Suckville

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The Mars Room
by Rachel Kushner.
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Early in *The Mars Room*, a bus full of prisoners is being transported upstate from Los Angeles County on Interstate 5, which bisects California's Central Valley. The bus passes by the stench of a cattle farm and follows a truck full of turkeys headed to slaughter. The valley is blighted, 'a brutal, flat, machined landscape, with a strange lemonade light, thick with drifting topsoil and other pollutants from farm equipments and oil refineries'. It is California's backside, a vast landscape of things people don't like to think about: slaughterhouses, industrialised agriculture, and the institutions of America's penal system.

Narrating the ride to jail is Romy Hall, a 29-year-old stripper and single mother who has been given a double life sentence for murdering a man who stalked her. The year is 2003. Her first parole hearing will be in 37 years' time. She has been in jail for two years already, long enough to learn not to say much and not to complain. She has also learned not to cry, a lesson she received on the night she was arrested, while crying, from a cellmate who showed her a 'Shut The Fuck Up' tattoo on her lower back. She has left, out in the world, a seven-year-old son.

The prison bus leaves the county jail in the middle of the night – 'anything to shield the regular people from having to look at us, a crew of cuffed and chained women on a sheriff's department bus.' On the journey north out of Los Angeles, Romy recollects her hard-knock life. She was raised in the Sunset District of San Francisco by a negligent single mother from Germany who named her after 'a German actress who told a bank robber on a television talkshow that she liked him a lot' (we get the better part of a Wikipedia entry on Romy Schneider without her being explicitly revealed as the namesake). Romy devotes some time to clarifying what the San Francisco of her childhood was like, lest readers mistake it for the San Francisco of 'rainbow flags and Beat poetry' (or for today's San Francisco of technology monopolists). Romy's childhood was one of shoplifting, fist fights, alcoholic parents, bus shelters and casual drug use. The Sunset she knows is a neighbourhood of 'fog and Irish bars and liquor stores', working-class and culturally mixed-up. In the 1980s Romy has brushes with the sad leftovers of the counterculture, like a commune called the Scummerz which subsists on the manufacture of purple microdot, but Romy's San Francisco is not a place freethinkers go to find refuge. Her mother's trajectory from Germany to California is never explained. For Romy herself, the city is its own kind of prison, 'a sad suckville of a place', as she emphasises in asides like 'I sometimes think San Francisco is cursed,' and 'What I eventually came to understand, about San Francisco, was that I was immersed in beauty and barred from seeing it,' and 'The trouble with San Francisco was that I could never have a future in that city, only a past.'

There is the malaise of her 'glacial' mother, who left her to the mercy of predators like the man who assaults her at the age of 11 on her way to a punk rock show. She works at International House of Pancakes after high school, then moves on to the

Mars Room. It is the worst strip club in San Francisco, the sort of place where 'if you'd showered you had a competitive edge.' Romy is presented as an autodidact, a self-taught reader of library books. She didn't fall completely into drug addiction like some of her friends but neither did she escape the nihilism that prevents her from joining 'the straight world'. The Mars Room is her purgatory. She loves heroin, but gives it up when she gets pregnant, which happens after an affair with a bouncer at a nearby club. Later, when asked by a boyfriend the reason she didn't go to college despite her potential, she claims depression. She finally tries to escape, or at least go to Los Angeles, but a stalker who met her at the strip club follows her there, with the denouement that lands her in jail.

Romy is either an enigma or a character who doesn't quite cohere. The 29-year-old German-American stripper, trapped in her station in life, who drives a 1963 Chevy Impala and likes talking about rims and spinners, dates an art-school professor, has a Disneyfied kid who makes cute observations about the autumn leaves, and who has also bludgeoned a man to death, is not someone whose motives are always discernible. When Romy speaks of 'an elevator that smelled of human sweat ionising on stainless steel', I'm not sure she is staying in character. And Kushner deploys the trick of humanising Romy for readers by making her too someone who likes to read. There are several unnecessary attempts to persuade us not only that Romy is smart, but also that the terms by which we might judge smarts (a salaried job, degrees) are mistaken. 'Every stripper I know is clever,' Romy says. 'Some are practically geniuses.' Would the reader care less about Romy if she had interpreted her interior life through the TV show *Friends*?

But this backstory sets up the primary questions of *The Mars Room*. These are old questions: Which fates are self-determined and which are determined by circumstances? What does it mean to mete out justice in an unjust world? Does anyone, no matter how 'bad' they are, deserve to be subjected to the industrial prison complex, which is, as Kushner describes it, some kind of apex of technology, avarice and society's failure to care for its own?

