel the heat enveloping me completely, forcing its way deeper and deeper into every inch of my body. Pieces of my skin are beginning to blacken and flake off, revealing so

much tissue, so much meat, so much more of *me* beneath the surface. I would love to see it for myself, but my eyes are so drenched in pain and tears that I doubt I could even get them to open. The blood and sweat continues to roll down my body, marinating me in my own juices - God, I'm going to be delicious! This superficial society loves to tell you what you are: a boy, a man, a bum, a headcase, an idealist. But right now, I am the most exquisite meal these cultists will ever have, and even if the world takes away everything else from me, it can't take away that!

“Looks like you were wrong, Mom,” I whisper with the last of my strength. “I am worth something.”

things that decay

grandma told me the story of jesus in the wilderness // she
said the devil was just like any one of us looking for a break
in a life long with failure // and really we ought not judge
him on account of that

*What would you give in exchange for your soul?
Ice cream.*

and thats what she brought me

\\

grandpa would call down the squirrels by clicking his teeth
and rattling an old hubcap filled with pecans // they would sit
on his shoulder or eat out of his hand // he wore plain white
tshirts and khaki trousers // he was a boxer before the war
// owned a bar in galveston but mostly gave up drinking in
the midfifties when he came home too drunk one night and
my father and his brother beat him up // he smoked camel
cigarettes but never in front of me // he had a lot of friends
// we got along // and then one night in his eightysecondyear
he shot himself in the head // awoken by a sharp pain in an
already failing body or maybe he couldnt get to sleep and
was fed up with it all // he was found the next morning //
we stood in the front yard hugging // across the street veiled
and trailing smoke the neighboring beekeeper waved

Touch-desert, plague side.

Agasp beneath the window lock,
the ladle dolling slowly,
the froth and grasp,
the window glass,
the lady lilting lowly.

The distance of the breath
beneath the bottling of the metal
the lock-me-out, with subtle pout,
the breasts and bursting petals.

The hunger of the creeping cat
beyond the stain glass fortress
the candlelight, the coming night,
the long abandoned curtains.
The open door, the hinge undone,
the entry through the parlor.
The wind rush through,
the moaning, too,
the moonbeam and the martyr.
The ghostly sigh, from parted lips,
dewy on the mirror.
The tender touch beyond the tips,
the tongue, and teeth, and terror.

This old town been home long as I remember
This town gonna be here long after I'm gone
East side, west side give but don't surrender
They been down but they still rock on
– Michael Stanley, “My Town”

This issue has been dedicated to Cleveland rock ‘n’ roll
legend and hero, Michael Stanley.

For you, we rock on.

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