

X

R

A

y



COLLECTION II
FALL READING 2020

X-R-A-Y
Collection II
Fall Reading 2020
Edited by Jennifer Greidus
X-R-A-Y Literary Journal
Front Cover © Bob Schofield
Book Design © K KUURRTT
Copyright © 2020 by X-R-A-Y

All rights reserved,
including the right to reproduce this book
or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.
For information contact: xraylitmag@gmail.com

Table of Contents

4	SPREE by Meg Tuite
8	SCARAB by Jihoon Park
13	THE MOON IS SAD by Kyra Baldwin
16	TENDERNESS by Anthony Sabourin
31	ILLUMINATION by Audra Kerr Brown
32	SAN ANTONIO by Saul Lemerond
40	THE LIFE CYCLE OF TEMPORAL BIOMATTER ATTACHMENTS by Jemimah Wei
46	AMERICAN LAKE by Aaron Burch
49	TRIPTYCH O FALLING STARS by Wayland Tracy
52	DOG TRACING by Mike Andrelczyk
58	THE BEEP by Jason Schwartzman

SPREE **by Meg Tuite**

Mom has an entire fortress of pillows that she readjusts around her body.

“Barricading my skin against bedsores. Stay in one place for too long and you’ll have to order another ass from Walgreens.” Amber prescription bottles layer her bedside table. She marks the empties with a black X, doesn’t throw them away until a refill has been secured.

Rustling toes mow through bed sheets as Mom drags up another mini-vodka with her feet. The bottomless cascade of that clear liquid is her Niagara Falls. She is queen of the mini-island. Bottles are stashed away in pockets, beds, pillows, shoes, drawers, seat cushions. She buys tiny airplane-size bottles and layers the counter with them at the Walgreens every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

“I’m not a weekender,” she tells the clerk. “The Friday cattle who line up here are absurd, like accountants and flags.” No matter who’s behind the register, Mom is told that the larger bottles are much cheaper. She’s not an idiot. She loads up her empty purse with them, holds her hand up to her mouth as though it’s a secret

and whispers to the clerk, “Hide the evidence. You get it, right?” Every time they laugh as though this is some kind of code that every customer, whether living in a cardboard box or a three-story house with kids doesn’t access.

“Elvirus, I’ve been calling you,” she says, as though I can’t hear the wheels of her guttural, somnolent chant, rutting over and over in my head.

“We’re going shopping. Light Mom a cigarette and get her a glass of ice for her vodka.” She doesn’t call me by my chosen name and speaks in third person after a few drinks. “Don’t forget her lemon, Elvine,” she thrums through a bloom of smoke.

By the time I get back with her glass, she’s dressed in one of her slinky 70s dresses.

This mimicry exhibits all the features of someone’s mom, but not mine. My mom only goes out for liquor. Her hair is combed. She isn’t wearing her shredding nylon nightgown, with coffee-splotched stains and cigarette holes anymore.

I stare in the mirror. I still look like her kid. My bangs are crooked and I wear stagnant knock-offs with shoulder pads, budding breasts polyp through Mom’s darts, pleated jean skirts and shiny pink, green and red blouses with moving motifs of lava lamp patterns, fringe and bell-bottoms from the pioneer days of Mom’s closet. I have a gift for reassembling the backwash material with scissors and safety pins.

“Do we need to lock the door?” Mom searches her purse for a key she doesn’t possess, as we walk out into infested air, thick with all the lives before it.

Mom and I slog through Harwood Avenue to catch a bus five blocks away. She wavers on a slight incline with her head and upper torso two steps ahead of the rest of her. She doesn’t drive anymore. I was eleven when I drove us home after Mom had one of her panic attacks, slammed over a curb into the yard of someone’s rummage sale. She didn’t hit anybody, but faces unhinged from the broken-down armoire, bicycles, toolsets, clothes, toys and astrology books they’d been rummaging through.

Mom’s hands were claws. Too much white hovered around the persecuted gray of her eyes. I had to unclench her fingers from the steering wheel and sit on top of her. When we got home, she shut the door to her room and didn’t come out for a few days. Dad whispered, ‘menopause’, but I knew this was no kind of pause.

We got off the bus in front of the “old bag” second-hand store.

“These clothes are married to a history you can feel. They didn’t come from cheap labor in China. Check the labels,” Mom says.

I’m fourteen, don’t check labels. I rake through racks to find something normal that will fit me. Some lady with a skin-rippled overlip keeps threading silent eye-pong accusations in my direction as she folds sweaters and talks to the woman behind the counter. They have the exact same haircut. “A mutt is a mutt,” she says.

“You don’t have any idea what you’re getting. You remember that guy who had the same mutt for like ten years and they find him mauled in his backyard. I mean, that’s the chance you take when you go to one of those shelters. With a pedigree, you can check out the parents of the litter and know what you’re bringing home.” The other lady looked bored like she’d heard this shit before. Overlip glanced over at me. “You can only take six items in the dressing room, honey. Six.” She held up six ringed fingers.

Mom was already in a dressing room. I could see the maxi dresses looped over the door. It was either nightgowns or slinky dresses and I loved when she dressed up even when she wasn’t going anywhere. That meant Mom was back in the world with us.

This place wasn’t an easy score. The women were checking my every move. “Here, honey, let me help you. What size are you? Six?” So much for a free one. Mom never helped. She wasn’t the Mom who talked with women. She could care less what transpired between us. Her universe placated one being. Mom bought me a pair of jeans and some sandals and said yes to all the dresses. After we got back on the bus and walked the few blocks to get home, Mom unzipped the dress she was wearing and had two more on underneath. She ripped them off. “That feels much better. I was getting hot. Honey, can you get me a few lemons?”

“You stole those dresses?”

“No one else could have pulled these dresses off, Elvatross, let’s be definitive. I was saving the ladies a few hangers.”

SCARAB by Jihoon Park

I see a scarab beetle on the sidewalk on my walk home from the bar. Instead of stepping on it, I scoop it up with the Yellow Pages on the driveway and place it on the ficus tree next to the garage door.

I'm very nice when I'm drunk. I fall into bed next to Janine. She is awake but she does not want to talk to me. She probably wants me to shower and get the whisky smell off, but I still have some dignity left. I am my own man and tonight I want to sleep in my jacket and jeans.

In the morning, I see Janine smile for the first time since our son died. She has made pancakes. A stack of three pancakes for her, and a stack of three pancakes for the scarab beetle.

"I see you brought the bug in," I say.

"Sorry there's only one pancake left," Janine says. "Scabby was starving. Maybe you can wake up earlier next time."

So she's given it a name. That's fine. My childhood dog's name was Scrappy, and I wonder if Janine is playing a trick on me. Do those names even sound alike? I try not to think about it.

My hangover gets worse on the drive to work and so I pull over on the freeway to throw up the single pancake I ate. I gargle with the mouthwash I keep in the glove compartment.

Janine spends more and more time with Scabby, who grows bigger every day. She takes it to the play structures in the park. She takes it to the mall and looks at the stuffed animals in the Build-A-Bear Workshop.

One day I go home to find them watching Wheel of Fortune. Scabby is now the size of a large Doberman. "Can you get groceries tonight?" she says, patting Scabby's little armored head. "Scabby ate all the frozen chicken. I left a list."

I decide to have a few drinks at Ralph's Tavern before grocery shopping. At Ralph's, I run into Hector. He has just sued his employer after spraining his ankle getting off a forklift, so we celebrate. After last call, we smoke two joints inside his van. We drive out to the soccer field and skid out donuts in the parking lot, like in the old days.

