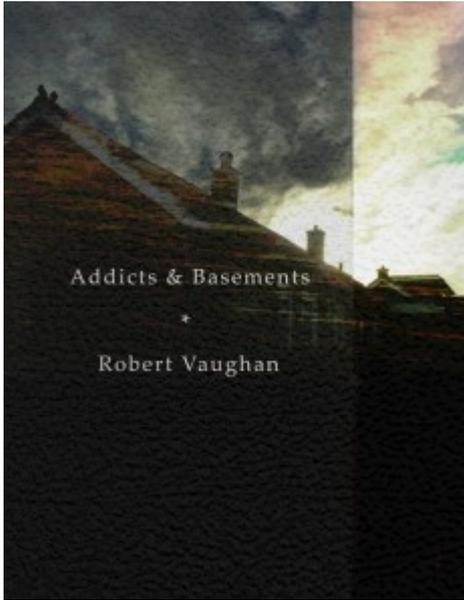


Addicts & Basements by Robert Vaughan

written by Peter Tieryas | March 25, 2014



Addicts & Basements

by Robert Vaughan

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142 pages / [Amazon](#) / [Goodreads](#)

Robert Vaughan explores addictions and the dark crannies of basements in his collection, *Addicts & Basements*, which assembles a variety of his works from flash fiction to poetry. There's a disturbing symmetry in the obsessive nature of the characters, each piece a syringe of distorted desire injected directly into the nerves of the brain to disrupt synaptic cohesion. Vaughan's words act as amphetamines and depressants, a lyrical brand of verbal inhalants that capture moments, or as in the story, "Fallout," a man "hopes to capture their essence (seed pods), as if by shooting them, freezing them frame by frame, he might see his own life oozing before him, undulating like festering wounds." Many of the stories feature a wound, analyzed, inspected, then ripped back open. The opening story, "The Femur," is about a strange collection of artifacts the narrator has garnered, from pubic hair given by an ex-girlfriend, to his grandfather's titular femur. Through the recounting of his history, the femur becomes an anchor and a focal point around which his life is chained. Even as an external joint, he depends on it like a crutch, a thigh enabling locomotion: "Through the years, and multiple moves later, I'd grown attached. It was as if we shared bone. Cartilage. Nerves. Connective tissues." His addiction is sewed into his muscles and he'd suffer an abasia without it, explaining, in part, his resistance to his wife's attempts to get rid of it.

In the darkly humorous, "Most Popular Baby Names of 2013," we're treated to a list of drugs as metaphor for chemical catharsis, a salvation triggered by receptors and neurotransmitters. The nuclear family gets decimated by drugs in this witty list that is deceptively simplistic. But it's a short scene in "Disappearance," that makes for one of the more poignant and subtle family

exchanges. A couple gets lost, asks for directions, and a simple slip by the husband about where they're going—Rivers Glen—leads the wife to chastise her husband.

"I'm sensible. You don't go giving personal details to complete strangers. That's all we need. Santa Claus to show up at our fire pit."

I chuckled but knew she was right. I stared out at the stream, packets of fog in dancing patterns, soaring off the stream, their misty shapes disappearing into sunlight.

He suffers a mix of shame, regret, defiance, and hurt pride. Perhaps he'll get over it a minute later, perhaps it'll linger. Through this interaction, Vaughan is expressing something most people experience every day; the little addictions, whether wanting to always be right, or petty regrets, bolstering the psyche with pylons of guilty, even if they vanish into "misty shapes" a moment later.

The bridge of a middle "&" connects to the "Basement," and the junk and dross tossed in the subterranean cellar is more elusive, requiring more than a glance to fully absorb. Through the manifold exploration of the underground, we see there are as many basements as there are neuroses. Vaughan's poetry follows the ladder-like structure of a maddening descent downwards as with "In the Suburbs:"

memories but
slices of carefully selected visions
flash before the pallid screen
imagining constant
visitors and beginning
short declarations
with no endings...

Cumulatively, the individual pieces are like "slices of carefully selected visions"—memories—triggered by the a trip into Vaughan's brain. The boundaries between poetry and fiction become moot in his prose as some of the poems read like fiction and some of the flash reads like poetry. Seeing the different pieces juxtaposed next to one another feels like prying through a neighbor's basement with a microscope on a time limit. As Vaughan bares his addictions, there's a slight ululation in my veins: "I never thought it could happen but when he says I own your hole I thought he said heart so I leapt into the sky from a rampart we watched where they're so gallantly strung, and a frozen custard caught in my throat. It's just you and me he says..."

Miscommunication and misunderstanding can be another addiction, an albatross dictating the invisible creeds we often cling to. Age, time, desire, lust, and a cacophony of suppressed urges are intimated at in, "The Lost and Erasable Parts of Us: "My identity tied up in a bottle. I craved my smell

back, my decency, my shameless will. I grew gills, slithered up the stairs, fettered away, toward some desert city, in undulating waves." When identity is so intertwined with a bottle, an addiction, or a basement, it's easy to get lost. In Vaughan's symphony, those weaknesses are a path back to self-discovery, a melody, however distorted, to guide listeners up into revelation. This isn't a AAA meeting though as addictions lead to other addictions and there's no permanent egress, only leaps into oblivion. I'm a Robert Vaughan junkie now. You can find me drowning in his basement.