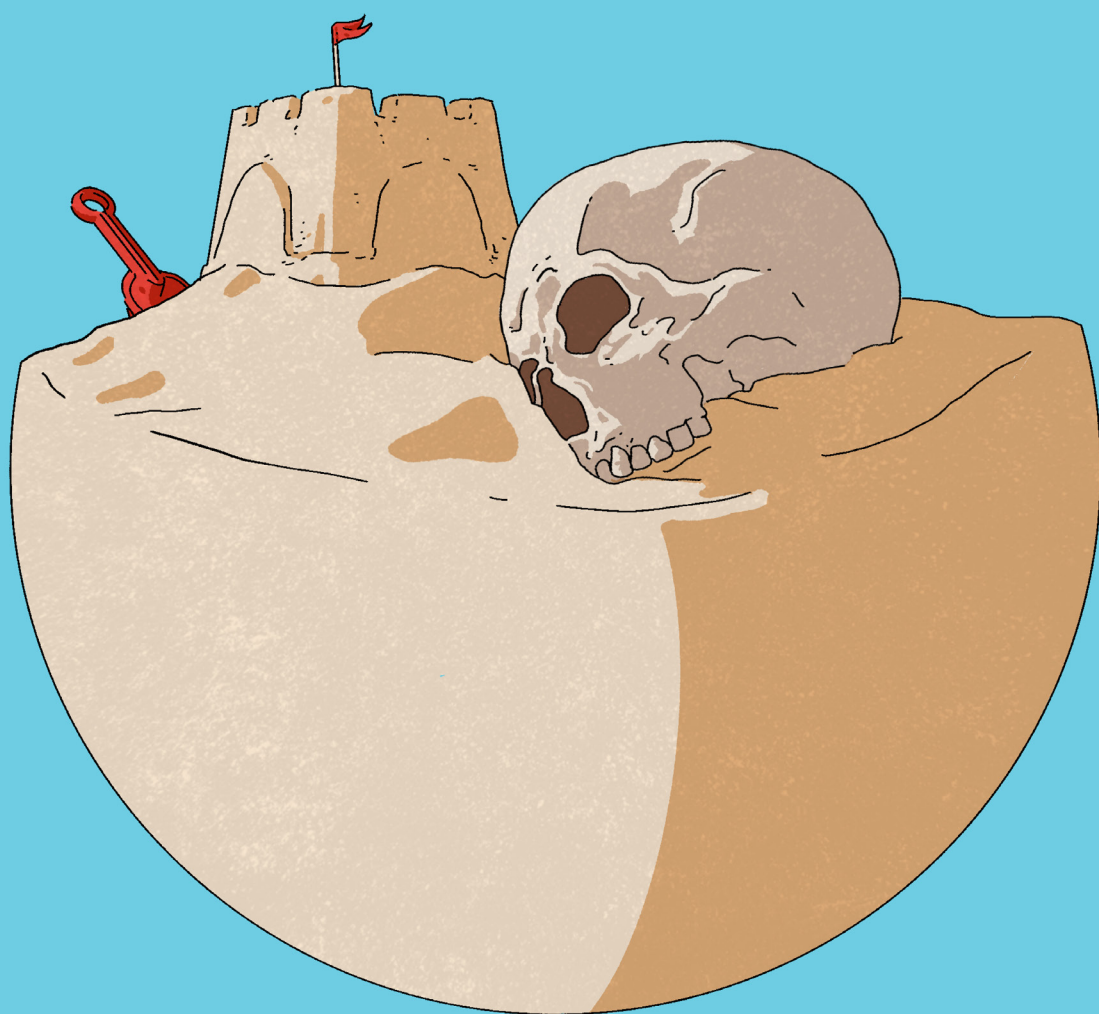


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SUMMER READING 2021

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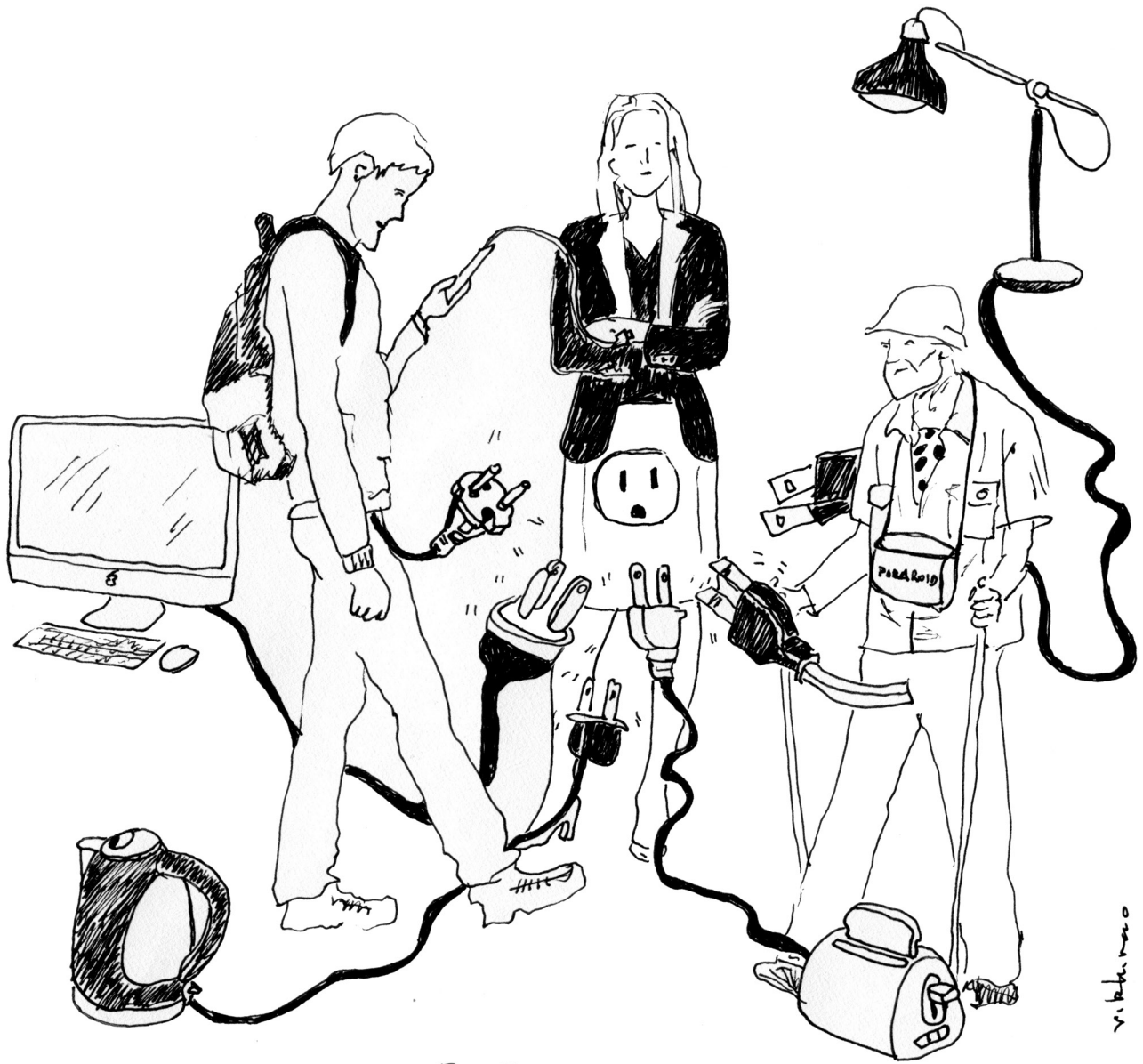
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PATRIARCHY
XBC to present

Vi Khi Nao's "Campari Soda Isn't An Amphibian," abides by a kind of neo-noir pretzel logic, which I love: "Truman Capote wrote a book called *In Cold Blood*. An amphibian is a cold-blooded, ectothermic vertebrate. A bullet is a cold-blooded metal. Do you think if I make you a Bloody Mary – it would be cold-blooded enough?" At the center of a rapid-fire conversation about scrabble and bullfighters, amphibians and Campari soda, is a constant and compelling act of self-appraisal. Like much of Vi Khi Nao's work, "Campari Soda" swerves in unexpected directions, daring the reader to catch it at its tricks. Whether you're new to her work, or a longtime fan, see if you have what it takes!

—Gauraa Shekhar

CAMPARI SODA ISN'T AN AMPHIBIAN

by Vi Khi Nao

In real life, the girl on the toilet is named KAY. Another girl, Vada, walks in and silently holds a gun to Kay's head. Without making any demands. She turns to Kay and automatically offers one key to her. Vada takes a look at the key and contemplates whether to kill her or not. Vada pulls the trigger and Kay drops to the ground. She turns to the bathroom door and realizes that there is a key already in the lock. Vada walks towards the bar after exiting the bathroom. And, turns to the bartender and says, "My sex drive is an amphibian. It can go a very long time on water. Or stroll leisurely on land. I wish you could see the radiation beneath your eyelids." The bartender turns to her and says, "Campari soda isn't an amphibian, but it will make you drunk enough to feel like you are floating down the Mississippi."

Vada twirls her fingers in her air and says, "Two of those please."

The bartender responds, "I am sorry we ran out of Campari."