I go back home past 2:00 AM. Janine is waiting for me at the dining table reading *The Metamorphosis*.

“Did you at least get the groceries?” she asks without looking up.

“Forgot.”

We start to argue. Janine wants me to stop drinking, to be a better role model for Scabby. We start arguing, but Janine stops. She doesn't want to wake Scabby in his room.

“His room?” I ask.

Janine tiptoes down the hall and opens Dave's room, the room we never go into since he died. Scabby is asleep in Dave's bed. I begin yelling. I hate seeing that thing in my son's bed. I throw the desk lamp and shatter the window. I pick up Dave's old hockey stick and bash down the closet mirror. I topple over Dave's drawers. Janine grabs Scabby, cradles him in her arms and yells that she is staying at her friend what's-her-face's for the night.

My feet are bloody from stepping on broken glass, so I wrap them up with gauze. I make three Long Islands in the kitchen and gulp them down. My hands shake. My feet hurt too much to sleep so I go and get groceries.

Janine does not come back for a while. I sweep up the glass in Dave's room and fix up his drawer with some old two-by-fours in the garage. I straighten out his trophies. I want the room to look nice.

I try removing the bloodstains in the carpet with shampoo, but it doesn't work. I search Google and it tells me to use ammonia instead. The internet warns me not to mix ammonia with bleach, since the fumes will kill me.

I invite Hector to crash on the couch for a few nights. He brings over four bottles of Johnnie Walker, which he bought with his settlement money. We drink and smoke and watch reruns of Cheers.

Janine comes back with Scabby after a month. Scabby is all grown up now and much taller than me. He is dressed in a nice three-piece suit. Janine says she is back to collect her things, and that Scabby will take care of her from now on. He has found a nice job at that legal firm with the nighttime television commercials, Johnson & Perkins or something like that.

I beg her to stay. She hands me a business card. One of her old college friends is an addiction counselor and has agreed to see me pro-bono. I get angry. I don't need anyone's charity. I rip the card into tiny little pieces and toss them down on the doormat.

"It's all your fault, I should have crushed you when I had the chance." I leap at Scabby and throw punches, trying to bust his jaw or mandible or whatever you call it, but his exoskeleton protects him. I expect him to fight back, to rip me apart with his 100-times-stronger-relative-to-his-body-weight strength, but he just waits until I tire myself out. I collapse on the front steps of the house.

“I’m sorry,” says Janine, staring down at me. She grabs hold of Scabby, who opens up his back to reveal his glistening, golden wings. I watch them fly away, Scabby’s wings booming like a helicopter, until they disappear as a little dot in the blue sky.

THE MOON IS SAD

by Kyra Baldwin

It's raining in Seattle. I catch sight of my face in the drop-spattered glass of the bus stop. It's lit by a phone-screen. The moon is out. It's lit by a phone-screen. No one is texting either one of us.

See, the sun fucked the moon and the moon is sad now. The moon is already a depressive character because the moon is Vitamin-D deficient. The moon wanted to get a SAD lamp to remedy this, but the impassive physical laws of our universe said *nuh-uh moon*, because a SAD lamp in the sky would just look like another moon.

"There can't be two moons," they said.

"Why not? I'm loooonelyyyy," replied the moon with comical sadness.

"Because we've already set the gravitational pull of Earth to just One Moon."

"Mars has two moons."

"Well, you're not Mars."

“Jupiter has sixty-seven.”

The laws shrugged.

“Does either Jupiter or Mars have life?”

“No.”

“Nobody gets everything, Moon.”

And the impassive laws of the universe walked away, except they also stayed exactly there and didn't change at all.

“But I don't even get to experience life. Earth gets all the life,” sighed the Moon into the black void. There was no one to talk to.

Moon would talk to the stars, but the stars are all friends with the Sun. And Moon fucked the Sun and now they ignore each other. It happened just last year, in that odd 4 a.m. hour where the Moon and the Sun are equals in the sky. After billions of years, Sun looked at Moon in its harvest gown and thought *Moon looks pretty good right now*. And so the Sun fucked the Moon and came shooting stars. Ew. Sun made Moon laugh by describing what earth is like during the day. “Sweaty.”

The next day at 4 a.m., Moon waited restlessly for Sun to come back. So many people had already loved Moon and left (Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, Harrison Schmitt). Moon didn't think it could take losing any more love. But when morning came up over

Australia, Sun wouldn't even look at Moon. Sun ignored Moon and just stared out at Sagittarius A. It wanted something bigger and sadder than Moon could ever be.

So that's how the Moon and I got to talking. Moon said we look alike because my face is round and doleful too. I told Moon that it'd be really cool to control oceans and menstrual cycles. Moon shrugged and said it'd be cool to go in an ocean and have a menstrual cycle.

TENDERNESS

by Anthony Sabourin

The Doomsayer is at work.

He takes a sip of black coffee from a styrofoam cup. He mumbles to himself and barks like a dog and screams into his elbow as one would muffle a cough. He takes another sip of coffee, gargling it and spitting it into the street; wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Across the street the train is stopping, and soon the morning rush will be streaming by on the stretch of street before him, walking in their harried steps, a tension in the inconvenience of being a person around other people, already impatient to hasten the day's end before it's begun. The Doomsayer adjusts his pants and trench coat, picks up his cardboard sign, and steps upon his milk crate. He shouts the words on his sign.

“The end is nigh!”

Faces look up to see.

“The world is almost over!”

The Doomsayer worked early and all day, taking lunch at 10 am and as many bathroom breaks as he could finagle out of the decrepit Subway across the street, where he was engaged in a bitter feud with the manager, a weaselly man named Laramie. He would be home in time for dinner with his wife, a sturdy and freckled woman who stunk from her work at the smelting plant, whom he loved completely.

It was a good life, and the Doomsayer found joy in his work. He was passionate about the end of the world, and while he was aware that his message was difficult to accept, for a long time he lived for even the most tacit acknowledgement of the words that he raggedly shouted to the idiot faces of the people who worked in glass and steel buildings. Even the most furtive of glances would satisfy him for weeks.

He remembered with great fondness one particular day when a car broke down in front of his preaching stoop. Savvy in his knowledge that the Subway across the street was closed because of a plumbing issue, the Doomsayer shouted at the car's woman and sullen teenager for the three hours it took for a tow truck to arrive—his cracked yelps painting a picture of the end, of how the resolute corporate leaders of the past were long dead, and how their doughy and cow-eyed offspring could only lead us more swiftly to our certain doom; that unchecked plague had emaciated the horses and left the goats vomiting in the city's neighboring fields, and how more and more these days the rain was actually just acid that left the asphalt smoking after a storm. He supplemented his arguments with credible first-hand analysis of various religious

texts. And with the tow truck loaded and ready to leave, as the Doomsayer asked out of professional courtesy if this mother and her child would at least acknowledge if they, on the basis of the case the Doomsayer had presented to them, thought that the world would end, was it not true that their heads, as the truck jerked and pulled away, bobbed in a manner that was markedly similar to a nod? For so long this had been the highlight of the Doomsayer's career, so much so that yearly his wife made him a rum cake to mark the anniversary of the occasion.

It was only now—after the black clouds of the chemical factory had intermingled with and covered the skyscrapers with soot, and all was darkness except for the fires from neighboring cities—that crowds began to form. Only now—as the syphilitic ramblings of the city's mayor failed to placate them—that the crowds gathered to listen to the Doomsayer.

