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Foreword Review SHORT STORIES

★ Ruin

Cara Hoffman
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The engrossing short stories of Cara Hoffman's *Ruin* are at once familiar and otherworldly.

These arresting, disorienting stories demand attention, like the "image of a mirror that reflects another mirror." In one tale, a beekeeper tends her hives under helicopter surveillance; her detainee and housing bloc numbers are stamped inside of her boots. Elsewhere, a boy navigates a world of bunkers and barbed wire, looking for his father, and a woman moves into her uncle's trailer on the edge of the "hobo jungle," visiting a damp nativity just past the electric fence.

Some stories are linked to an anarchic future; others reflect the dark present. Teenage girls flirt with nameless, faceless boys and view cryptic films against a blank sheet in the basement, waiting for something "beautiful" to happen; a reporter living in an 1987 Chevy imagines the voices of her dead friend's ghost and a talking dog; a dying mouse envisions the "end of the little path in her mind."

The evocative prose includes glimmers of hope even among the refuse. Images of disorder are juxtaposed with poetic descriptions of nature, as of blossoms pooling in "gutters already white with ash;" here, art has the power to create and preserve matter. In the stunning story "Ruin," an impoverished painter seduces a man she met in a Salvation Army thrift store; later, she recreates him on canvas, along with his poisonous tropical frog: "And I went back in, giving weight to the flesh of James Day. Life beneath the line of muscle, life where there had only been color. Life to the black eyes, life to the palm that held the frog, life to the frog who was the sister of god."

In the radiant, brooding stories of Cara Hoffman's collection, art and nature are sources of refuge in a tumultuous, uncertain world.

KRISTEN RABE (March / April 2022)

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