

American Gothic

by Michael Colangelo

The mask was a flat jigsaw puzzle of whittled wood eight inches across, about a foot and a half tall. Luke had felled a number of firs with his axe and then carefully whittled choice pieces into curving animal shapes with his buck knife. The thing was held together with an intricate patchwork of knotted cord across its inside.

He hid it behind the cabin in the dead center of a patch of dying fir trees, pushed down deeply into the soft soil, safely hidden from the road and the back windows of the house by a screen of heavy foliage and their long defunct outhouse. Every day, Luke placed a wooden bowl at the base of the mask, sinking the container into the soft earth to further ensure that its contents would not spill over. Behind him, from the cabin, a tinny radio announcer's voice droned off the names of towns hit by the storms. He listened casually, only so far as to see if he recognized any of them. If any of the listed towns were nearby. They weren't.

He regarded the stack of crudely carved animals before him. Each one had visited him in dreams, starting that previous autumn, and each one had made its presence known to him; Sheloman the Rat, Yedidia the Fox, Nadab the Mole, Omri the Blow Fly, and others. As long as he paid each of them homage, they would show him what to do to complete the mask. That was the purpose of his worship.

He scanned the yard. It was really nothing more than a patch of forest cleared back far enough for their needs. Remnants of the old farm, before the storms were still visible; a patch of barren topsoil that had long hardened into clay, the old chicken coop with fading plywood and fraying chicken wire, and a fence made of logs that was slowly coming apart, its wood slowly tumbling back into the ground as the years ticked past. In the pen, remnants of Father's livestock scratched in the dirt – only three of them left; his rooster, his sow, and his goat. All three were as jet black as the night, all three were as jet black as Father's heart. Those animals never visited him in dreams.

There was the sound of tires on gravel at the front of the cabin, and Luke moved between the trees at the side of the home to peer through the pine needles for a better view. An old black limousine with a gap-toothed front grill and body patchings up and down its sides slowly rolled up the driveway and stopped in front of the house. Stamped across the front license plate was the word FAITH in gold paint. Father stepped out from behind the wheel, slightly shaky on his feet, and staggered inside the house forgetting to shut the car door behind him. Luke stumbled backwards from the thicket, tripping over the offerings bowl. Its contents – bright red – spilled out across the cracked ground. Father was home.



'Finally,' Cock said, pecking at a dandelion that had somehow managed to find root and bloom on the floor of the pigpen.

'Finally, indeed.' Goat agreed. 'She's in for it now, isn't she Sow?'

The pig ignored him, settling into the muck, eyes closed, her back muscles rippling with pleasure.

'Well, then,' Goat recovered. 'I for one am happy to see him.'

'It's okay. We were all worried, Goat.' said Cock.

They laughed together while sow rolled over in the mud.



She woke to a sharp, dazzling pain across the side of her head. When her eyes snapped open – Frank was standing over her, eyes glazed and bloodshot and furious – beard still wet and matted with beer. He had one hand knotted tightly in her hair and was pulling her from the bed to the floor of the cabin.

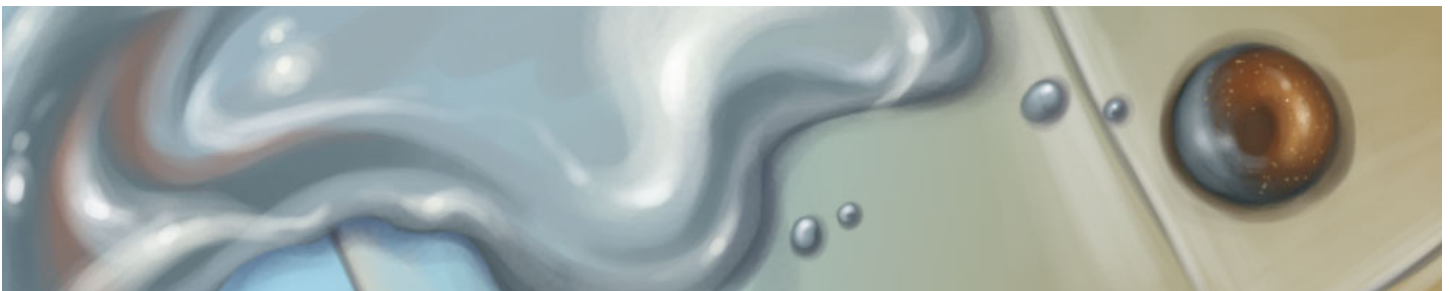
She protested. “Frank, I –”

“Fornicator!” He screamed in her face and then dropped her to the hardwood. She landed there with a thud.