“Have we passed the point of no return?” he asked the crowd.

“Yes!” the crowd shouted back at him.

“Do the penguins now slide into the muddy ocean from the floes of our own garbage?”

“Surely!” they cried.

“What happened to all of the good animals? The noble giraffe? The whimsical flying squirrel?”

“All of the good animals are extinct!” the crowd said.

“And what of the new animals humankind discovers? Those weird fangy monstrosities they fish out of the bottom of the ocean? With their glowing eyes and spiked, skeletal bodies—what do we make of mother nature’s nightmares?”

“Only abominations remain!” the crowd cheered.

“And our leaders? Did their plans of digging an elaborate city of tunnels work for anyone but the owners of the tunnel boring machines?”

“No!” the crowd chanted in ecstasy.

“And what of our neighbors? Can we depend on the slack-jawed inbreds to the east and west of us for salvation in our hour of need?”

“Our neighbors can only be depended on for war and death!” the voices boomed.

“What have we done to our planet?” he would shout at their faces.

“We’ve wasted it!” the crowd would wail.

It was a true golden age.

Yet, after years of plying his trade in obscurity, the Doomsayer felt a sense of emptiness in his newfound success. The work came

to him easily now, and he longed for the days when convincing people that the world was ending was a challenge. He had taken to rolling in the garbage in the alley by the Subway, thinking the rank juices dripping from his trench coat would make his message less sensible, but still, the crowds grew.

Only a seasoned observer would have been able to tell that his rheumy eyes were sad and not sick, his voice still full of fury but devoid of passion, his malaise not directed at the end of all things, but at himself and his lack of joy in this—his moment of triumph. The closest thing the Doomsayer had to such an observer was the dreaded Laramie, who mistook these changes as sure signs of the imminent death of his rival. Over a sandwich made for the Doomsayer with open contempt, they conversed:

“Is your death near?” the scoundrel Laramie asked him.

“Is yours?” he spat at his enemy.

“I am a picture of health,” Laramie said, and the Doomsayer did acknowledge to himself that Laramie’s long neck, bulbous head, and tiny limbs still wriggled about the vandalized sandwich counter with the ease of a younger man.

“But you—” Laramie continued. “Your new friends out there may not notice the change, but I have seen how your voice falters, how your eyes have turned splotchy, and your gestures uncertain. I have seen your skin grow pale and your body rebel with stink as it rots from the inside. I want you to know that I relish it!”

“If I appear ill,” the Doomsayer said, “it is no doubt from the stagnant meatballs and moldy cheese I ingest from this, the foulest of the Subways.” He took a bite of the sandwich and chewed it slowly. “But I want you to know, Laramie, that this food is the small dose of poison that grants me the immunity I need to endure your presence, and upon your demise I will lead your family to this failed enterprise to celebrate my ultimate victory.”

It would take another half hour of negotiations before the Doomsayer could use the bathroom.

After facing an afternoon of the cheering crowds, there was little relief for the Doomsayer among his own kind, for even at the Lazy Susan—where the drink special of a free rotisserie chicken with the purchase of a pilsner openly courted the castoffs of society—the company of his fellow harbingers, soapbox criers, suspected deities, and lesser prophets greeted him as a celebrity.

He drifted about in the whorl of voices with his pilsner and a drumstick—

Majestic tirade out there—buy you a drink you’ve earned it—the voice it’s his voice how he uses it he can—goes to show that hard work pays off in the—did you see the garbage he rolls in a stroke of genius—Kevin, I’m—it adds so much resonance you know he’s the garbage we’re the garbage we’ve wasted it—used to be humble too good to drink with the Kevins now—I think it’s his sign you need the right message—location is the key—no, I’m not Kevin I’m Carl you know, the conspiracy of dust that’s mine—all hard work that’s the key—The end!—It will never

end it can't—so proud of him I taught him the ropes and he—buy you a beer whatever you want—is nigh!—such persistence, it couldn't have happened to a better guy he's—

—running his fingers along the arches spine of Susan IV, the tavern cat about on her rounds—

It's really him he comes here—yeah of course the end of the world—eat the rich that's my thing I pass out pamphlets—where did you get that cloak it's really thick—when he bellows it shakes the earth—they eat out the palm of his hand how articulate—the geese there are too many of them that's my thing—K-E-V-I-N, I'm the second coming get you the right cloak—the end is nigh!—I found out they all huddle together close to the lake and I try to convince them to drown but the geese don't ever—the end is nigh!—No I'm Carl the dust it—listen—you're a Kevin I'm a Kevin—THE END IS NIGH!—oh every night this chant—THE END IS NIGH!—they never listen—THE END IS NIGH!—the rich you gotta eat them I hand out recipes—THE END!—dust building never stopping—IS!—the voice it's—NIGH!—can't hear you these chants—THE END IS NIGH!—the dust builds and it can't—no listen—THE END IS NIGH!—it builds—THE END IS NIGH!—THE END IS NIGH!—THE END IS !

—looking out at still more expectant faces, the bedraggled and cloaked and rag-covered fellow cranks, he never knew what to tell them. He had nothing to say. He lifted up his beer to his fellow colleagues in a gesture of goodwill, chugged it down, and left to more cheering.

Outside he was accosted by one of the newer criers, a weathered boy who carried pamphlets of recipes for how to eat the rich, which he distributed to the university students downtown.

“Wait!” he said, grabbing the Doomsayer’s arm.

“Eat the rich! How is that going?”

“The University guards and their truncheons do not support cannibalism but I can still outrun them,” the boy said.

“Ah that’s good. You may want to use your pamphlets as padding, if they ever do catch you.”

“I appreciate the wisdom, sir. And, I apologize for grabbing you just now but please, do you have a moment to discuss the end? I feel like there must be something more to it. I have to know what is next.”

“Next?”

“Don’t pretend. These people, they look to you now because you knew, and because you knew, surely you must know what happens next. There must be something. Please, I beg of you— help me out here, I mean I’m just starting and even with just a nugget of your foresight I could build a whole new-”

“There is no next.”

“What?”

“The end is it. One day it will all be over with and done and that’s it. That’s the end of it all.”

The boy fell silent and his shoulders dropped into a slump. “Oh,” he said. The Doomsayer left him by the neon lights of the Lazy Susan, and walked home to his wife.

Home and seated for dinner, the Doomsayer realized it was the day of the cake. The Doomsayer had forgotten, but now here it was, his wife bringing it into the dining room and setting it out on the table. The rum cake is a glistening oversized donut shape from the bundt pan, with two candles representing the woman and her teenage child from that halcyon day years past.

He tried to make a happy face.

“What’s that, all of those things your face is doing?” his wife asked.

“I am just so moved by this gesture. The rum cake, I appreciate it so much I just.” The Doomsayer blew out the candles to keep from crying. He cut two pieces of rum cake and set them onto plates as listless smoke filled the room.

“Oh, so we will eat the cake in this very sad manner,” his wife said.

“No, I am happy, I love this delicious cake,” the Doomsayer said with a full mouth, chewing as his eyes began to water.

The Doomsayer's eyes said that nothing was wrong, only this was unconvincing, because they were spilling tears, and suddenly he was breathing heavily and having a panic attack while still trying to eat the cake. His wife went into the kitchen to pour him a glass of water, and throughout the Doomsayer was trying to comport himself as though he were not having a panic attack, his body shaking as he swallowed cake between gasps of air, all of it becoming increasingly ridiculous. With his full mouth he sobbed "I no longer love what I do."