Violations of human rights provide many of the dramatic turning points in the book. One prisoner isn't given medical attention and dies on the bus ride to Stanville. Another goes into premature labour on arrival (her contractions precipitated, perhaps, by a delousing pesticide the prisoners are forced to apply). Romy and several other prisoners are sent to 'administrative segregation', a kind of solitary confinement, for attempting to help the inmate in labour. They get pepper-sprayed, and the baby is taken away from its mother. One chapter is just a list of rules detailing what visitors can and cannot wear to the prison, including 'No purple clothing'; 'No denim of any kind or colour'; 'No logos or prints'; 'No "Capri" pants'. Another chapter lists the rules of comportment visitors are supposed to follow. We learn about the broken justice system through the story of Romy's incompetent public defender, who fails to get the murder victim's history of stalking admitted as evidence. Kushner describes the negligence in treatment of pregnant inmates, the slave wages of five cents an hour paid

for jobs like sewing sandbags and the operations of Global Tel Link, the monopolistic telecommunications company that charges exorbitant rates for phone calls. Another part of the story follows Romy's failed attempts to seek information about her son. All of these examples are rooted in reality.

One of Romy's cellmates recalls a stay in a different kind of prison. It had a swimming pool with state-issued bathing suits, rooms with wood shelves and cabinets, green grass, make-up for sale, and is recollected as some kind of paradise. 'It was before mass incarceration,' she says to Romy. 'As if mass incarceration were some kind of natural disaster,' Romy reflects, 'or a cataclysm, like 9/11, with a before and after. Before mass incarceration.' The point being that mass incarceration is not a natural disaster, or an accident, but the direct result of anti-crime policies in the 1980s and 1990s that increased the number of prisoners in the United States from 300,000 in the early 1980s to around 2.2 million people today. Prisons like Stanville, Romy's institutional home, are new.

Romy is the primary voice of *The Mars Room*, but not the only one. As she becomes accustomed to her institutionalisation, Kushner introduces us to an ensemble cast of prisoners and prison staff around her. They have great, pulpy names. Some are wicked, others merely hard-boiled, unlucky but crafty people who survive on the margins. There is Conan, classified by the system as a woman but perceived by most people as a man, a self-described 'prunaholic and a horndog'. (Prison wine is called 'pruno'.) There is Laura Lipp, the only other white woman in the unit besides Romy, a loopy committer of infanticide who compares herself to Medea. Sammy Fernandez, Romy's closest friend, is the child of an addict and has spent a lifetime in and out of institutions, beginning with Child Protective Services group homes. Button Sanchez murdered a college student for no reason. Serenity Smith is a trans woman who gets transferred from the men's unit, not without some resistance from a faction of gender bigots in Stanville. Betty LaFrance is a death-row inmate who hired a hit man to kill the hit man she hired to kill her husband. Candy Peña is another death-row inmate who stabbed a little girl while high on meth and PCP, and now lives in remorse, knitting baby blankets. 'The Norse' is a six-feet-tall white supremacist with tattoos of bald eagles who rules over the prison wood shop.

In scenes of daily prison life, the book starts to read like an updated all-female *Shawshank Redemption*. There are many poignant attempts to restore humanity to the soulless institution, all of them informed by Kushner's research: making cheesecake out of Sprite and non-dairy creamers; making tamales out of Doritos and water; mashing up psychiatric meds, ingesting them and throwing a party; sending contraband through the sewer lines between cells; keeping a secret pet bunny; exploiting pen pals for gifts. So many journalistic details! There are times when it feels as if the novel was written more to accommodate each of them than to tell a particular story.

Almost everyone in this novel gets a past. Some of the characters get to narrate their backstory themselves. We get the story of Kurt Kennedy's murder from Romy, who killed him, then the lead up to the murder from Kennedy himself – confirmation

that Kennedy was, as reported, a pathetic stalker. Sammy Fernandez has a first-person chapter about her life on the outside turning tricks out of a hotel called the Snooty Fox, then going home to her boyfriend Rodney, who beat her. Other chapters detail the fate of Betty LaFrance's second hit man, Doc.