"Why did you suggest it then?"

"Because Campari and amphibian share so many vowels and consonants and I wouldn't want to deprive you of such linguistic liquor."

"You don't speak like a bartender."

“What do I speak like?”

“Like an English teacher.”

“Close.”

“What is it then?”

“I play scrabble competitively.”

“For money?”

“For the education of my ego.”

“Tell me: would you prefer a key or a bullet?”

“Neither.”

“But if you had to choose.”

“A bullet.”

“Right.”

“Truman Capote wrote a book called *In Cold Blood*. An amphibian is a cold-blooded, ectothermic vertebrate. A bullet is a cold-blooded metal. Do you think if I make you a Bloody Mary – it would be cold-blooded enough?”

“May I have a highball?”

“That is how it ought to be served. However, we just ran out of tomato juice and dill pickle spear.”

“Are you playing with me?”

“One coming right up.”

In real life, the bartender is a bullfighter. He looks like Manolete. His face takes the shape of a thin pentagon. And, his chest hair grows massively, spilling over his clean white shirt and his bow

tie, and it extends into the wall like English ivies, invading and gatecrashing into the brick walls and scaling up the old apartment complexes near the bar above the Greek restaurant. He was a bullfighter by day and a scrabble player in the afternoon and in the evening, he bartends.

“Your chest hair is a health hazard.”

“A fire hazard.”

“Has it killed anyone?”

“You mean has it strangled cats, dogs, and homeless folks?”

“I don’t mean it like that.”

“It just clogs up toilet bowls. It snakes into the bottom of the sewage system and whenever I stroll home, I drag home a city worth of tampons and wedding rings. I look like an eschatological version of a Christmas tree.”

“Does your chest hair get in the way of your—”

“You mean—bullfighting.”

“You’re a bullfighter too?”

“Yes, it makes me more of a complex beast. I get full respect from the bull.”

“Doesn’t it get in the way of your speed?”

“My chest hair?”

“What else?”

“It doesn’t. It makes me focus more. This jungle here.” The bartender waves his fingers agilely across his chest and continues, “My footwork must be flawless. It has made me more of a nimble, lithe,

dexterous being. Because I always had to compensate for my chest hair—I had to be always on top of my game.”

“It seems like a very tiring life.”

“Hardly, I am clever, you see.”

“How?”

“My infraclavicular virtue makes me so much smarter than men who don’t have any hair. I make better decisions. It’s easier for me to win scrabble games. And, postmenopausal species are so much more attracted to me – especially when I wear a V-neck sweater. And, I could tell that you just killed someone in the bathroom with a bullet.”

“How did you know? You could see through walls?”

“My chest hair has been wet, not like a water wet – which is when the toilet bowl overflows, but wet as in thick – like blood is thicker than water thick – and so I knew the edges of my hair has been feeding secrets about you back to me. You see, I am clever. And, I wouldn’t be clever without the extraordinary circumference of my chest hair. A virtue! Now, the cops will be arriving soon because my chest hair just dialed the police station from meters away using my cellphone. So, while we wait for them to arrive, may I make you a Campari soda?”

“I thought you ran out?”

“My chest hair, again, just strolled to a liquor store a few blocks from here and purchased a couple of bottles for me.”

“It even paid for it using your credit card?”

“How did you know?”



Photo by Crow Jonah Norlander

I don't know what a sonata is, technically. It sounds like a fancy Latin way of saying "sound," or "song," maybe a little song, a songlet. No, that's confusing the diminutive "ita" from Spanish. It seems inherently pleasant, elevated but not too lofty. Daisuke's incessantly singing narrator has some airs but comes by them honestly. The girl's frailty is and isn't feigned: She hopes to "become weaker" in service of a greater purpose of dispelling the burdensome singing. The curse of her affliction is loaned legitimacy by a collective unawareness forcing her out and away, into a vague and visceral danger.

There's the synesthetic swirl of scents, tastes, and textures: mildew, fleece, mist, lagan, sludge, sand fleas, silk, cake, ripped flesh, mastication, lavender. It'd be tackily blunt for Daisuke to use the word (they didn't, but I will)—a sensory crescendo gives way to chaos and then, finally, quiet for everyone but the singer who craves it. Her continued singing is a bittersweet solace: I can perceive the shape of a song with a tune I might recognize if only I could hear it, but the piano, impossibly strapped to the pianist's back, has gone, gone silent, and the singer—the only remaining source of sound—has no audience.

—Crow Jonah Norlander

SONATA by Daisuke Shen

For a long time now, all sound has been damp. Wrapped in mildew, white-fleeced, everyone's voices turned to mist. I am the only one not contained within this quiet—me, who has always wished to be, more so than anyone else; me, the girl who could never stop singing.

I had tried all of the tricks, of course: stuffed my mouth with lagan scrounged from sea beds, weaned off of proteins and greens, hoping to become weaker. Yet the avalanche of notes poured out of my mouth like sludge; my crazed melodies frenetic and pinched as sand fleas.

The silence started two years ago at that strange rehearsal, where a man wearing a blue silk scarf played a piece on the piano outside of M. Franco's cake shop. None of us had ever seen him before, nor seen a piano that size. We held our breath as he positioned himself on the bench, his fingers stretched and hovering above the keys. Perhaps this was the one we had been waiting for. Because of my incessant singing, I stood toward the back of the audience as I always did.

He began to play a symphony familiar to all of us, though there was something sinister to it, I realized—he had ripped away its flesh, plunged his fingers into its insides to rearrange the notes. Why did no one else think the mastication of this piece to be sinister? But

everyone was amazed, unable to look away.

Even through my warbling, I heard the piano cry out as the man wrung its felt throat dry; its strained screams contorted in his hands into the softest lavender.

Long after he had strapped the piano onto his back and taken his leave, everyone continued clapping until the world was wrapped in static. Even their bodies became muffled, less opaque, dipping into one another's on the street.

I, however, absorbed the piano's grief. If people regarded me with contempt before, they now term me traitor to this town and its silence. I reside in a grey room in a grey building they have built underneath the ground, with just enough light that I can see the pen with which I write this letter, the only comfort that damned sonata that I sing again and again, as if I can be the one to save it.



Photo by Alisha Wexler

Scott McClanahan said, “If the narrator hasn’t done something fucked up by page 2, I don’t have time for that shit.”

Great art fucks the nervous system. Like you might die. You sit in your room and don’t eat or go to the bathroom. Those systems shut down. Weren’t important. Like reading. Having your brain hijacked.

Raise your hand, if you’ve ever dated a psycho? Wanna know why? Volatile. Potentially dangerous. Turns on the fight-or-flight. Ups our frequency. Sharpens focus. Like a good story. “Lizard Blood” is so fucking good. Making desert-static. Boredom. So close to spiky plants and buzzing you swat the air. A narrator more volatile as it wears on. Motionless. But, loaded. What’s the fucker gonna do? Fuck the stepdad? I’d read that. Murder somebody? Probably.

I could read it all day. All day. Cause I’m addicted to it. Need to be hijacked. Taken over. Squeeze all that bullshit I usually think about out. Show me a way I’ve never seen before. Haven’t heard about. Where will it lead me? Want in? Show of hands.

—Tyler Dempsey

LIZARD BLOOD

by Alisha Wexler

Tuesday I wake up damp with a clenched jaw. Dirty towels on the ground reeking of mildew. Why do people record their dreams? Dreams are trout in bare hands—let them slip free! Mine are so generic anyway. I pluck out my teeth one-by-one like daisy petals. *He loves me*, I say with blood pouring down my hand, *he loves me not*. I move on. I weasel out of New York lease. I get out of bed. I go into the bathroom. I put on the clammy moist bikini hanging over the shower rod. I lay by the kidney-shaped pool in the backyard.

I'm still in Arizona—the McMansion in the Sonoran Desert. It's the house I grew up in that my dead mother left to me. I've been here a month. By now, I should have renovated the house. I should have listed it on the market. But for who to buy? The houses in the neighborhood are still boarded up and owned by banks. Occupied by squatters. No one's moving in. I should have signed the deed over to my stepdad, Neil. But I've done nothing except lay by the pool.

My friend in New York texts me: *WHAT is even in the Southwest suburbs?*

I reply: *Pools*.

This pool is where I had my first kiss. It's where the Mormon girls in my neighborhood baptized me by holding my head underwater

until I felt the walls of my lungs vacuum seal together.

I lay across slabs of sandstone, basking in the sun. Lizards join me: geckos and horny-toads.

When my dead boyfriend was alive, he called me reptilian—an ongoing joke that I hated. He first mentioned it when he saw how freakishly long my tongue was, then in passive aggressive jest about my short attention span. Sometimes he mentioned it when he heard my croaky morning voice, and once when he noticed the yellowish green of my eyes. Mostly, he said it when I was cold. I resented this. Being called ectothermic—associated with cold-bloodedness.

In the Sonoran Desert, the children are playing in the cul-de-sac and the teenagers are overdosing on Fentanyl. I take a deep breath of air polluted with endocrine disruptors. Yesterday I parked behind the drug store and watched a malnourished coyote lap up roadkill. Today I see the sun glittering like chrome sparks off the pool's little wakes. Everyday, I get up and drive twenty minutes to the nearest Starbucks just to hear someone tell me "good morning" and remind me I exist.