His wife laid the water on the table and held him. She cooed into his ear: "Ah so what you love has turned into work, eh? Woe unto the prophet now that his obscure and cool new future is the common present. Shush, my idiot baby. You think I do not see this at the smelting plant? Some people stare at the glowing ore until it takes their minds away. You just need to take a vacation."

"A vacation," the Doomsayer said with wonder. The very concept seemed alien to the Doomsayer, but immediately his panic faced relaxed and his eyes brightened, and he again seemed at peace. They went back to eating their cake, which was very strong, and it led naturally to their lovemaking, their cries frightening the squirrels who had overtaken and were developing complex structures with the garbage they were collecting in the field beyond the Doomsayer's home.

In the morning he purchased a plane ticket and packed his bag, soon finding himself on a propeller plane rocketing in its arc towards the Republic of Vronsk, a coastal city known for its decommissioned

oil rigs, incomplete skyscrapers, and beautiful beaches, with sand as white as the Doomsayer's knuckles as he experienced a screeching stop on the ramshackle landing strip of the Vronsk airport.

Vronsk was beautiful. The Doomsayer wandered around the city in a Hawaiian shirt and dollar store sandals, marveling at a sky that wasn't grey-black. He fed beef jerky to the mongrel dogs, who began to follow him around.

He gazed up at an unfinished condo, whose main level was ransacked, and whose upper levels gave way from glass and concrete to upright metal beams that stabbed at nothing, razed manmade exclamation marks surprised that this was their end. As he walked up another block to see another interrupted building, he heard the familiar sound of a voice yelling in the street. Feeling the pangs of homesickness, he walked to the source of the shouting.

"It's over!" the voice cried out. It was a Vronskian woman with a shaved head, wearing a metallic bouffant dress. She was gesturing to the great and unfinished skyscraper above her, which the Doomsayer had to admit was a nice touch. A crowd was forming.

"The sun shines weaker every day and the ocean rises ever more swiftly to swallow up Vronsk!" she shouted. "Our street dogs outnumber our children! And in their canniness they slip into our houses and lie in their beds!"

Voices murmured in agreement.

“Our leaders have been rendered fetus-like from inbreeding! Drought has crippled our farms and clouds of locusts rattle against our windows in the night! The word is ending!” she shouted. The Doomsayer found the material to be very strong, and he enjoyed being present in the throng of people who shouted in recognition.

“The world is ending!” he heard the woman say. All around the Doomsayer was a sense of good cheer. The woman basked in the jubilation for a moment, but she cut the crowd short. “It is ending! But is this enough?” she asked the crowd.

“No!” They shouted back.

“No!” the woman said. “For the end is not coming soon enough. We must act!” she preached. Members of the crowd raised their fists in the air.

“We must destroy!” she shouted. “We must waste! More garbage! More fires! The end is in our hands and we must never waver!” she screamed. “We must be resolute! The end is now!” The crowd was rapturous. The glass in the skyscraper was mirrored like the back of a bar, and reflected in that mirror the Doomsayer saw an old man in a Hawaiian shirt. He felt as though he were in a foreign church. The dogs followed him as he left the crowd.

The Doomsayer meandered beachward, stopping to buy postcards at a souvenir shop. On the back of a postcard featuring art depicting a more optimistic Vronsk, with the sun setting and playing off of completed skyscrapers, he wrote a series of threats addressed to

Laramie. Then, on a postcard depicting a series of minerals native to Vronsk he addressed to his wife a poem of longing. He continued on, mailing the postcards and, at a corner store, buying a jug of brackish wine which was described to him as a local delicacy.

From the beach looking towards the ocean, the decommissioned oil rigs lounged in the distance like ugly mechanical swans. The Doomsayer laid on a towel in the sand with his dogs and an open package of beef jerky. He was sharing the jug of wine with a couple who had seated themselves next to him. They were honeymooning in Vronsk, which was very affordable, and they overlapped against each other like sunning seals, languid curves supine and happy. They reminded the Doomsayer of earlier days with his wife, and he radiated happiness and goodwill towards the loving couple, and refrained from mentioning the imminent end of all things.

They watched people in swimsuits splash in the waves; the new wife and husband periodically wading into the water, and as the jug emptied the afternoon passed in the lazy and relaxed way that beach days pass when the sun is out. Bony birds circled overhead, and shade from the palm trees retreated to the street.

A commotion arose in the water. From people-watching and the overheard snatches of conversation, it became clear that a woman playing in the waves had lost her wedding ring. She lay sobbing hunched over herself in the sand, and an improvised search party was formed, with bodies launching themselves headfirst into the surf, legs akimbo, looking in the sand underneath the waves for the lost ring. The newlywed couple next to the Doomsayer were

recruited into the search, and the Doomsayer offered to stay behind to watch over their things. He threw beef jerky to the dogs and watched the futile pattern of the people in the waves, as over and over legs would appear out of the water, and would wriggle about in the air until submerging, and after a beat, like a magic trick, an apologetic face would emerge.

Suddenly a siren wailed from the beach, and a fissure of water erupted from one of the oil rigs in the distance. The Doomsayer watched as the rig furthest to the left began its collapse, metal sweeping into the water, the rig's mast dipping at a dangerous angle and toppling into the adjacent rig. The shriek of metal-on-metal reverberated with the siren in the air. Waves grew larger and crashed to the shore and people retreated to the sand. The search was over.

Eventually the newlywed couple returned to the Doomsayer, where they admitted that the ring was likely lost for good. The Doomsayer stayed on the beach though, watching as the rigs toppled like slow motion dominoes into the greedy sea. The sound they made was mournful. The sun dipped below the horizon, disappearing into a blood-red wink.

Alone with the mongrel dogs on the beach, the Doomsayer turned around to face the street, and he noticed how the people were moving in the moonlight like pallbearers in search of a body. Everywhere there was garbage. He returned to the view of the lapping waves, and he found himself wading into the water, and his head disappeared into the sea.

The dogs watched the waves.

A pair of pale legs popped upright into the air, calm and balanced despite the waves.

The conspiracy of dust carried on unabated.

ILLUMINATION

by Audra Kerr Brown

Three weeks after her miscarriage, Guinevere fell in love with the lightbulb. A 40-watt incandescent globe from the dining room wall sconce. She removed the lampshade in order to stare at the glow of its tungsten filaments, the bare harp sitting above the bulb as a halo.

You are beautiful, Guinevere would say. *Absolutely beautiful*.

The light had an electrical heartbeat, a faint buzzing, as if bees were trapped inside.

She liked to unscrew the bulb from its socket, marvel at how perfectly it fit in her palm. How warm it felt. How round, how small.

SAN ANTONIO by Saul Lemerond

The piglet was pink, but not the regular pink that you expect piglets to be. This was the sort of glowing, warm pink that only exists in Disney movies. God, the little animal was so cute Yancy wanted to squeeze the thing to death. Wanted to squeeze it 'til its head popped off its precious little body.

Yancy's friends Tim and John think this too. *He is so lucky*, they think as they stand beside him wishing they could also have one. They'd all been on their way to the Riverwalk but now no longer care.

Yancy reaches out a hand and pets the piglet on its snout, which offers a high-pitched oink. This is right. Rightly right. He names the piglet Normand. Normand smiles. Normand's smile is a demon's smile. There is an air of danger about Normand, which only makes Yancy desire him more.

Yancy picks up Normand, thinking, *My mother will like this piglet*.