Finally there is Gordon Hauser, a PhD dropout who teaches high-school equivalency classes at the prison. As the sole character in the book who is not locked up, the chapters about Hauser are a window out of the novel's confinement. He's a man, one of the very few in the book, and has reached adulthood without going through trauma, wanton violence or drug addiction. He is the first member of his working-class family to go to college and his biggest failure in life is not having finished his dissertation on Thoreau. After his days at Stanville, he gets to go home at night to a cabin in the mountains, where he hears the shriek of a mountain lion and contemplates the nature of solitude. He mulls over the difference between Thoreau and Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, between the pursuit of solitude and a hatred of society. Before his move to the isolated cabin, a friend gives him a copy of a Ted Kaczynski reader; quotations from Kaczynski are scattered through the book, for what seem to be purely evocative purposes. The prisoners take advantage of Gordon's naivety and his loneliness, and he lets them. He fulfils their meagre requests for yarn or packets of seeds. He buys Romy books by Bukowski and Denis Johnson. He Googles the inmates to consider their crimes and Kushner channels some philosophising through his character:

> The word violence was depleted and generic from overuse and yet it still had power, still meant something, but multiple things. There were stark acts of it: beating a person to death. And there were more abstract forms, depriving people of jobs, safe housing, adequate schools. There were large-scale acts of it, the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians in a single year, for a specious war of lies and bungling, a war that might have no end, but according to prosecutors, the real monsters were teenagers like Button Sanchez.

And then, a few pages later, Gordon muses: 'There were real epistemological limits to knowledge. Also, judgment.' He decides to go back to grad school for social work, leaving the prisoners with one fewer extracurricular outlet.

What Kushner has done, in *The Mars Room*, is novelise certain arguments of the Abolish Prisons movement, whose most famous advocate in the US is Angela Davis, the activist, former member of the Black Panther Party and author of a book called *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003). Davis has argued, with ample evidence, that in certain American demographics people have a far greater chance of going to prison than they do of getting higher education, and that the 'tough on crime' drug laws of the 1980s and 1990s are unevenly applied by race. She has observed that there are more mentally ill people in jail than in hospitals, that mass incarceration has not led to a drop in crime but simply a rise in the number of people incarcerated, and that the rise in demand for

prison builders, contractors and security has created an industry that lobbies for the incarceration of the poor. Because the prison population is hidden from public view, often in rural areas of the country, it is easy for the general population to live without having to think much about what goes on in jails, who goes there, and why. Prison is a false solution to far deeper problems: 'The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor,' Davis wrote. In recent years, some of her ideas have become more mainstream, particularly after the publication in 2012 of Michelle Alexander's damning evidence of a racist system in *The New Jim Crow*: *Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colourblindness*.

Kushner could not have foreseen that her novel would be published in the middle of a summer when the US government has shown more eagerness than ever to incarcerate, declaring an initiative to criminally prosecute undocumented immigrants that has resulted in the disastrous policy of separating parents from their children. I'm not sure, however, that her novel will emerge in the years to come as a primary artistic document about this national problem. *The Mars Room* isn't exactly a work of social realism; neither is it a protest novel. It has more whimsy than Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and more moments of hope than Richard Wright's *Native Son*. It is too ambivalent to work as a polemic, and seems instead destined to join the collective prison-based entertainment pile: television shows and movies that, as Davis once wrote, serve as much to normalise the abnormal prison system as reveal the damage it has wrought.

The Mars Room is set in 2003, when 'mass incarceration' wasn't a commonly used phrase. It was the year the United States went to war in Iraq, and the year in which American soldiers were torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib, images that when they became public in 2004 would define the vision of what the democracy we purported to export really looked like. In 2006, when I was working as a reporter in Miami, I went on a media tour of the prisons at Guantánamo Bay. By then some prisoners had been moved from their cages in so-called Camp X-Ray, the cages where they had first been held with buckets for toilets, into a new high-security facility that had been built by the military contractor Kellogg, Brown and Root, the company to which Dick Cheney had financial ties. We toured the prison, which was called Camp 5, modelled on a maximum-security state prison in rural Indiana. It was shiny and high-tech, and housed the most dangerous inmates – although the charges against them were largely kept secret so who really knew? It was an early sign that US domestic and foreign policy was increasingly represented not by elections but by prisons.

In her descriptions of Stanville, Kushner at times reminded me of the performance piece *Faust*, by the German artist Anne Imhof, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale last year. In Imhof's installation there were stainless steel basins, plastic water bottles, hoses, bars of soap, white towels, Doberman Pinschers in cages, glass surfaces – the aesthetics of contemporary institutionalisation. The prisonification of our daily life is becoming more normal to us, from the queues and scans before a flight, to the installation of metal detectors in high schools, to the imprisonment of

children in a tented camp near the US border with Mexico. In some circles, advocacy for more prisons and imprisonment is encouraged as a sign of patriotic pride. Kushner's novel is a timely reminder that a country's authoritarian tendencies can be most easily measured by the number of people it deems unworthy of freedom.

Emily Witt's memoir, *Health and Safety*, was published in September.

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