Wednesday I wake up, put on the damp bikini, lay by the pool.

At noon, Neil comes over to check the chlorine levels, filters, and pumps. He circles the perimeter, skimming out leaves and drowned moths. "The Little Guy is broken," he tells me. The Little Guy is what he calls the suction scooter that scours the pool like a bottom-feeder.

The older he gets, the deeper his voice becomes. I now hear the

Oklahoma drawl he suppressed for years. Though, he's not "old" per se. He's only sixteen years older than me. I run the numbers in my head. Married my mother when he was 24, she was 47, I was 8. Oddly, the older he gets, the younger he looks. Maybe it's the relief of my nutcase mother being in the ground, maybe it's his even tan, or just the glow of new sobriety. He's got those angular lower abs that gesture toward his dick. Had he always had those? I can't believe my mom made me call him Daddy.

I dog-paddle to the narrow part of the kidney and rest my elbows on the lip of the pool, letting water dribble out of my mouth.

"Neil," I say, "the jackrabbits are committing suicide."

"I don't blame them."

"I've run over several on the road underneath the arroyo. They hop out into the middle and just sit there. I swerve, they leap in the same direction. Splat!"

"Don't swerve. Jackrabbits seek thrill. They play chicken. You just go straight at 'em and they'll jump out of the way."

I think about games of chicken. Two fighters racing toward each other only to surrender at the exact same time, pull out in the exact same direction, collide anyway. Two cowards who die without dignity.

That night I wrote a letter to my dead boyfriend.

E,

Are you one of those people who see animal instincts as omens or warnings? You know, how in apocalypse/natural disaster movies the first sign of things taking a turn for the worst is always strange animal behavior? I'm one of those people.

This is why I left Arizona years ago. There were animals—animals everywhere. I'd walk out my front door and see roadrunners darting down the sidewalk. I saw coyotes sniffing through the garbage. Late at night, I'd pull into the driveway, headlights beaming onto cottontail families as they scurried out of the lawns. Their habitats: the sage, saguaros, and brier, were being torn out and scorched to the ground to lay down concrete. New roads paved. The foundation to build bigger but weaker houses; ugly houses with confused architectural styles. This isn't to say that the animals "sensed" an economic crash, but it was a sign (more literal than symbolic) that something was about to change.

I wish you could smell my skin now: coconut and chlorine. Maybe I don't shower enough. I am so tired and sun-drunk and regular drunk. I drank a lot of tequila. I ate a lot of Xanax. Perhaps I'll see you in Hell very soon.

Until we meet again,

B

Thursday I wake up, put on the damp bikini, lay by the pool.

Another friend texts me: *Damn the desert's a VIBE*

I reply *hell yaaa* and swat a wasp away from my thigh.

U working on anything out there?

No. Just vibing.

When the sun sets I drive to Starbucks and take the road under the arroyo. A jackrabbit is there, as always. I charge straight at it, as Neil advised. It doesn't jump away. My heart swishes around my chest like a squid in a small net when I feel the crunch under my

tire.

At night, Neil calls to tell me that my yard is infested with scorpions. It's nice of him to help out as much as he does, I think, considering he's a gold digger who didn't get the inheritance he married for. I feel an odd responsibility to take care of my dead mom's cowboy gigolo widower. I'll give him money, but I'll never give him this piece of shit house.

I go outside with a blacklight. He was right. I see scorpions glowing fluorescent blue—too many to count—they're crawling on the ground and wriggling up the walls. People who don't believe that there is pure horror in this world have never done this: gone into the desert night with a blacklight.

Friday I wake up, put on the damp bikini, lay by the pool.

The least serene day of the week: band practice. A death metal band plays in a garage up the street. There are guttural shrieks and heavy base. Boys squealing like injured pigs—various patterns of the words:

GUT

FUCK

CUM

SLUT

CUNT

PUNCH

It ends with them repeating:

INSIDIOUS

INSIDIOUS

INSIDIOUS

I roll over onto my stomach and untie my bikini. A lizard is back. He doesn't flinch. He holds his head regally high toward the sun.

I jump into the pool and hold my breath. I wonder if I can stay down long enough to feel the walls of my lungs kiss like they did the time I was baptized.

I imagined New York, slinking into bed when my boyfriend's body was still warm. I swung my leg over his leg, braided my knee under his knee, my ankle over his ankle. He said he felt the night's chill soaked into my skin. His was burning feverishly. We lied there entwined, regulating each other's body temperatures. Morphing into one another. Yin and yang. The next night an ambulance flashed lights over our unmade bed. Ripples of blanket and sheets looked like the waves of a red hot sea.

I emerge from the water's surface and gasp. I climb out of the pool and offer myself to the sun. I turn toward it. I indulge in it. It warms my lizard blood, and when the wasps come buzzing, I'll shoot my lizard tongue twice as far as my height and eat them. Later today, I'll find a way to numb my lizard brain. And when I no longer like my lizard tail, I will chop it off and it will grow right back.

I'm a sucker for a strong voice. So it's really no surprise that I chose Rebekah Bergman's "Nightshade and Periodontology" for my favorite recent X-R-A-Y publication. The protagonist is fascinating because she's fascinated—with the decline of her own body. The flash reads like body-horror, and the reader is taken on a terrifying ride. Bergman's tone is at first wonderfully objective and scientific, and then slides into a less-careful rumination. The ending pivots into an intimate revelation. Good endings are like that: They are cracks of light that guide the reader in new directions. Every ending can be a beginning, too.

—Becca Yenser

LIKE NIGHTSHADE AND PERIODONTOLOGY by Rebekah Bergman

She scheduled all her overdue appointments for the same week. She went to the doctor, the dentist, and the gynecologist. She came back with three minor diagnoses and referrals for two other specialists.

It was right around this time that all science started feeling like pseudoscience, modern medicine especially. It began with the nightshade.

She could no longer sleep through the night for the itching. A rash that looked like raspberry jam had formed on the back of her neck.

The allergist told her to stop eating nightshade. She was unsure if she had been eating nightshade.

What *was* nightshade? It sounded like witchcraft. She began to question what food she put into her body, and what her body did with it.

Two weeks later, her wisdom teeth were impacted. The pain in her gums was a fact she held onto. Still, she could not fully fathom that her body had grown these appendages—*wisdom teeth*. They were only mentioned when they failed.

She became, slowly, sicker. As she did, she became more of a skeptic. She questioned what her body held inside it. And what it didn't. What it was capable of. And what it wasn't.

She had never seen, for instance, that she had such a thing as a brain or a heart.

Some days she could convince herself that her own sense of self was a kind of delusion, like nightshade or periodontology.

Had she always been like this?

A memory of a chilly day in childhood. Sitting beside her father on a picnic blanket in the backyard. Him, reading her a book and sipping his coffee. Everything around them cozy, golden. She'd felt so loved, so hopefully curious in a world full of wonder.

When you die, she said, interrupting her father mid-sentence, can I cut your body open and look inside?



Photo by Nathaniel Duggan

Nathaniel Duggan's story is about the sudden realization that, after a certain point, life is permanent, your direction is set. There's nothing to do but die, and it takes so long. There's nothing to do but wait in the permanence you once imagined you had control over, as Shark Weeks turn to Shark Years, previous boyfriends confirm what they've always known, and even your own mother starts to realize nothing great is going to come of you. Duggan's protagonist Frank repeatedly fails to reverse the mundane parts of his life, because the parts of his life aren't the problem. Frank is the problem. "Loneliness and heartache..." is a story The New Yorker would be too chickenshit to publish because the little lives that little people live inside little apartments aren't all quaint and cute. Some little lives are incurably hopeless.

—Graham Irvin

LONELINESS AND HEARTACHE IN THE DISCARDED APPLE CORE PIT OF AMERICA'S ROTTED DREAM FOR AND OF ITSELF

by Nathaniel Duggan

Lately Frank has been feeling especially Frank-like, his days reduced to the potato chip crumbs he has failed to brush from his lap—as if he, the essence of himself, is a shirt that can be slipped on or off and has been worn perhaps a few too many weeks in a row. He wets the bed more than when he was a child, although back then his piss was hot and searing as shame, whereas now it is simply cold as a metal unexpectedly touched. His sweat, too, is cold. His dreams are muggy as incest, bratty stepsiblings fucked. He works at a deli sandwich shop, his shifts spent fondling various meats through disposable plastic. He is 32-years old and having trouble, lately, imagining what will fill all the years left ahead of him.

On his days off, Frank visits his mother. At one point Frank had friends; then, suddenly, as if through a magician's whirling trick of smoke and exploding pigeons, he woke and did not have friends. They had vanished. They had slipped into the cracks of better lives, found secret passageways hidden behind their medicine cabinets into mortgages and tropical island vacations and jobs with business suits, places thoroughly and utterly inaccessible to the Franks of the world.

“Maybe you could try grad school,” his mother suggests over lunch.

“You always did so well in school. Or what about teaching English overseas? Plenty of young people are teaching English overseas these days, they’re saying.”

“You always do this,” Frank says. “This is all we ever talk about. Can’t we ever talk about anything else?”

“You were just always so good in school,” his mother says.