He looks over to his friend Tim who is tall and reminds Yancy of the bronze cowboys on the Riverwalk, the Briscoe. Stetson hatted.

Rugged and loving life. There is a piglet that has appeared at his feet.

John, who is dashing handsome and reminds Yancy of a younger version of himself, also looks down to find one.

This is strange. Yes, they admit that, but, their libidos are excited. They know a good thing when they see it, and they brace themselves, psychically, for what promises to be a considerable amount of sexual attention. Yancy looks at Tim. Tim looks at Yancy. They smile at one another. The attention, it seems, is already here.

How beauteous these piglets are. Oh, brave new world, Tim thinks, *that has such creatures in it.*

They take pictures and record videos of the piglets and post this on their many profiles. Tim names his piglet Worthington. Worthington, like Normand, has the grin of a hungry hobgoblin.

Yancy's mother is a starchy woman who likes index funds, has a drooping heart, an aching soul, and a mood in constant need of cheering. Her name is Mildred.

"What a cute little piglet!" Mildred shouts when she sees Normand. She tries, very hard, to hide her jealousy which is a very ugly part of her that she rarely acknowledges.

Oh, and will you look at that. Mildred didn't notice at first, but she has a piglet standing next to her as well, sniffing at her fern-green flats.

"Where did this little guy come from?" Mildred asks. "This is the cutest thing I have ever seen in my adult life. I will name him Weatherford. It looks like a Weatherford, don't you think?" She, like Yancy and his friends, is also excited about the attention this will afford her, sexual and otherwise.

Mildred sends a picture of Weatherford to her friend, Francene. Francene sends Mildred a picture of her piglet, Hamlet. Hamlet, like Weatherford, is adorable yet also menacing.

It's a profoundly joyous time, and they make sure to post this on their many profiles.

There are many questions about where the piglets came from and why they are here. These questions seem important but not as important as, say, actually having a piglet. The piglets are a mystery to be sure. Everyone agrees. They will investigate, of course. Of course they will. Later.

Then the message: *Arbuckle just ate John!*

Yancy looks at his phone and wonders if this is a typo. If instead of ate, they meant @. '@John!' makes more sense than 'ate John', but no. A photo is shared with a little adorable Arbuckle chewing on John's foot, still in its classic western boot.

Everyone at John's funeral who doesn't have a piglet finds a piglet there. They are dangerous, these piglets, it cannot be denied, if only slightly, which just adds to their titillation. The funeral is like most funerals only more so in that it serves as both a celebration of life and a fracture in their interpersonal happiness along with flowers, drinks, and old friends.

The occasion is emotionally wrought. Everyone loves their piglet, but at the same time, they do not know if they can trust them. Tim looks at Yancy. Yancy looks at Tim. The death of their good friend has brought them closer than ever.

During the funeral, Hamlet attacks Yancy's mother's friend, Francene.

At first, Hamlet leaps up to Francene's neck and takes a fleshy chunk out of her neck, right around where the carotid artery probably is.

The other piglets, seeing this, jump aboard this flesh lunch wagon and take what they can get. Muscle, bone, tendons, and teeth. When they are finished, there is nothing left. Everyone posts this on their many personal profiles.

Mildred takes out her phone and reports this to several organizations who make it their business to keep data on such things.

It seems to the mourners as if time stops and the whole scene freezes in tableau.

Yancy looks at Tim. Tim looks back. Suspended between them is an aerosol of terror, disgust, and desire.

The horror sharpens slowly, like the point of an icicle in early springtime, then everything begins to move again.

Tim pukes in the large clay pot of a *Ficus benjamina*. Several others join him. Many fear they will be eaten next. They inspect their piglets who oink at them dismissively, so dangerous and yet so cute.

Later, when they are still alive and uneaten, it becomes clear to everyone that their piglets will either eat them or they won't.

Yancy could not get rid of Normand even if he wanted to. He puts him in a box outside at night and finds the piglet in his bed moments later. He leaves him hundreds of miles away in the Chihuahuan Desert and returns home to find Normand waiting on his porch.

Yancy sits down and reflects on these uncertain times. He wonders if he is in love with Tim. Tim does not wonder. Tim knows.

The two of them sit and drink coffee together.

"I want that piglet!" A voice shouts. It is strange to Yancy and Tim. People do not care that the piglets are dangerous. People, it seems, have complicated relationships with danger.

Yancy and Tim hold Worthington and Normand close. Across the street, there's a group of people with no piglets and a single man who has one.

Yancy and Tim think there might be violence. You never can tell these days.

A drove of piglets runs up from off of E. César E. Chávez Blvd. Now, there are exactly enough piglets for everyone. Tim kneels down in front of Yancy.

Yancy calls his mother, Mildred, to see if she is still alive and unchewed.

Her smiling face appears on his phone with Weatherford in the background.

He is adorable. *The threat of him*, Yancy thinks, *somehow adds to his appeal*. He tells his mother that Tim has proposed. Life is too short, he says. He wants a Texas wedding.

Across the street, one of the new piglet owners is being devoured by his adoptive little pink package of joy.

Several of the other piglets join in on the meat buffet and blood sprays everywhere. The shock and smell of the wet, naked viscera send several observers to vomit into the gutter lining their side of the street.

Yancy turns his phone around so that his mother can watch. Mildred sends this information to the appropriate data collection agencies, then she congratulates Yancy and Tim. What a good couple they make.

The drift of piglets lets out a long whine. High pitched, like a host of porcine cicadas.

Tim records all of this on his phone, livestreaming to followers with similar interests.

Oh, how cute, they're singing, Yancy thinks. *Is there no end to their precious benefits?*

These are interesting times. Uncertain, yes—destabilizing and frightening, of course—but interesting to be sure.

Another piglet begins to eat its new keeper. It starts at the leg. The screams that follow are uncanny.

“Yancy,” Mildred says, and Yancy turns his phone to face his mother. “I’m so happy,” she says, “for you, and that my Weatherford is a kind and gentle creature.”

“My Normand, too,” Yancy says, lifting the singing piglet up to nuzzle his neck. He is happy to be with Tim and Worthington.

“I cannot believe how many people have joined my livestream.”

“We should take one of those Lollipop carriages downtown.”

The gutter runs thick with retch and gore.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF TEMPORAL BIOMATTER ATTACHMENTS by Jemimah Wei

This is completely unsexual, but ever since the ex left, Jennie has gotten into the habit of sticking her hand down her pajama pants and cupping herself to sleep. It started in week five or six of the lockdown. One day, she woke up and her hands were in her pants. Both hands, under her pants, resting on top of her underwear. This happened occasionally, even before the ex moved out. Usually around the middle of the month, when she could feel her body beginning to slush. Whenever it happened, Jennie would periodically stick her finger into the folds of her vagina, to check if her period had come early. This time, too, she brought her hand to her nose and sniffed, expecting the scraping smell of pre-blood. But, nothing. If anything, her fingers smelled a bit like Cheetos.

The next day, she woke up in the same position. And the day after that. After four successive days of waking like this, she started sliding one hand into her underwear before falling asleep, letting it rest there all night. Jennie did wonder if her body was trying to tell her something, and once or twice, pushed her fingers further in, to see if her body would respond. It didn't. Jennie's sex drive had evaporated in the last year, and the ex leaving hadn't changed anything. After awhile, she stopped thinking about it, and it has

since become a nightly routine for her to cup her vagina to sleep with her right hand, like a baby with a blanket.