She struggled against him, kicking uselessly with bare legs, flailing helplessly, too groggy from sleeping in late to be effective. He dragged her across the cabin floor, out of the bedroom, through the kitchen, and right out the backdoor of their home. Then she was being pulled along the spring thaw mud, towards the animal pen, towards the tin box that Frank had worked on so carefully for the last three months. Still gripping her by the hair, he reached across and opened the box’s makeshift door, and finally she understood what it was for.

“You wanna rut like a beast? I’ll keep you like one!” he shouted, startling the animals in the pen – Frank’s pets, his goat, his rooster, and his sow – jet black and bristling with pleasure at the sound of his voice. They scampered about the pen momentarily, circling each other at half-trots. Then they stopped abruptly, heads cocked, to watch the human proceedings unfold.

She screamed as he pulled her across him and attempted to thrust her into the box’s narrow opening. With renewed vigor (she was awake now), she kicked and fought against him hard, snapping at his hands with her teeth, pulling her head violently away from his grasp



until she felt her scalp tear and the blood flow beneath her hair in a warm trickle. She was hitting him with her fists as hard as she could, and he just-continued-to-push. He was too big, too strong; his face grim and work-oriented, like a pall bearer struggling beneath a heavy load but determined to get the job done.

This was it. He was going to kill her this time or worse. Something had finally broken up there inside his head forever.

The air inside the box was already hot and stale. He shoved her roughly from behind into the back wall of the box and swung the door shut behind her. She heard the padlock snap shut and he kicked the door, making the entire structure shudder.

“Y’all women can go fuck yourselves!” his muffled voice screamed once from the other side of the box. Then nothing. Quiet. The sound of her ragged breathing.

The cock crowed.



‘Why do you ask, Cock?’ wondered Goat, grinning through his beard. ‘It’s really quite obvious, no?’

‘Rhetorical, Goat,’ Cock responded. He quickly scratched a crude, upside-down pentagram into the dirt and then proceeded to erase it again, just as quickly. ‘Rhetorical.’

The trio watched Frank retreat towards the cabin.

‘It’s frozen the important bits of his brain,’ Goat observed. ‘Fermented grains. He’s poisoned himself.’

‘Again, Goat,’ Cock pecked at the muck. ‘It was rhetorical.’

‘We’ve a chance now.’ Goat pointed out with a hoof.

The pair nodded in agreement, and trained

their black, baleful eyes on the box again.

Sow shuffled in place, gleeful.



She slammed her palms against the walls of the box. It was just tin, bolted together and reinforced with a wooden frame. If she had more room to swing – more leverage – it would give away with ease. But that was not the case. Her blows simply rattled against the sheet metal, booming inside the confined space, splitting her ears with the sound of amplified thunder. Still, it was dark and hot and tiny inside the box, and stopping – being left alone with silence inside of Frank’s makeshift tomb would kill her. She tried the box door, held shut by a padlock on a hinge. It wouldn’t open, but gave an inch. She held it open and placed her face at the narrow opening, breathing the fresh air.

There was a figure making its way across the yard towards her out from behind the thicket of firs at the far end of the field. Luke was dressed in his trademark overalls (the only pair he seemed to own) with a large wooden mask strapped over his head. He looked like a jungle native, the stereotyped kind she’d watch in the old black and white films on Sunday afternoons while she ironed. All he needed was a spear, and maybe a loincloth instead of the overalls. The mask looked like it was made from all sorts of different kinds of wood and pieced together. Different shades and shapes mixed across its curving face, broken only by a pair of eyeholes pierced by Luke’s ice blue gaze. He lumbered right past her pen, and vanished somewhere near the animals. Then she heard him talking to them.

“Luke?” She called. His voice cut off abruptly. “Luke, get me out of here!”

There was nothing. Silence. She cursed

him; she cursed herself – her only son – a fucking retard who talked to Frank’s animals and couldn’t comprehend she’d been locked in a tin box to die. Then, there was the sound of scuffling against the wall of the box. Luke whispered, “Mama, Mama is that you in there?”

She reminded herself to remain calm and patient with him, speaking slowly. “Yes Luke, it’s me. Can you open the door for Mama?”

She heard him groan. “The pig doesn’t want me to open the door for you. She says that you deserve to be in there.”

“Luke, listen very carefully to me. The animals, they don’t talk. And if they did, don’t you think they’d want you to let me out?”

“Nuh uh. They talk like the animals in that book you read me sometimes. They also say you’re bad.”

“Do you think I’m bad, honey?”

There was a pause. “No.”

“Then you should let me out, Luke. The animals, they’re just uh, telling you what Frank told them to say. They’re scared of him too.”

She heard him moving outside of the box, and then he appeared, crouching, before the opening with his mask on. He fumbled with the chains on the latched door.

