

HOUSE TOAD

Someone gave him an air hole, out of kindness or habit,
pulled the towel back from a corner of the cardboard
box. (Serious cunning in the toad brain seeks openings--

flow of air, spot of light, weakness--launches the oddly inflated body sack,
lands with a meaty smack, though no one ever ever
hears the percussive moment of escape.)

Innocence captured the toad, a pet for a night, forgotten
after the lid incident. Innocence hooked itself to ignorance,
pulled the blanket over its head while toad

gorged itself silently in dark corners for years
on house flies and wayward beetles, adventurous mayflies
windblown wasps, pill bugs tumbled into cul-de-sacs, the rare silverfish

Sum of nothing to everyone but toad who named it *manna* and
expanded so slowly the new owners assumed water damage when the floor
buckled, fixed the roof, never checked the cellar, with its cobwebs and

cracked pickle jars, odd lengths of pipe, unnamed roots on drying screens,
bits of coal, tubs of geodes, coils of hemp rope, fragments of onion braids
noosed from the joists, translucent as ghosts.

Toad plodded room to room, dropped contagion by the baseboards,
groomed his blistery flesh in closets until the yellow spots gleamed wetly,
blinked without flinching during close encounters with

intelligent eyes. He was, we understand now, so large he became
invisible. How the organic mass escaped notice in the architecture is
explained by the abundance of overstuffed chairs, lathe-turned piano legs,

end-tables festooned with tassels, quivering floor lamps and insufferable figurines.
Hid in plain sight, not so plain, until the hunger could no longer be satisfied by
insects, larvae, and agglomerated microbes. He began to consume the furniture.

The smell should have alerted a sensitive soul, but the house, by then, was
antique. Preservation impulses meant tolerating unpleasantness for the sake
of memory. Whole rooms were closed, untenable.

Still, he flattened himself under doors (you know how they are)
and moved, unmolested, room to room, big enough to be his own company--
Care for some tea? No I'll just have the scone with milk. Do you have beer? Sure.

Skinny high school dropout with sagging jeans and paint-spattered shoes

smoking weed on the scaffolding and popping siding with a crowbar, sees the flesh through a chink, and freaks.

So much for insulation and new clapboard. Whole rooms had to go, wall after wall. The turret addition, circa 1983, turned out to be a leg. The entire place was reptilian. They tore and demolished, purged and scrubbed.

Toad never budged. Sidewalk led right to place where his tadpole tail receded, two stories high. Toad was so still, adjusted skin tone like camouflage to neighborhood paint palette, the voyeurs gave up. House was gone. Life went on.

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