The previous day, Frank remembers, he fucked up a wrap at work. The wrap had folded wrong, split against the bend of itself, crumbled and unspooled. He’d looked at his coworker, Kyle, in mock-shock. “How do you fuck up a wrap,” he said.

Kyle was in his early twenties and attending community college, acne still surging like meteor showers across his face. He was grinning.

“Yes you did,” Kyle said. “You sure did fuck that one up. But hey, there’re children starving in Africa, there are tiny babies without food or homes or mothers, and one fucked up wrap doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of their suffering.”

In response, Frank slam-dunked the wrap into the trash can. Across the service counter, customers were watching. Frank felt strange and unreal, felt almost, as if in a video game, unbeatable—like there were forces trying to defeat him and they could not.

That kind of thing happened sometimes, he knew. In certain moments, a hatch opened in your brain, and you crawled up and out through it to escape the piloted machine of yourself, got far enough from your own way of seeing that your life became as unrecognizable to you as a telescoped planet, and for a moment, then, even beneath the insect-splotched lightbulbs of your workplace,

everything kind of glimmered like it was covered in fresh dew.

Of course, like anything else those flashes ended. The customers coughed impatiently. Kyle shuffled his feet and suggested they get back to work, he and Frank. You were just you, after all. There was no way, as of yet—as discovered and postulated by scientists, by physicists in nuclear basements and engineers pale-faced by the rays of computer screens stared into late at night—to be anyone else. So Frank made the wrap. Although really he did not want to make the wrap. He wanted instead to talk about how those children overseas were only starving because of American bombs and governmental policy destabilizing their infrastructure.

“You were always so good in school,” his mother says again in the dining room, her voice a sigh. as faint now as a tapping on a windowpane.

Although it’s bright summer, all the lights in the house are on, making the space look cold and drained of the day. They finish the meal in silence. Afterwards, his mother excuses herself to the bathroom. Frank hears her run the shower and then, muffled by the water, quietly scream.

Frank gets in his car and does a few laps around the neighborhood. He is not drunk but he feels the dilation of drunkenness, as if there are air bubbles moving in his bloodstream. This is the suburb where he grew up, adjacent to the city where his current apartment is. It occurs to him he has not made it very far outside of his life, the neatly cropped and segmented lawn of it. When he returns to his mother’s house, all the lights are off, and he finds her asleep on the living room couch, sprawled and open-mouthed as a child.

After a lunchtime rush, Frank asks Kyle, “So what’s up this weekend? Any parties?”

He means it as a joke. He has always assumed that Kyle, still living with his parents, returns home to play video games after each shift. To his surprise, Kyle freezes at this question, the color draining from his face.

“I mean,” Kyle says. “Well, it wouldn’t really be your kind of scene. Kind of a different crowd. I mean, younger. No offense, dude.”

On Frank’s smoking break, the clouds roil apocalyptically in the sky above. He tries to light his cigarette with a dramatic flourish, like it’s the last cigarette he’ll smoke before the ash-black end of the world. He thinks about a boy he kissed at a New Year’s party five years ago who he hasn’t seen or spoken to since.

“We just had such a connection,” he says when he steps back into the kitchen.

“Wait,” Kyle says. “This isn’t about what’s-his-name, is it?”

“Brian,” Frank says. “We just really kicked it off. We had such a spark.”

“Jesus,” Kyle says. “We’re not really talking about this for the thousandth time again this week, are we? Didn’t that happen like, a century ago? Just let it go, man. Please let’s not talk about this again.”

When Frank gets back to his apartment, he doesn’t turn on any lights. He eats a prepared supermarket meal by the orange glow

a streetlamp tosses against his bedroom wall and drinks half a beer. Teaching overseas...He imagines himself copy and pasted, a file moved but otherwise unmodified, into China, South Korea. In the scene he is in a classroom and the students around him are faceless. He himself in the scene is faceless—actually, he is censored out, a digital conglomeration of squares. After his lessons he would probably go back to an apartment no bigger than the one he currently occupies, eat a prepared supermarket meal, and drink half a beer. The thought makes him feel bereft of hope, like in the second act of a summer blockbuster where aliens have invaded the earth and toppled the government—the part where the heroes lose and fog shrouds the horizon. Faceless Frank. The problem with leaving for anywhere else, he suspects, pulling the covers over his head, is that he would have to go there with himself.

And so for a while, for a couple several years and decades, Frank feels formless. He feels like a cookie cutter shape, its limits defined and rigid, but its details bludgeoned, the features misshapen as blurs. He gets enraged every now and again at his mother. For what reason, after all, did she have to create him? To force him pink and vulnerable into the cruelty that is the world? He feels often and especially like a supervillain abomination, like a—ha ha—a *Frankenstein*, and when he visits her, he screams and shatters her plates. He still works for minimum wage wrapping sandwiches. He is 36, and then he is 47. Kyle has long since quit, graduated with his college degree and gone off somewhere probably to teach

English overseas. Frank himself has begun to drink at an admittedly destructive rate, although he does this in a subtle, calculated way that doesn't feel so much like blatant annihilation of the self but rather quiet sabotage, trapdoors and tripwires laced intricately throughout his heart. He feels, now, like he is a spy in the country of himself, engaging in acts of treason, and so appropriately one morning he calls his ex-boyfriend Adam.

They decide to meet on the beach. It is late fall. They lay out their towels and then lay on top of their towels, side by side.

"That gull keeps circling me," Adam says. "Are you seeing this? Maybe it thinks I'm dead. That I'm a carcass. A corpse."

"Jesus," Frank says. "You never change. Everything's always about you, isn't it?"

There are leaves scattered about the beach, autumn red, like so many cooked crabs spilled. Seagulls keep pinwheeling overhead. The ocean sounds the way the inside of an empty shell sounds. The weather is cloudy, and it's one of those days where you cannot tell if it is a buoy washing ashore or a headless, half-eaten seal.

Afterwards they get a hotel. Adam turns on the television. There is a rerun of "Shark Week" playing. "Shark Week" is a TV series produced annually that, for an entire week, dedicates itself to shark-based content—divers getting into deep-sea cages with sharks, lifeguards interviewed regarding shark-based deaths on their beaches, entomological investigations into the history of sharks and the possible existence of super sharks, ancient and lurking things at the bottom of the ocean the size of sunken ships.

Frank is realizing sex will probably not happen tonight.

This is, simply, not a situation in which sex between two people can occur.

Shark Week keeps playing, a rerun of a rerun's idea of itself. Frank and Adam fall asleep together fully clothed, and the next day after leaving the hotel they do not talk ever again.

Later a decision will be made by ad agencies and corporate lawyers to transform "Shark Week" into "Shark Month." And after this proves a rousing success, they will extend it even further, until there are entire Shark-themed calendar years, and before you know it your very life has become a Shark Week rerun regurgitated and interrupted regularly by commercials.

That night as Frank fell asleep against Adam's warmth, he dreamed of a room black with mirrors—every inch of it paneled with glass such that the light inside bounced continually and endlessly until its expiration, leaving nothing then but darkness. Although he could not see, Frank was aware of his reflection in the mirrors, multiplied a million times over. He could sense it there moving in all that glass like a hole in the back of his head, a hole the size of the moon—no. A hole the size of the disappearance of the moon.

One Friday Frank goes to the bar alone.

No one there talks to him, and he does not talk to anyone.

He spends several nights in a row eating fast food in his car in empty supermarket parking lots.

Late November a centipede scuttles down his neck.

Somewhere a terrorist whispers the word “galvanize” in a Wendy’s before ordering chili cheese fries.

Overall love is renounced across the globe, as is life, death, inner city bus drivers.

Various presidents and prime ministers acknowledge in hastily assembled press releases that nothing will ever happen to anyone ever again.

People are a bit perplexed by this—should they feel secured or doomed?

More worrying, they realize: can they even still tell the difference?

Each day sheds the skin of itself and slithers into the next. On interstates everywhere rodents dart in front of roaring 18-wheelers. The chipmunks have grown crazed and carnivorous, caught—on *camera*!—gnawing one another’s bones. Fathers are blamed for America. Founding, suburban, whatever, it is the father’s fault, whether he was absent or perhaps so present his touch reaches across the span of centuries to tangle each life and word and thought of his great-great-grandchildren like puppet string. And so a feeling of doom pervades and closes each day. Schoolteachers drive to little league baseball fields late at night and shoot their brains out atop dusty mounds that seem almost Martian in the moonlight. The stock market, meanwhile, does pretty well.

Frank tells his doctor, “I feel displaced and without purpose. I am utterly depressed. I know I have a drinking problem, but the problem is not the drinking, the problem is what causes the drinking, the problem drinks itself dry, it is an abscess, I feel it as a

scabbed drought on the back of my skull where fluid cannot help but lump and end in an aneurysm because it is a lack that must be filled, because nothing always wants something. In this sense, the symptom is the same as the cure.”

“Yes,” the doctor says, hands stuffed deep into Frank’s mouth. “OK. Frank, you know I’m a dentist. Have you thought about seeing a professional regarding this?”

Frank is 54-years old, driving to his mother’s house.

They argue over salad.