“I’m gonna need an axe or something Mama.”



‘Utterly fascinating,’ Cock exclaimed, peering at the boy. ‘We’ve rubbed off on him, I think.’

‘True enough, Cock,’ Goat observed. ‘However, he appears to have trouble following instructions. I’m certain Sow told him not to release her.’

‘Frank would disapprove of this, immensely I think.’ Cock said. ‘More so than Sow. Shall I rouse him?’

Goat chuckled. ‘He hates you more than his own family, Cock.’

‘Indeed. Here I go.’


‘Cad.’ observed Goat.



Frank was passed out on the ratty couch in the living room, dreaming with an erection sky-high in his pants. The refrigerator door was still open; a six-pack lay at his feet forgotten in his stupor. He awoke to a sharp, stabbing pain in the center of his forehead. His eyes greeted the sight of his rooster standing on his chest, pecking away. He flailed his arms, muttering, and it flapped its wings in a flurry of escape, gliding awkwardly down to the cabin floor in a burst of shiny black feathers.

“By fuck-” Frank roared, rising from the couch and staggering towards the .22 hanging from the felt-lined gun rack across the room. “I’ll kill you too.”

It cocked its head at him and pecked at the hardwood floor as he loaded two bullets into the weapon from an ammo box he kept atop the television set. Taking wobbly aim at the animal, he squeezed the trigger and the sound of the rifle crack echoed through the house. A large piece of flooring vanished in a spray of sawdust and the rooster, alarmed, flapped towards the door of the cabin, disappearing outside. Frank gave chase, reloading as he staggered across the backyard. Then stopped abruptly.



Luke was trudging his way across the yard towards the box, the wood axe from the shed in tow. He wore a mask over his face, tribal in design, but Frank recognized the overalls and slouching gait. He squinted, hoping that the retard wasn't doing what it looked like the retard was doing. Luke made his way over to the box and raised the axe.

“Oh no you don't.” Frank growled, raising the rifle to his shoulder. He fired and the boy fell to the grass trailed by the axe and a cloud of fine red mist.

‘A crack shot, Frank is.’ Goat grinned.

‘Crack shot, indeed.’ admonished Cock.

They watched as he dropped the rifle and ran towards where the boy lay unmoving.

‘Remorseful too, our Frank.’ Goat added.

Sow bumped Cock with her girth, sending him sprawling to the muck in the pen.

Cock bobbed his head at the larger beast. ‘I’m going, I’m going. Must I do everything?’

Goat raised a hoof. ‘You’re the only one with toes, Cock.’

‘True.’



By the time the rooster reached the rifle, Frank had reached Luke's body. He pulled the mask from his face and clumsily cradled the boy in both arms. The rooster fumbled with the trigger while the other two animals looked on. Its toes were not strong, and it took an almost Herculean effort from the frail avian to work the mechanism. At last, the rifle went off with a loud crack, sending a spray of dirt into the air. The bullet ricocheted off the ground, striking Frank in the small of his back. With a grunt, Frank slumped forward and then rolled responsively onto his back, the fabric of his shirt wet with blood.

Inside the box, he could hear screaming. She was screaming for Luke, screaming for him, screaming for herself. He tried to move but found his arms and legs unresponsive to his effort. His lungs felt heavy and painful – and his breathing came in short raspy breaths clotted with blood-spotted mucus. Luke's cold body lay beneath him.

It was a miserable ending to a miserable fucking day, to be sure.



'A CRACK fucking shot, if I do say so, Cock. You're better than Frank' congratulated Goat. He and Sow hopped the pen to join their brethren near the place where Frank lay.

Cock took a free peck at the side of Frank's head.

'How is he doing?' Goat asked.

'He's delicious.' reported Cock.

Sow lunged at the bird, catching him across the neck in her jaws. She crunched down and Cock gave a single squawk of surprise before blood ran from his eyes and beak and his body jittered uncontrollable trapped in the porcine's maw. Sow chewed slowly, savoring the taste of blood and feathers in her mouth.

'Positively abominable, Sow.' grinned Goat. He tugged at Frank's belt with his teeth, trying to eat the buckle. The man moaned loudly and Goat responded with two sharp kicks - one to the head and one to the groin.

'I'll give you his flesh, dear. As long as I can have his belt and his boots.'

Sow shivered in agreement.



She was still screaming inside the box after the pig and goat had taken their fill. She would continue to do so well after the animals were sick of her dinner music. And after two days, Sow, swollen and sleepy and streaked bright red, noticed the mask that lay discarded and blood-spattered nearby. With two cloven hooves and all her weight behind it, she rose up on her hind legs and smashed it back into oblivion with glee.

Tired but satisfied, both animals moved off, upright, towards town.