It feels like a betrayal, then, when she wakes one day to find it sore. There is a mild but insistent throbbing, and when Jennie runs her fingers over the surface of her skin, she finds a slightly inflamed bump on the inner folds of her labia. Jennie prods it tenderly, then gets out of bed and tries to get a look at it by sitting pantless with her legs wide open, in front of her mirror. But the bump is too far back and she goes cross-eyed trying to twist herself into a proper viewing position. She uses her phone's front camera to take a picture, so she can see what she's dealing with, but even with the flash on, the picture comes out a blur of skin and hair.

Jennie goes online and orders a handheld mirror for two dollars, then wonders if this is the ex's doing, if he's left her some kind of venereal disease as a parting gift. She wants to ask, but he hasn't called in days, and won't pick up when she does. The last they'd spoken was the last time he'd called, a week prior. The ex rang often, to work through the break up. He was almost done processing it. "The important thing is not to focus on the six years we had together," he had said, "but to be thankful it didn't turn into sixty." Jennie thinks about this as she turns on her computer and fiddles with the settings on her Netflix account. Half an hour later, the phone rings.

"Did you put an age lock on my profile?"

"What? Let me see," She taps at her computer keys randomly,

the phone pressed to her face, his breathing in her ear. “Oh, sorry. Must have been an accident.”

She can almost hear him rolling his eyes. “Jen,” he says. He hangs up.

The mirror arrives three days later. Jennie can’t stop touching the bump, even though it hurts. She’s completely given up on wearing pants at home, and there is very little stopping her from fingering it, when she’s working, watching TV, or stalking the ex. It’s gotten a little swollen and the pain hasn’t let up.

Jennie sits cross legged on her bed and angles the mirror under her bum. It’s the first time she’s seen her lower landscape in such clear detail: the darkened inner thighs, the hairs on her butt, the wrinkled frown of her vagina. And the bump. She takes it between her thumb and forefinger, and squeezes lightly, wincing despite having expected the pain. A sharp white blot strains against the surface of her skin, and she increases the pressure, watching her skin stretch and threaten to split. Ah, a pimple. Jennie burns in shame as she puts the mirror away. She cannot help but feel like this is a personal failing, of sorts.

The phone rings again. She knows what it’s about even before she picks up.

“Is there something wrong with your Netflix?”

“No, why?”

“Now I’m logged out. Can’t seem to sign in. Can you check?”

“Alright, hold on.” Jennie puts him on loudspeaker and googles “vagina bumps.” It’s apparently super common. She makes it through two pages of search results before the line cuts.

The best thing to do would be to leave the spot alone. All the websites—be they dermatologist sites, online magazines, or beauty blogs—concur that no matter what, one mustn’t pop it. *If it really bothers you*, Women’s Health Online says, *you can visit a trusted dermatologist and have it safely lanced*. Teenage Magazine is more assertive. *Under NO circumstances should you deal with it on your own. You will make it WORSE*. Jennie reads this with one hand on the bump, rolling the little spot of pain between her fingers, squeezing occasionally but never pressing down firmly.

The next time he calls, she starts talking first. “Sorry babe,” she says, trying to sound as perplexed as possible, “it looks fine on my end.”

“I still can’t get in. Jesus. Jen. If this is some passive aggressive bullshit you’re pulling—”

It is, of course. “It’s not.”

“It’s not like I can’t pay for my own. You know that. It’s just that the algorithm is already stored in that account. Six years of preferences. I’d have to start all over again.”

“I know.”

He exhales violently against the mouthpiece. “Okay, can you please just look into it, please.”

Jennie sends him a text after, saying that she’s reset the password, can he try it again and let her know? He never replies to her texts, something to do with drawing boundaries. He doesn’t reply now either. But she can see that he’s posted a new status on Facebook. *Takes a special kind of crazy to withhold netflix from a person during a GLOBAL QUARANTINE.* There’s a comment under that, from a new Facebook friend Jennie doesn’t recognize, a Chelsea. *Ugh*, the new Chelsea says, *what a MONSTER.* She looks at the comment for a long time, hovers over the like button but doesn’t click.

In her email inbox, there is a reply from a dermatologist she’s written to. *Look*, the dermatologist says, *you can come in after the lockdown lifts, if you want. But I’ll be honest with you. If you leave it alone, it’s likely to go away on its own.* She looks for a second opinion, but they’re all the same. A skincare blogger attempts to analogize: *Haven’t you had a pimple before? Think of the pimple as your skin trying to heal. You might feel like you’re getting the gunk out, but what you’re really doing is interfering with the healing process!*

The phone is ringing again. She counts the rings—one, two. The most she’s let it get to is eight. She watches his name vibrate aggressively before her, then flips her gaze down to the bump. She’s given up on wearing underwear too. She applies a little bit of pressure, watches the white tip reappear. What would it be like,

she thinks, to be the sort of person who could press down? Three, four. She squeezes and watches the skin redden, then blanch, the white becoming ever more insistent. Five, six. The pain makes her gasp, she's never come this close to breaking before. There are tears in her eyes. Seven. Come on, she thinks. Come on. Eight.

AMERICAN LAKE

by Aaron Burch

Did you grow up near water? What did you think of when I asked that—lake, river, ocean, pool, other? Do you like to swim? Do you remember learning how? Did your grandmother live not *on* a lake, but near? Walking distance? Do you have fond memories of going to your grandmother's house, getting one of the large towels she kept for you in the bathroom, one of the inner tubes she kept in her garage? Do you remember being little and using actual inner tubes on the water, not an inflatable pool float or tube like you might buy from Target or WalMart or Fred Meyer or Meijer or wherever, but an actual rubber doughnut made and perhaps even previously used as the *inner* part of a car or truck tire? Did you ever get in trouble for using her automatic garage door like a toy—hitting the button so it would retract up and then grabbing the metal lip at the bottom and letting it carry you up in the air, when you were still young and little enough for that to work? Have you ever looked at your own garage door and wondered how one could have ever had enough power to lift you floating up into the air while also at least a little bit wanting to try to again? Do you remember that short walk from your grandmother's house to the public access trail to the lake? Remember the one house along the way that had rabbits and chickens and goats? Remember how the

trail was pretty well hidden, snaking its way between two houses, two private properties, but it was supposed to be for everyone? Remember parents telling you that every lake has to be accessible to the public? Do you think that's true? Did you still take it for granted that most everything your parents told you must be true, and so you didn't question it, either the legality of such a claim nor the fact that the lake had a park with a beach and a roped off swim area and lifeguards and boat access a mile or two down the road, and so wouldn't *that* count as the lake being accessible to the public? Do you remember the dock at this small beach—not the big one at the park, but the one that felt both public and private, almost like your own little personal beach on the lake? Remember swimming under it? How you could swim under but then come up and wade there, your head above water but under the deck, this little hidden foot or two that seemed like another world? Did you ever do this? Did you also, later in life, have a phase where you loved getting and hanging out on roofs? What do you think it is about certain stages of your life and being under or on top of things—pillow forts, caves, sitting on car hoods or tops, the roof of your house, your local church, school, whatever building had some combination of nearby fence or tree or other accessory that made it possible to get on top of? Have you ever been skinny dipping? Do you remember your first time? Was the idea yours or theirs? When you think of nightswimming, how much do you remember? Was it clear skies? Was the moon out? Have you revisited that lake as an adult? Parked at the end of the cul de sac, next to a “Public Property, No Access” sign right where the trailhead used to be? Did you sit in your car, listening to a playlist of songs from your

youth and ask yourself questions about whether you should abide by the sign or not? What did you do next?