Frank is intrigued to find himself so self-righteous while so full of greens. The same mouth spitting acid at his mother is chewing vegetation, mincing arugula into mushed bits—what could be less threatening than grazing on grass? Yet she gets so small when he attacks her. To Frank her retreat is contemptible, her face crumpling in on itself like a beer can’s crushing, even her wrinkles wrinkled, sad eyes lost in folded decades of skin. But he knows, when he goes outside to smoke a cigarette, that he cannot blame her—she is only trying to help. He should not be so hard on her. Sometimes it is necessary to shrink yourself, he understands. Sometimes, confronted with the vast, metropolitan sprawl of life and its disappointments, you have to reduce yourself to your smallest unit, to slip rodent-like through the cracks and avoid all that gargantuan existential nonsense, those questions, asteroid-sized and incoming, *Why am I here, Where am I going, and What am I going to make for dinner?*

Life becomes a four-walled thing for Frank, always closing in, a phone ringing at midnight and an unfamiliar voice asking, “Is your refrigerator running?” He is suspicious of nostalgia, the sugared deceit of it. Any moment can become nostalgic with enough refraction, any person can be yearned for if placed at a far enough distance.

His heart, the bargained yard sale of it, continues to pump. He does not find love. He is 60, his mother is dead and he has inherited her house. He sleeps each night in the guest bedroom and he washes the sheets after.

One afternoon in the supermarket he runs into Kyle. It has been, it seems, generations since he last saw Kyle. His acne is gone. His hair gleams and he is wearing a business suit and tie. He looks, Frank muses, professional—which begs the question, then, professional of *what* exactly, of teeth, of blue-gloved hands plunged into the gape of a mouth, of football, of politics, of sandwiches, of teaching overseas...

“Frank,” Kyle says. “Oh, hey! How have you been?”

“Kyle,” Frank says. “Not bad, man. What’re you up to these days?”

They talk for a while. Kyle has one of those jobs and is living one of those lives—“You know how it goes,” he says, and Frank does, and together they nod their heads in understanding. Kyle would like to catch up, he invites Frank to dinner. As they part ways, Frank reflects that so much happens in the supermarket, so many people loveless and wandering and checking their eggs before purchasing. The parking lot is vast as an airplane landing strip, and as he navigates it he feels the distinct melancholy that comes with a journey’s beginning or end. Where did he park again?

And then it is 1am and the leaves of the trees in his neighborhood are limned by orange streetlight and there is no moon. A moonless night: imagine, Frank thinks, to be *-less*, to be, in a word, without. Frankless, he thinks. He cannot sleep. He leaves the guest room and makes the walk down the hallway to his original bedroom, the one he slept in as a child. The floor creaks beneath him as if he is an intruder in his own house. The bedroom is a belly of darkness and trapped air, the lights off and the shades drawn tight, everything perfectly preserved by the stale smell of dust. He crawls into his old bed, pulls the blankets to his chin, and closes his eyes. His eyelids are shut tight but he is utterly awake. Somewhere in the house there is a window open and the breeze it lets in sounds like his mother's soft sighing. Secure as he is beneath his sheets, he feels cast-off and drifting, like an island untethered. He feels like someone else, someone completely and thoroughly not-Frank: like an old childhood friend of himself, one of the kids he had been close to in grade school before they had moved somewhere away and irrevocably exotic, to Florida or Hawaii; a friend lost then, but coming back now, rendered strange and unknowable by so many decades apart, yet familiar as a constellation is far, returning to a place they had never properly left.

The first time I read Sara Hills’s “How to Tell a Scary Story” in the X-R-A-Y submission queue, I was a wreck. The story comments on the ubiquity, even normality, of sexual assault, through a series of “how-to” steps that guide the reader through the various literary devices that make up a story (setting, character, plot, etc.). The narrator takes “you”—the reader, the main character— on a claustrophobic journey to create a “scary story” that is somehow both familiar and depersonalized. Vivid and specific, yet universal. The character you create in this story could be anyone. The setting could be anywhere. Yet, there’s a sickening sense of inevitability as you put the pieces together. That no matter how you order the elements, the tragic outcome will be the same. The weapon will be used. The villain will win. Life will go on, sort of, for your protagonist.

It’s brutal. It’s intense. I loved it. I loved it so much I messaged our fearless leader, Jenn, right after I finished reading. Lucky for us, Jenn was able to press that sweet, sweet acceptance button before someone else scooped this piece up!

—Megan Carlson

HOW TO TELL A SCARY STORY

by Sara Hills

Start with setting

Think about someplace you know. A lonely walk to school, the back alleyways downtown, the dark crevices under the high school bleachers, a house from your childhood. Remember the sodium-yellow haze over the empty parking lot that time in college when a rugby player refused to get out of your car, and decide, instead, to catch the reader off-guard. Think about places that should be more comforting and familiar—a clean ribbon of asphalt under a cloudless sky, the upstairs bathroom at a family Christmas party, a sleepover at your best friend's house, a city bus.

Add in the sounds—the cheering crowd, the seventeenth rendition of Jingle Bells pounded on the piano by your niece, a sharp inhale through a cigarette, a confined silence, the steady drip from a leaky tap; the smells—pine toilet cleaner, car exhaust, whiskey and vomit, buttered popcorn—know you'll come back to these details later and wonder which ones are worth telling.

Choose a protagonist

Pick someone likable, sympathetic; or not. A small girl whose yellow sundress tickles the tops of her knees, a teenager in torn jeans on her way home late from school. Make her 32, a spinster, a mother. Make her thin as a mint Girl Scout cookie. Make her

fat with thighs that rub together under her skirt. Give her glasses or a briefcase, let her clothes inform the time period—a chunky bow in her hair says 1983, a Holly Hobby lunchbox says 1979, a flannel shirt and ripped jeans say grunge, 1992. Make her proud or shy, make her a cookie-baking grandmother of four, or a boy with gapped teeth and a hole in his heart. A widower with three children at home. Make them hungry, unsuspecting, naive. Make them a little bit like you. Make them kind to kittens and afraid of breaking the rules. Or not.

Craft a villain

Surprise the reader; make them nonthreatening, approachable. Make them a teacher with a drawer full of snacks, a benevolent uncle, the older brother of your best friend. Remember drunk teenage boys in dark houses, fathers addicted to pills, neighbors with a new game to play. Pluck them out of thin air. Give them a uniform—a police officer, a postman, a soldier, a doctor, a nurse. Think about the possibility of female villains. Controlling mothers who can reduce a child to the size of a tick with one glance, ready to pop you if they hear one more distasteful word. Angry teachers who make you call them ‘Miss’ and send you to sit in the hallway for being helpful. Decide it could be any one of them.

Choose a weapon

Start with what you know. Remember your mother’s pinched face and her open palm, your brother’s fists, your dad’s loaded pistol in the bedside table. Remember the boy who chased you home from school with a big stick, how fast you ran. Think legendary weapons—Thor with his mighty hammer, Medusa’s eyes, Midas’s touch—and wonder about touch as a weapon. Remember all the

times your blood felt like it had stopped, clotted to stone, how your legs didn't move—couldn't. Think of celebrities' accusers, think of girls in alleyways behind dumpsters, think of machetes and acid and knife attacks and bombs, and think how easy it would be to go quickly. Think of an unexpected weapon, the thing most villains have in common. Write 'penis.'

Employ rising action. Quicken the pace.

Let your mind rest on the crocheted doll on the back of the toilet, her plastic smile, the exploded lunchbox with the blue thermos rolling into the bushes, the white-and-pink globs of bubble gum pressed under the bleachers, the empty beer cans, chocolate wrappers, the posters of boy bands on the walls. Recall the smells, you always do, the sound of laughter, disparaging remarks. Try not to cry.

The denouement

After, let your protagonist live. Fasten the memory like a tiny shadow tucked inside a heart, a womb, until it gnaws its way out. Let them tell no one what happened, or let them tell everyone. Have them whisper it to their diary, their best friend, their mother. Try to remember how the shards of words can catch in a throat; seeing yourself reflected in your mother's eyes when you told her—how distorted you felt, how dirty, how broken—and make your protagonist look away. Crimson their skin with shame until it feels bruised. Let them pray for help, for forgiveness, for death, for justice that never ever comes.

Let no one believe them.

Let it happen again.



Photo by Ryan Norman

I'm drawn to Ryan Norman's "The Sound of Violence" through its taught interplay of beauty and violence. Norman keenly taps into the soundscape of wilderness to create anticipation, terror even. More than once, he ends a paragraph with a question, using a driving sense of curiosity to create momentum. He echoes earlier scenes in later in the story through color: the gray of dead flesh to the gray cast of the moon, layering them on top of each other to show the razor thin line between life and death. What's wrestled with here, though, goes far beyond that theme and pulls us into the relationship between violence and sex, dominance and submission, struggle and release; I think, a subtle and masterfully accomplished undertone of queer cultural themes. Beyond soundscape, taste is used, as well as sharp visuals, textures, smells, making this work a study in the sense-dimensions that brings a lived-in quality to any compelling story: a world richly realized.

—Michael Todd Cohen

THE SOUND OF VIOLENCE

by Ryan Norman

Usually the orchard was all light, sunburn cooled by a welcome breeze, but not that day. Fog crept up from the river and swallowed every tree in its path, whetting its appetite for the too short grass that cut like blades, soaking the cicadas' song. I sat on a cold cinder block and watched my boyfriend wash his car, questioning why he would shine it on such a gloomy day, but daring not to say it aloud. His phone rang and I looked at myself in the shiny apple red door. Winked. Shot some finger guns. Fell to the floor.

