

Shael Riley, Snow, Love, And Sludge (Toybox Mi

I've got a gift
but the gift needs batteries.
In some way I'm sick.
I can't get it out of me.
I've broken all the wishes that I can.
And if you leave me now,
If you would leave me now,
then my death be complete.
But I'm a tin man.
I'm a toy soldier.
And you know where I sleep.

It was the year after I graduated from college.

In January, I go down to Baltimore, to do some voice acting for a tiny production company making t
They operate out a disheveled house, owned by a recovering alcoholic--the president of the compa
The president himself is a quietly impish man, as hospitable as he is enigmatic.
As gaudy as he is impeccable, as much a conceptual humorist as a businessman.
There is a trophy that says "Number One Rapist" with his name printed underneath,
sitting on his desk, and he won't explain it.
Sometimes he wears a dress. His girlfriend is fat, but pretty.
I spend two weeks drinking, going to the mall and watching movies.
No one in the company seems to do any work, but the vice president does receive packages
from record labels who think he might be in a position to afford licensing their artists,
from time to time.
We're making a dance game.

Ten days into the trip, my girlfriend comes to visit us...
and a woman who will eventually become a stripper buys her a nightie.
She is the ex-girlfriend of the vice president.
They aren't on good terms but she needs a place to stay for the night
and he's going to drive her to the airport in the morning,
after they sleep together.
Me and my girlfriend sleep together too,
as do the president and his, the one who is fat but pretty.
And for one night, the whole company is swallowed up in sex.
In the morning, which is four PM for us, we go down to the basement and record the voice overs.
The session only lasts about four hours and it's the only session.
But for the next five months, when people ask me what I've been doing since I graduated from colle
I tell them I've been doing some voice acting.

From February to May, nothing of significance happens.
My girlfriend flies to Japan to become an exchange student.
I get a three-month trial membership at a gym
and the highlight of my day becomes fifty minutes on the elliptical.
This is because, during this trial period, it's the only thing I leave the house for.
I spend a lot of time chatting online, and I call "networking."
I change my dietary habits: no cheese or red meat, empty carbs or fried food.
I eat garlic, and raw ginger, and I will live forever.
A twenty-dollar rice cooker improves my quality of life.
I lose fifty pounds.
I make an appointment to have that hand surgery I've been putting off;
for two years carpal tunnel's been stealing my ability to play guitar, but I can still type.

In May, I get a job in a writing lab at a local community college.
It's a good job. Although It doesn't give me any satisfaction from helping people.
I'm not even sure I am helping people;
I'm probably under-qualified to do that, but what's important is that it doesn't give me the dissatisfac
I would get from working retailthe only other viable option.
I discover previously unimagined nuance regarding correct usage of the definite article.

In July, the surgery goes well, but heals badly. I can't type anymore.
The only potentially marketable skills I've ever had become inexpressible, dormant and begin to at
I write off this disability as temporary until October, when I slip into a slow, sustained panic.

I start to worry that my limited ability to use my left hand is affecting my brain, as I've read that doing activities that use both hands in consort, like playing piano, or guitar, or typing, improve general cognition. Maybe they're vital to general cognition; maybe they don't just improve it. At work, my change in demeanor does not go unnoticed. I overhear my boss saying she's going to fire me on the phone and I tell her I won't be coming back next semester in order to save myself the disgrace, and immediately she cuts my hours, leaving me with more time to go crazy. My girlfriend returns from Japan to me in this state and is not unaffected. She ends up leaving me for a guy named Bob, which ruins Bob as a throw-away name for me. Which is a shame, since Bob kind of my go-to throw-away name.

In November I shave my head down to stubble and, for a while, I feel monastic. Then I feel cold. I find myself sitting several times a week in the same Burger King, at the same time of day, eating the same meal: Diet Coke, small fries and a BK Veggie. The worst of two broad-spectrum dietary paradigms. The healthy eater wouldn't get the fries, but the big fat guy would get a real burger. Typical American martyr. I gain back the 50 pounds. One weekend I go to Philadelphia with a small film production company for a convention, and, in the dealer room, I run into the vice president's ex girlfriend. She's become a stripper and has a lot of money now. I invite her back to our hotel and she has a lot of sex with one of the guys from the production company and on the bathroom sink, and in one of the bedrooms and, for the first time in a long time, I'm reminded of Maryland, and the vice president, and the president, and his fat but pretty girlfriend. The next morning it's my birthday. I don't tell anyone, letting the rough cut film premieres and hotel room drinking proceed sans any p. And, for the first time, during long on-screen pauses that the director asserts, addressing the audience as they occur, will be filled up by music in the finished version, I feel old. I thought I'd felt old before, on previous birthdays, but I hadn't. What I'd felt was the fear of feeling old. The severity of the difference between the two cannot be emphasized enough. Consider a roller coaster vs. a car crash.

I don't do very much in December. I fantasize about web log entries I will never make, in which I would fantasize about things I would. A whole new layer of inefficiency opens up to me. I shave my head down to the skin, as though doing so would prepare me for my own death. I give up writing music. The willful cessation of self-defining activity. This is a way to experience one's own death and the hereafter. And the hereafter stretches on. And on. And on. And on. And on. And on.