TRIPTYCH O FALLING STARS

by Wayland Tracy

Every night I hear the screams of myself far away. I beg for help but I will not help. In a ditch by the tracks, full of golf balls and bones of careless creatures. White quartz set in circles. I lie down and I am falling. Can't find the earth. The noises of town rattle like deathbed confessions. Trains hurtle past. The stars encroach. We once had lights that prolonged days. I scrounge for bones with meat clinging on. I once had a table. Pictures of people stuffed into cracked walls, maps that do not help me. No children anymore. Hawks fly full-on head first into trees. Cats and dogs are buried, dug up. Men scream and tear at their own bodies. Become puddles in the streets. My dreams pound my head in continuum of the day. Day pours out of night. A single gunshot every hour. I know what berries will kill me. I've buried strangers but I do not kiss them anymore. I howl on my back. Coyotes smell my piss and hope I don't get up. I found my mother with a meteorite lodged in her heart. My father runs north following the deer. I pick up a golf ball and throw it into the sky. Rabbits cry in their dens. The man who counts crawls into my ditch. The golf ball becomes a star. I poisoned a woman at my table. I beat a dog. I cut the leg off a boy and threw it in the river two days later. Please believe me. The star falls, then the rest.

Through the fields and hills, far away, I follow the deer. I carry a rifle and one bullet. They know my purpose. I eat the grasses and berries they eat. I drink from the streams they drink. I shout at wolves. I carve faces. I follow the descent of owls, the little screams, circling vultures. Lights of unnatural color move among the stars. I write to my wife and son. Letters placed in the hollows of trees and under rocks. A gray man followed me for three days. He scared the deer. A fawn nuzzles my head. I hold it and weep. I cut its side to remember. I eat mushrooms glowing at night. I sleep while I walk. The head of a buck seared to a meteorite. I pray. I burn my clothes. Snow sticks to my skin. Wolves seduce the fawn. The gray man returns. He speaks through the steaming stones, words of my voice, a mirror of ice, one man drowning. The deer wait for me. I beg them forward. I point my gun and the gray man charges.

I long to be the woman of the candlelit painting, floating in a river. All my blankets are gone. I scrape mold from cheese. I wear curtains, sit in corners. A boy climbed to my roof and has not come down. My neighbor tells me she intends to go to the moon without her husband. I never trusted her. Never open the door. I wave a revolver at a mouse. It was my husband's. Coyotes sit on my porch every night, scratching the door, shaking the handle. I tell them about my day. I chew on salted wood. My father plays me his harp. He sits in the tree outside the kitchen window every morning. I knew it to be him right away by his smile. Such a smile you don't see anymore. I cannot bear the noises. I tie rags around my ears. I hum till my throat is sore. The coyotes leave when the census man comes. I show my gun through the window. My father shows me the place I must sit when it is time. I watch my neighbor

kneel on the tracks. The census man slips papers under the door. I burn them. I know of a place where the floors aren't cold, where I might see my family again. I whisper into black holes, to mice no longer gathering my hair. Scurry now, friends. I confess. I sing in the fire of paintings, the clouds of heaven. The shrieking sky opens.

DOG TRACING by Mike Andrelczyk

I just remembered a maintenance man I used to work with who said he liked to get drunk and trace his dog on big sheets of paper and his garden was lined with pieces of broken hotel sinks. I just remembered this. Out of nowhere. When things come into your mind from out of nowhere it's like looking at the outline of a dog on a piece of paper. The dog is gone, but its shape is there. This is a memory.

Imagine one of those shitty video dissolving effects now.

....

....

.... OK.

I was standing in the sun outside of the parking garage. There was a square of sunlight on the ground and I was standing in the center of it. I was avoiding doing any work for a few minutes and I was standing in the center of a square of sunlight. This was a good thing to do while avoiding loading luggage onto bellman carts and wheeling it around the hotel and unloading it.

Javier came out of the parking garage with a box of empties. The sunlight hit the bottles and it looked like Javier was carrying a box of light to the dumpster. This was good too. Throwing light into the dumpster.

“I’ll get it dude,” I said and lifted up the lid to the dumpster. “Dump ‘em baby.”

Javier smiled. “I’m doing these bottles one at a time.”

He took out an empty bottle of Bacardi rum and threw it into the mouth of the dumpster. There was a great smashing sound. The great smash. The sound was like the sun smashing to pieces.

Javier selected another bottle from the box. A green bottle. He handed it to me. Like a suave gentleman extending an offer of a cigarette. Would you care for a smash, my friend?

I accepted. “Smashing,” I said in an English accent. I looped the bottle end over end and it shattered at the bottom of the empty dumpster. Terrific. Success.

Javier smiled at me. Success. Javier didn’t talk much. He was from Brazil. He had distant family that still lived in the jungle he told me once. He seemed to have a lot of girlfriends too.

“Hey, what the fuck are y’all doin!?” It was Jesse. The maintenance man. Maintaining. He was yelling at us in a pretend way like we were suddenly caught mid-smash and in big trouble. Jesse seemed

to always appear out of nowhere. Especially when I was throwing stuff in the dumpster. He was like a fly. Attracted to trash and refuse.

“Jesse, what the fuck. You’re interrupting a perfectly good smashing session,” I said.

Javier the Gentleman simply extended an empty Grey Goose bottle to Jesse. A peace offering. An invitation to share in the destruction.

Jesse inspected the bottle. He really looked at it lovingly. The man simply loved trash.

“Jesse, throw the bottle in the dumpster dude,” I said. “Have a nice smash man. Take a smash break. Be a smash bro.” (I am an idiot.)

“I ain’t ‘bout to. Ima take this home,” he said.

We were obviously stupid rubes for smashing perfectly good liquor bottles. Jesse knew the secret. Never throw anything away. Don’t abandon your trash. It’s only trash if you let it be trash. Never refuse. He told me once that he would take the broken porcelain sinks and toilets home from the hotel and smash them up until he had pebble-sized pieces and he would use those for his Russian wife’s Japanese-style zen rock garden.

He was the maintenance man. He knew all the secrets of the hotel. The ins as well as the outs. He was maintaining the order of things.

I said the last thing out loud. About maintaining the order.

“Huh?” Jesse looked at me cockeyed. “See, what I like to do is buy some Jacquin’s then I fill up these bottles and there ya go. Ya got Grey Goose. Don’t nobody know the difference.”

I laughed. “What? Damn Jesse, you’re a genius.”

He smiled. Because he knew he was a genius.

“Sheet,” he said. “See what I like to do is have a few drinks then I get my dog on the floor.”

In the few seconds before Jesse continued my mind was filled with horrific visions of drunken bestiality. Then Jesse hit us with the tenderness.

“I got her trained so she just lay on these sheets of paper. And then I trace her. I make silhouettes and then I decorate my walls with all the pictures of my dogs. Been doing it for years. First was Delly. She was a good girl. Then was New Delly. Then Dolly. Now Jasmine. All labs. They’re my sweethearts and I love ’em,” Jesse paused. A moment of silence for his dogs. “Thanks for the bottle motherfucker.” He punched Javier in the ribs, but not hard. Javier only smiled.

Jesse walked off. Cradling his bottle like a baby. A baby bottle. A jewel. He moved towards the elevator shaft and disappeared into the stairwell. A silhouette is the shape of a ghost.

Some silence occurred then. Not much, but a little. Enough for it to be called a silence.

Javier looked at me.

“He draw his dogs?”