"What are you doing? I have to go do something. Stay here," he ordered.

"I want to come. Where are you going? How long will you be gone?"

"A deer's trapped in a fence in the upper orchard. I have to kill it, or it'll make a big hole in the fence, or break its neck."

"I'm coming."

I didn't know deer screamed until that day. I watched in awe, my eyes wet, standing at a distance from this huge creature, all muscle, as it screamed into the damp air. Thrashing wildly against an almost invisible wire fence, its antlers trapped, entangled with imminent death until finally all went quiet. I touched my forehead and pulled away sticky droplets on my fingertips. That welcome

breeze returned, and my heart sank. I had never witnessed death, and never imagined I would. He told me the deer would be skinned, the meat eaten. Nothing would go to waste. But I sat in silence as the truck hurtled past trees into the thick of fog, uncomfortably aware that in the open bed lay a blood-soaked deer, jiggling stiffly with every pebble on the road. I imagined the process of preparing the deer for consumption, sliding a sharp knife between the skin and muscle. I knew some details. The indignity of it all. Hanging it by its hind feet to drain the blood, eyes wide open like black holes. But hadn't I done the same?

Descending the stairs in a southern New York lab, wearing clothes on top of clothes to keep out the formaldehyde—a sticky stench—entering a room with two dead bodies given to science. We were assigned a cadaver, a trick of the language to distance ourselves from the fact that we would be cutting into dead people with scalpels. Uncovering secrets. Naming muscles, veins, arteries. Draping white cloth for dignity. Digging into intercostal muscles with no breath sounds. A smell that hasn't left me. And when the draping slipped, an image that hasn't left me either. All that muscle. Exposed on a stainless-steel table. So much gray. Could I really judge my farmer boyfriend for killing a deer when I cut into a human?

He had been offended by that lab as much as I was saddened by killing a trapped deer. He had told me to stay. Wasn't it my own fault? But life carried on. Sadness blurred. Judgment faded. We went about our usual things, no hang ups. Trivia on Wednesdays, sunsets on the roof, cider on the porch watching the train rush by. Until we drunkenly ran through the woods one night, searching for a waterfall. We set up camp in a small clearing on the property of the orchard. A tent built for one. We stopped to eat over fire, a

hunk of meat thrown onto a cast iron skillet. He fed me a small piece and it was nothing I recognized. I asked him what it was, and he asked, "Remember that deer?" And it tasted of pain and fear. It tasted of violence. I spat it out.

The moon guided us to water, as she is wont to do, and the rushing sound plummeting past wet, slick stone drowned our voices. We left our clothes on the dirt embankment and swam in silver flecked streams, our bodies glowing green underwater and star white on top. I watched him there, standing in a warrior's pose on an outcropping of rocks among the frothy water, drunk on apples, and admired every inch of his marble-carved body. Maybe I was drunk on apples, too. Everything began to wobble, so we went back to his tent. He laid down, just another naked body in the summer night, his skin still cold from the green river. The moon cast his skin gray as he laid there on a slab of earth, no modesty, just the thin floor of his tent. I covered his face with my palm, his breath heavy, fog caught in my lifeline, obscuring love, and lust; my tongue a scalpel plunging deep into him. I wondered at his muscles quaking with each scream, stealing the silence of the night until I was full.



Art by Tyler Dempsey

“Come Home Now” is one of those pieces that I just loved from the first reading. It’s a masterful account of young love, its obsessive nature, the potential for damage. The opening image of broken stemmed flowers hidden in a bag is such a perfect scene-setter for the story of two young people, one of whom is struggling with addiction. Through tornadoes and poetry and honesty that’s searingly raw, the relationship emerges. I admired Danielle’s lack of melodrama as she describes how it was:

“I checked your location. You checked mine. We were both dots on a map.”

The checking locations mirrors the checking of the weather, and the pressure builds as the substance abuse heightens. I love the juxtaposition of the innocence of youth with the very serious themes at play here:

“We fought in the parking lot of a casino, but it was romantic. You hugged me every time I cried.”

This line, for me, is such a perfect cross-section of the power of the feelings a teenager has, the sense that fighting is romantic, that it implies a love deep enough to care. I found this utterly relatable.

This is Danielle’s second piece I’ve had the pleasure of editing for X-R-A-Y, and I’m hoping there’ll be more to come. She has a talent for situating us in her specific experience, embracing us with a swirl of ideas and themes, and yet managing to ensure there’s enough of the universal in there for us readers to feel seen and understood.

—Jo Varnish

COME HOME NOW by Danielle Chelosky

When apologizing to you for fucking up, I'd buy you flowers. The first ones were blue—not like the sky, but abrasive and ethereal like from a video game. I broke the stems so they would fit in my bag without peeking out, and the color dripped onto my palms and stained them for days. If it were red, it would have felt accusatory; this ultramarine was comforting, safe.

*

The risk for fucking up was lethal. Not for me, but for you.

*

I was seventeen. I fell in love fast, curled up against you while we watched movies. My mom spammed my phone one night with texts: *There's a tornado warning !!! Come home now !!!* We laughed. Tornadoes never happen on Long Island. *American Beauty* played on the screen in front of us. We kissed while the storm raged, the wind vibrating the house, my phone buzzing.

*

You spent every night in my bed for months. When I unplugged yellow lights, I left the blue ones in. Then, as if by association, I'd reach my lips up to yours and climb on top of you. We fucked slow and carefully, as if the whole thing were fragile. *I love being inside you*, you'd say, so in love. We talked about getting married every day.

*

I checked your location. You checked mine. We were both dots on a map.

*

In the winter, we drove up to Syracuse. We dawdled around a DIY venue waiting for a band called Fiddlehead to play songs about grief. Rumors circulated that they were late because the frontman was a teacher and he got held late at school. You got nervous in crowds, but I held your hand. They went on and the sound quality was abominable in the best way. Static rang in our ears. You took photos with our shared disposable camera. In one, the band is drenched in a deep blue, almost underwater.

*

I am not anybody's first, or second, or third, your poetry read, written years before. I am a residence put up for foreclosure, the weeds overgrown and the flowers dead.

*

We drove to Maine for another trip. After a show in Connecticut, we went to a hotel in Massachusetts. The air conditioner turned on and off throughout the night, waking both of us at 4 A.M., our consciousness syncing up. You wrote of the moment: "A kiss good night turned into passionate caresses until I found myself inside her half-asleep. We made love in a dazed narcoleptic dream. We then fell back asleep, this time fully naked, knotted in each other's arms and legs."

*

You worried you weren't enough for me. You were often insecure, often implying that I was a slut.

*

According to News 12, there is about one tornado on Long Island

every year. Where am I during these?

*

Another old poem of yours: *Awoken by shrieks rippling into the dreading silence of 4am, I wipe the cold sweat from my forehead. The hazy vision from the night prior still remains. I think to myself how it reminds me of the steamy car windows that probably still reek of one too many stale beers and poor decisions. The rain still beats the gutters relentlessly and my headache pounds just as heavily.*

*

You were a scorpio, a water sign. Sensitive, sentimental, intense.

*

I had the house to myself one night. You came over and we watched *Pulp Fiction* on my couch. I wanted to be Uma Thurman—mysterious, smoking cigarettes, bleeding out of my nose. We made cookies and popcorn, and then you fucked me on my translucent kitchen table because you could.

*

You kept getting sick. I didn't know what that meant.

*

Maybe every time there was a tornado on Long Island, I was away with you. Maybe it was when we went to North Carolina. Or during our trip to West Virginia. Or amidst our Pittsburgh adventure. Or while we were at your aunt's lake house in New Jersey.

*

We fought in the parking lot of a casino, but it was romantic. You hugged me every time I cried.

*

You were growing away from me. I checked your location. You were at a friend's house. I thought you loved being inside me, then you weren't even near me. When you were, I unplugged the yellow

and blue lights at the same time, knowing you didn't want your body in mine. I wished we weren't separate entities. I wanted to be one with you. There was a gap between us, filled with static.

*

There is a website where people can predict tornadoes. The worst one to ever strike Long Island will be on July 9, 2141. I won't be alive to watch it.

*

I checked your location. You were getting heroin. I had no choice but to go about my day. I went to Barnes and Noble because I needed books for class. I slid paperbacks into my bag and headed to the restrooms to sob and try calling you again. On the line, a woman told me: *You look like a cartoon. Not in a bad way, I'm an artist.*

*

You moved to Philadelphia for recovery. I drank gin in my room alone. The dot became a never-ending loading symbol.

*

One morning, I was sitting at a cafe reading Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and getting ready to drive to you. It was two and a half hours away and the drive sometimes gave me panic attacks. I always went 90 on the Jersey Turnpike. When I started cleaning up to leave, you texted me asking if we could do the next day. I cried and cried and cried. I found out later that it was because you relapsed and were sick again.

*

I asked you if you could get me flowers. You never did.