“Haha. Shit. He traces ’em. Outlines.” I mimed outlining a dog on the ground. I made the shape of a dog. I briefly imagined like that would be all you had to do to make a dog—just make the shape of a dog and it existed. In a way it was true.

Javier smiled. “Traces dogs,” he said. “Jesse.” But the way he said it sounded like Yessy.

Javier handed me another empty bottle. I smashed it. The bottle became hundreds of tiny pebbled-sized pieces. An empty bottle is just a future zen garden.

We finished the smashing. I still had more than an hour to go. This was a shitty shift. Not much action. I’d be lucky to make three dollars in tips.

\$\$\$

I got lucky and carried some bags for a rich asshole guy and his girlfriend. Some rich people were truly cheap. But this guy wanted to show off and he gave me \$10. It may have been accidental. He pulled out the bill and we both looked at it and then he handed it

to me.

\$\$\$

I stopped at the Food Lion on my way home. I always thought “Food Dog” in my mind because once I drove Javier home and he pointed to the sign and asked if I minded stopping at the Food Dog. The lion on the sign looked like a dog I guess. I mean it was basically like the shape of a dog pretty much. I bought some fried chicken for grandma.

Then I stopped at R&R and bought a fifth of Grey Goose.

I took a small drink as I drove home. The window down. The warm evening air rushing through. I heard a dog barking in the distance. The air made the shape of the dog’s barks. The sound of the dog barking became part of the air. A dog in the sky. Yes, I thought, a dog in the sky.

I decided I would take the bottle to the beach that night and drink it in the dark. I would drink from the bottle until it was empty and I could see in the dark.

THE BEEP

by Jason Schwartzman

I am his tutor and he is trying to tell me about an unknown variable. About X. But he has forgotten that it's called X.

"The mysterious thing," he says, laughing.

I love him for this. I will tell everyone I know about the mysterious thing.

During one session we're in his apartment and I hear a beep. Just one beep. The microwave, probably.

"I'm really sorry," he tells me, tensing up.

Sorry for what? It feels like I'm missing something.

"Totally fine!"

On the walk home I wonder why he was so on edge. Then I forget about it, my thoughts about him confined to the tiny sliver of the week we share. In the middle of another session, his mom comes home. She sits next to him, asks how it's going. He's taken the wrong test so we're a little behind.

“I wish I had a baseball bat,” she says, smiling.

I see her smiling, so I automatically smile too, before I process what she might mean. Then she makes another comment, this time about throwing him off the roof. She smiles again.

I don't know what I can say. Or do. Or if I'm just crazy. So far on the outside of something I can't really see it. I say it's not a big deal, the test. Not at all. He is doing well. Very well.

Sometimes I think about the beep. I also think he is okay, but I don't really know. I'm not his tutor anymore.

CONTRIBUTORS

***Mike Andrelczyk** lives with his wife in Strasburg, Pennsylvania. He is the author of “The Iguana Green City & Other Poems” and a book of haiku called “Dissolving.” His full-length poetry book “Gateway 2000 & Other Poems” is coming out on Ghost City Press in November. He tweets at @MikeAndrelczyk. Find more work at neutralspaces.co/mikeandrelczyk.*

***Kyra Baldwin** has been published in McSweeney’s Internet Tendency, Reductress, and The Squawk Back. She was a SmokeLong Quarterly Award for Flash Fiction Finalist. Find her on twitter @kyra_baldwin.*

***Audra Kerr Brown** lives betwixt the corn and soybean fields of southeast Iowa. Her fiction has appeared in Fjords Review, People Holding, F(r)iction, Fiction Southeast, Outlook Springs, Cheap Pop, and elsewhere. Brown has been listed on Wigleaf’s Top 50 (Very) Short Fictions and nominated for Vestal Review’s annual VERA award. Her story “The Way of the Woods” was selected by Aimee Bender as a winner for Best Small Fictions 2018. She is currently a Senior Fiction Editor at New Flash Fiction Review.*

***Aaron Burch** is the Founding Editor of Hobart, and the author of the criticism-slash-memoir Stephen King’s The Body and the story collection Backswing. Other recent little cnf flash things have been published on Pidgeonholes, Jellyfish Review, and Bending Genres. He’s on Twitter [@aaron_burch](https://twitter.com/aaron_burch).*

***Saul Lemerond** is a dyslexic writer who lives in Madison Indiana where he teaches creative writing at Hanover College. His book Kayfabe and Other Stories was published by One Wet Shoe Press in 2013 and can be found on Amazon. His short stories have appeared in Bourbon Peen, Gigantic Sequins, decomP, Five: 2: One Magazine, and elsewhere. You can find links to many of his stories at his website: saullemerond.com. You can also follow him on Twitter: @saullemerond.*

***Jihoon Park** is currently a MFA student at George Mason University. His fiction is forthcoming or published in Spry Literary Journal, MARY: A Journal of New Writing, Wilderness House Literary Review, and elsewhere. He is from San Jose, California. Find him on Twitter @jihoon_park94.*

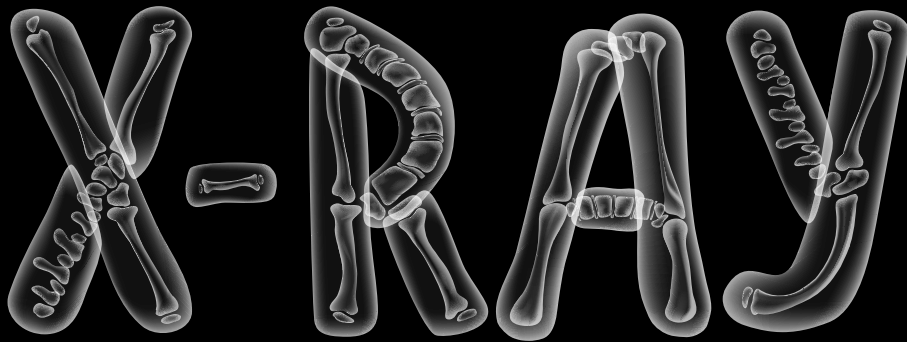
***Anthony Sabourin** is a writer from Ottawa, Ontario. His work has previously been published by X-R-A-Y, Little Death, and Bad Nudes. Find him at https://neutralspaces.co/anthony_sabourin/.*

***Jason Schwartzman's** first book, NO ONE YOU KNOW, is forthcoming from Outpost19 in Spring 2021. His writing has appeared in the New York Times, New York Magazine, Narrative.ly, The Rumpus, Hobart, River Teeth, Nowhere Magazine, Human Parts, Mr. Beller's Neighborhood, Hippocampus Magazine, and elsewhere. You can find him on Twitter @jdschwartzman.*

***Wayland Tracy** lives in Wichita, Kansas where he sells flowers wholesale and plays drums for Ponyboy.*

***Meg Tuite** is author of four story collections and five chapbooks. She won the Twin Antlers Poetry award for her poetry collection, Bare Bulbs Swinging. She teaches writing retreats and online classes hosted by Bending Genres. She is also fiction editor of Bending Genres and associate editor at Narrative Magazine. <http://megtuite.com>.*

***Jemimah Wei** is a writer and host based between Singapore and New York. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Fiction at Columbia University, where she is a 2020 Felipe P. De Alba fellow. Her work has appeared in SmokeLong Quarterly, No Contact Magazine, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, and Math Paper Press anthology "From the Belly of the Cat", amongst others. She is currently working on her first novel. You can find her on jemmawei.com or @jemmawei.*



www.x-r-a-y.com
@xraylitmag