*

You found someone else to love when I faded out of your life. Someone to spend nights in hotels with. Someone to post pictures

of. Someone to replace me. Someone to relapse with—even better than me. I was someone you hid from; she got to see you down to your core, float with you in that staticky world you loved to escape to. Someone to save you, someone to bring you back from the dead, someone to wake you up from that nightmare that took the air out of your lungs. I was in another state when your heart stopped beating, and I didn't find out until months later, like it never happened. I can't hate her because she is why you're still alive.

*

A loneliness flooded in that I had not felt in years. I thought: *I am not anybody's first, or second, or third.*

*

I underlined in *Bluets*: “For to wish to forget how much you loved someone — and then, to actually forget — can feel, at times, like the slaughter of a beautiful bird who chose, by nothing short of grace, to make a habitat of your heart.”

*

I have memories, but they are just images, ideas, fragments, poems, parts, pieces, and you are just a person, far away, a dot on a map I no longer have, a tornado swirling through a different city.

I read stories like an editor. This makes it very hard to read a piece without pausing along the way to amend things like bloated sentences or awkward phrasing. With “Salad Girls” by CK Kane, I was so swept up in the story that my inner editor was quiet from the killer opening sentence (“I don’t want my mom to die not because I like her, but because she’ll be the nastiest ghost.”) to the striking final ones (“My syrup feet make Band-Aid rip sounds all the way through the school parking lot. I’ll walk all night until I get to Mom’s house.”).

I often find it is hard for longer stories like “Salad Girls” to capture the same dense urgency one finds in good flash, where every sentence is a lean but fully realized work of art. But thanks to Kane’s use of precise language, surprising sensory details, and character descriptions so grotesque they often dip (but never dive) into caricature, I felt that dense urgency here.

This description of the narrator’s mother lingered with me: “Her eyes burned like the nostrils of one of her horses as a big glob of spit dangled from her mouth to my forehead. It splat right between my eyes and it smelled like her breath and her sobs.” Likewise, I can’t get this disturbing yet poetic image of the narrator’s aunt out of my head: “Karl,’ says her mouth, like those wax lips we used to get at Halloween that weren’t exactly candy. ‘She smells like the smoking section.’”

The subject matter (and its characters) in “Salad Girls” are hard to stomach at times. But I feel as though I am a better writer and editor for having experienced this piece.

—Elizabeth Crowder

SALAD GIRLS

by CK Kane

I don't want my mom to die not because I like her, but because she'll be the nastiest ghost. Unrelenting in death. I just know it. I pull her boots off like always. Using both hands, I make an ugly face and lean my body trying to pull. She moans like always. Whenever she's not on a horse she's in this bed. Crumbs of caked mud and crap get on the white sheets as the second boot finally gives and I almost fly across the room. Still in her breeches and a turtleneck, she pulls the covers over her save for a long black braid. The lived-in covers smell like dandruff.

*

A bell sound rattles sharp metallic through my bedroom. Our doorbell almost never rings, so I don't get up right away, I just freeze with my hand stuffed down my jeans, distracted from my drawing.

Downstairs in the doorway, she looks like one of the paper cut-out puppets I used to make. Just a dark shape. I recognize her but I don't know if I should act like it.

"Karl," says her mouth, like those wax lips we used to get at Halloween that weren't exactly candy. She smells like the smoking section. Hi Auntie Deb, I say to her grin. A force allows me to stand a certain distance away from her, like the back of a magnet.

It almost tickles when I step closer. She hears my mom wailing from upstairs through the walls and her down comforter. I don't notice until she does.

Outside the bedroom the groaning is unbearable.

Auntie Deb leans in: "Ever since your father, huh."

I nod, but I don't remember.

I'm glad I don't feel much. There's no room in this house for anyone else's feelings.

Auntie Deb click-clacks into my mother's room, chattering.

Lydia, what did you take.

Lydia, this boy must be close to six feet already.

Her fingernail is a shade of red I've never seen before, almost brown, almost purple. It faintly scratches along the grain of the sheets: "My God, these cost more than my whole life and you wear your barn clothes to sleep?"

I remember a party a few years ago in a different town in Connecticut, one that seemed like the black & white version of our town. After the party I asked my mom if we were filthy rich. And she grabbed my face so hard and shook it and said, "Who taught you how to speak like that? Someone said that, you haven't heard that in this house, who said that, who taught you that?"

I felt extra dumb. That was the last time I'd seen Auntie Deb until now.

The phone makes its wild sound to remind us it's off the hook, its cord of tired curls swinging like a noose in waning lopes. My mom

keeps it that way. Auntie Deb unplugs the phone from the wall and hangs it up, hard. She sits on the bed and rubs my mom's back and I watch from the doorway, feeling the magnet feeling but also an upset. Like ticklish surgery.

The fingernail traces my mom like chalk through the dandruff horse shit covers.

"So skinny, Lydia. How do you stay so thin?"

My mom rolls her eyes, I'm not sure if it's voluntary.

Coke and toast, I say.

Auntie Deb looks at me.

I tell her she only eats Coke and toast. Real Coke, not diet. White toast, I clean up the crumbs. With butter.

I think about my mom's deliberate, aggressive cracking of a can of Coke. Almost violent. A sound I try to flee the room before I have to hear. The craziest burps, too. You'd never think such a skinny lady would have these Homer Simpson burps. But when I burped she told me I was disgusting and she hated me. I don't burp around her anymore.

*

Auntie Deb in my room is awkward like Herman Munster, like she's going to break something even though nothing is really breakable.

"How old are you, thirteen? You have the room of an old man."

Her eyeballs swirl around like she's worried about stalactites threatening to fall from the ceiling and impale her.

What if I am an old man, I reply to the back of her head.

*

Pepsi is the scraggly cat who paces around Auntie Deb's porch. I call to him with a *Psst psst psst*. He glances at me before I go inside. Auntie Deb gets off the phone in her kitchen and tells me my mom is doing ok. The kitchen is yellow, everything. I hand her a refrigerator magnet. I stole it from a gift shop at Schiphol airport last summer when I visited Oma and Opa. It's a small pair of wooden clogs. I guess I thought I might give it to someone at school. They hadn't seen me in years. Oma was so upset by how much I resemble my dad she wouldn't look at me. Opa and I would take walks through Oud-Zuid and return to their creaky house on Amstelveenseweg with something new every day: art supplies, a travel chess set, a little dinosaur sculpture, or just some still-warm bread.

"Aren't you sweet," her hand grasps the clogs and the fingernail presses them onto the fridge.

"What's this for?"

I tell her, you know, for watching me or whatever.

I chop a fat golden onion on the cutting board like she tells me to. Stinging drips pour from my nose and I slip.

Blood squirts from my fingertip in weird beats and I wonder if I'll need a stitch, I think so. Auntie Deb click-clacks over, standing worriedly behind me. I smell the smoking section and also her rose perfume, "Because people to whom the Virgin Mother has appeared, you know, they all report smelling roses first. An overwhelming aroma of rose. Rhapsodic." The fingernails pinch my blood-finger and lift it to the wax Halloween lips like mini hors d'oeuvres.

And then she sucks.

*

The living room is like a garage sale. I do my homework and Pepsi stares at me through the window's lacy curtain. My finger is starting to peel from where Auntie Deb filled it with superglue. She always has this cha-cha music playing and I guess it's supposed to be cheerful but it's so, so sad. It's loud enough to hear above all else but also it fades into the carpet fluff like snowfall. I let Pepsi inside and he mews around my legs. Auntie Deb click-clacks out of the kitchen in an apron that she double-tied around her waist, pleased.

"I'm skinnier than your mom, now."

Her mouth is a purple hole in her face from drinking wine. She notices Pepsi after a while and the purple hole contorts:

"Get him out of here or I'll break that cat's neck so fast your head'll spin, don't think I won't do it."

I carry Pepsi outside and remember my mom used to follow threats with *so fast your head'll spin* when she still said things to me, and it always seemed so ghoulish.

The corduroy chair swallows me. Its coils are spent, its dimensions cartoonish. Auntie Deb sips from a chipped crystal cup on the floral couch and taps through the channels as the glow of the TV illuminates the purple hole. She asks if I remember my dad and if so can I still hear his voice saying things, because she can, and she wonders if they're the same things. I tell her they're not the same things because he didn't speak in English to me, which bothered my mom. The purple hole smiles.

"God forbid Lydia feel excluded."

An audience looms around us. Saint relics and porcelain figurines of poodles, butterflies and Siamese cats peek from their shelves, dead-eyed.

“He liked—” the purple hole corrects itself in a tone even lower in its gravel throat. “He *wanted* me, your father.”

I join her on the couch, entering her ticklish force field. She palms my skull. Her fingernails sift through my hair, letting it fall back into place like she’s flipping through pages in a book. Roses. Rhapsodic. She holds her cup to my face and my teeth clank the crystal when I gulp down her wine.

*

After my dad died a guy started coming over to tune the baby grand piano. He was balding and had drawn on a widow’s peak with black crayon, it looked like. My mom was awfully friendly to him, it wasn’t like her, she was drinking. My stomach flipped clunkily and I told Widow’s Peak about my dead dad while he tapped the same key over and over. My mom dragged me into the pantry and pinned my shoulders to the floor with her knees and gripped my little neck and said through her big square teeth that if I ever embarrassed her like that again she’d kill me, she’d fucking kill. me. Her eyes burned like the nostrils of one of her horses as a big glob of spit dangled from her mouth to my forehead. It splat right between my eyes and it smelled like her breath and her sobs. When she slammed the door, dry pasta rained on me.

*

Auntie Deb watches me eat while she puffs a cigarette, her eyes warming while I tell her bad stories about my mom like she asks me to. The kitchen yellow is bright and sick. Ash dances near my

pancake but I still eat it. When I'm done, she tightens the belt on her robe and takes my plate away and says:

"Do you know what our mother did to us? Women are evil, you know. Rotten. Sick."

*

The bathwater splashes up and down, up and down until I explode. Auntie Deb says I'll get an infection, I'll get backed up, if she doesn't milk me. I can do it myself but her house, her rules. I stare at the same spot of tile grout when it happens. After the bath, I grab a towel and cover up quick. She is a scarecrow blocking the doorway. I tell her I haven't had a headache in a while but she insists, it's preventative, it's better absorbed this way. I put one foot on the closed toilet seat and dig my toes into the carpet material seat cover. Through a rubber glove I feel the fingernail press the tablets inside of me as I try not to clench.

In bed, I picture an agonized, ancient tree trunk stuck inside another tree trunk at the bottom of the sea.

You don't have to prove your feelings if you don't have them.

You don't have to have feelings.

In the dark things are easier.

That's what I say.

*

When the cha-cha music isn't playing, I can play whatever I want. Auntie Deb tries to like it.

"I used to be a backup singer for a rock'n'roller. With one or two other gals. We did our hair like a bunch of lettuce on top of our

heads and wore lots of rouge on the apples of our cheeks. We started calling ourselves the salad girls.”

The bathroom door handle jiggles open. Her house her rules.

The fingernail pokes my stomach hard through the water splashing on every syllable. “Some-times-I-think-you’re-a-fag-got.”

When she slams the door, a brass ring from around the handle shimmies around and around before wobbling to a stop on the tile, sealing the quiet.

*

Charcoal scribbles hard like someone else is moving my hand for me and when I look up the art teacher looks away quickly and the other kids are already leaving. The guidance counselor’s voice, a phony pleading *KARL*, yanks me like bad entertainment off a stage into his office.

I tell him it’s art, it doesn’t mean anything. He says art always means something. Well, mine doesn’t. I sling my backpack over one shoulder and put my hair behind my ears on the way out.

The Janitor squeaks a wheeled bucket down the hall. He has deep eye sockets that make him look like an old picture. The soapy water sloshes floral and sweet and I’m nauseous as I run by his sunken face to get out. He might have said something to me or maybe his mouth just moved the way people missing teeth churn their face around their empty mouths.

*

Pepsi makes little snacking sounds when I give him the rest of my chicken dinner. The wind crackles through his parched fur the way it would move through dried grass and he’s happy I think. I focus

on that.

“WHO THE FUCK IS IN MY BED?”

A dull punch to the throat wakes me. Coughing and gasping, there's a blur, a frustrated ape straddling me, bopping the mattress beneath us. A gold chain grazes my eyes and I hear the swooshing of a windbreaker. Sour cologne and crunchy hair gel. Auntie Deb materializes in a talcum whirl and breaks it up. He's still swinging. Straining between labored breaths, Auntie Deb introduces us.

“Karl, this is my son. Ronnie.”

I ask her if she means my cousin Ronnie.

Heaving, with his mother's arms locking his by the elbows, Ronnie says, “I don't got any cousins.”

I remind him our moms are sisters, that makes us cousins.

“I DON'T GOT. ANY COUSINS.”

Ronnie sleeps off his episode on the floral couch in an angel white tracksuit. His big wet eyes make his Disney-long lashes cling in damp spikes. His buttony nose is like a child with a cold's or one of those Precious Moments figures you get for your first holy communion. I imagine a little ceramic statue of Ronnie, on his knees in his white tracksuit clasping a gold chain rosary. On the shelf of a Hallmark. A laugh I didn't know I had falls out of me, bounces off my chin and down my chest like a spat-out mouthful of Cheerios. Auntie Deb looks at him from the yellow kitchen table, I can't tell if she's sad or embarrassed or both. She tells me that Ronnie's dad worked in a crematorium.

“It's no good for a person, to breathe death all day, it does something to them.” Her voice sounds like it's asking me permission, like

she wants forgiveness for living the way she has and birthing the couch angel.

*

Auntie Deb click-clacks down the hallway through clusters of students and their parents whispering over cookies and juice. There's an invisible forest fire that follows her and once she passes everyone seems wilted, perplexed. Being at the school in the evening feels vulgar. The art teacher raises his eyebrows as he ushers her into his classroom, closing the door behind them, making me wait in the hall.

A group of classmates laugh and stare from afar. One of them, a girl, leaves the group and walks towards me purposefully, like she's doing something brazen and wants to seem cool about it. Like she does badass spooky shit all the time. Like it wasn't a dare. She tells me she thinks I'm good at drawing and that she might go to Europe in the summer and if she goes to Amsterdam can I teach her a word in Dutch maybe? I say *misschien* which means maybe. She adds that she doesn't believe the things she's heard about me—that I torture animals or that I left a kid in a coma at my last school.

A chair screeches, Auntie Deb is yelling at the art teacher. I open the door. "He's not *zany*", she mocks, "he's-just-a-fag-got," whacking the art teacher's desk with my rolled-up grades on each sound. He winces as she raises the roll like she's gonna hit him, a warning. She click-clacks right towards me and stops.

"Call his mother all you want. She's unwell. I'm in charge now."

The fingernails clamp my arm and she glares at the girl I was talking to and asks me, on our way through the spiritless juice and cookie

crowd, “Who was that little tramp?”

*

Ronnie slurps stew in the yellow chair across from me. Each time Auntie Deb says something to me he slurps louder. The fingernails walk up my leg under the yellow table. I ask how my mom is and the fingernails stop and dig. “She’s home. She’s been home, Karl. She doesn’t want to see you. She doesn’t care.”

“WHAT THE FUCK MOM?”

Ronnie pulls the hand away from my leg.

“Oh God forgive ya, Ronnie, for using that language with me,” barks Auntie Deb, cradling her lonely hand.

His Precious Moments face reddens when he asks what was that about. She tells him my mother is very disturbed so I need kindness, as much of it as I can get. Ronnie slams his fist on the table in front of me, rattling the salt and pepper shakers.

“SHE LOVES ME MORE,” he spews in my face. He gets up and backs away. The loaded slingshot pull of the screen door spring is like held breath behind him when he stops to announce, “YOU’RE NEVER GONNA SEE PEPSI AGAIN” before he stomps towards his car.

The fingernails rub my shoulders as I finish my stew, ripping off pieces of a dinner roll and dunking them in the remains. I’m entitled. She asks me do I want to kill my mommy and that she would help me and we would get away with it. I shake my head no and stuff more stew-soaked dinner roll into my mouth calmly. She yanks her hands away, disgusted by my serenity.

The house is warm, but it’s not mine.

*

I kick a twig down the road on my walk back to Auntie Deb's. The sun's exit behind me creates a monstrous silhouette. It reminds me of when Auntie Deb showed up at our door that time. And her shape projected through the foyer, eating it up like black smoke. Consumed. I realize I forgot my sketchbook.

I try two different doors before I find one unlocked and the school's so empty even my shadow echoes. The locker room lights buzz and then dip, buzz and dip. When I see the janitor, his dopey stance is sheepish like I busted him doing something wrong. Maybe it's the jumpsuit making him a bow-legged toddler with a sagging diaper. He asks me what I've got there and I tell him some drawings but he walks over my words and says *filth*. He waddles towards me and says it again.

"Filth."

His homeless mouth makes the shape of filth this time with no sound. He tugs at himself. I become rubber cement all clumsy and stuck. His hand forces mine to feel him get bigger through the jumpsuit.

The toilet tank lid is in clunky pieces next to him. The blood smells like something you shouldn't. I don't remember. I look away and think when I look back this won't be real but there it is, a flesh-filled jumpsuit slumped and stuck to the floor. A wet teabag. This has to be a dream. I'm dreaming. Pressure fills the space around my body and I shake 'cause Auntie Deb is gonna be so pissed I'm taking so long. Supper is important.

I stand right over him, his entire face caved in now, a collapsed building. A discarded Halloween mask on a paved street. His

ghost eyes are milky blue hard-boiled eggs splayed in different directions like a gorilla's tits. Spit fills my mouth and seeps from the corners. I poke the body with a pen and it's so crazy, I stab him with the pen all over, each time: *does that hurt, does that hurt, does that hurt?* I step back, my shoes peeling off the floor with sticky syrup sounds. I take a running jump and land on his chest, *clunk*, I think I broke his ribs. He's surprisingly sturdy. I jump up and down until I almost lose my balance on his squishy gut. I imagine his organs are water balloons and I'm popping them. Like bubble wrap. I lift up his arm and drop it, *thunk*. My jeans and sweater and shoes are spattered.

I sit down on a changing bench and flip through my sketchbook, showing him my drawings and explaining them. I marvel at the sound of my voice. I pause, feeling truly heard, and I giggle. Almost ecstatically. And then I draw him.

My syrup feet make Band-Aid rip sounds all the way through the school parking lot. I'll walk all night until I get to Mom's house.

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