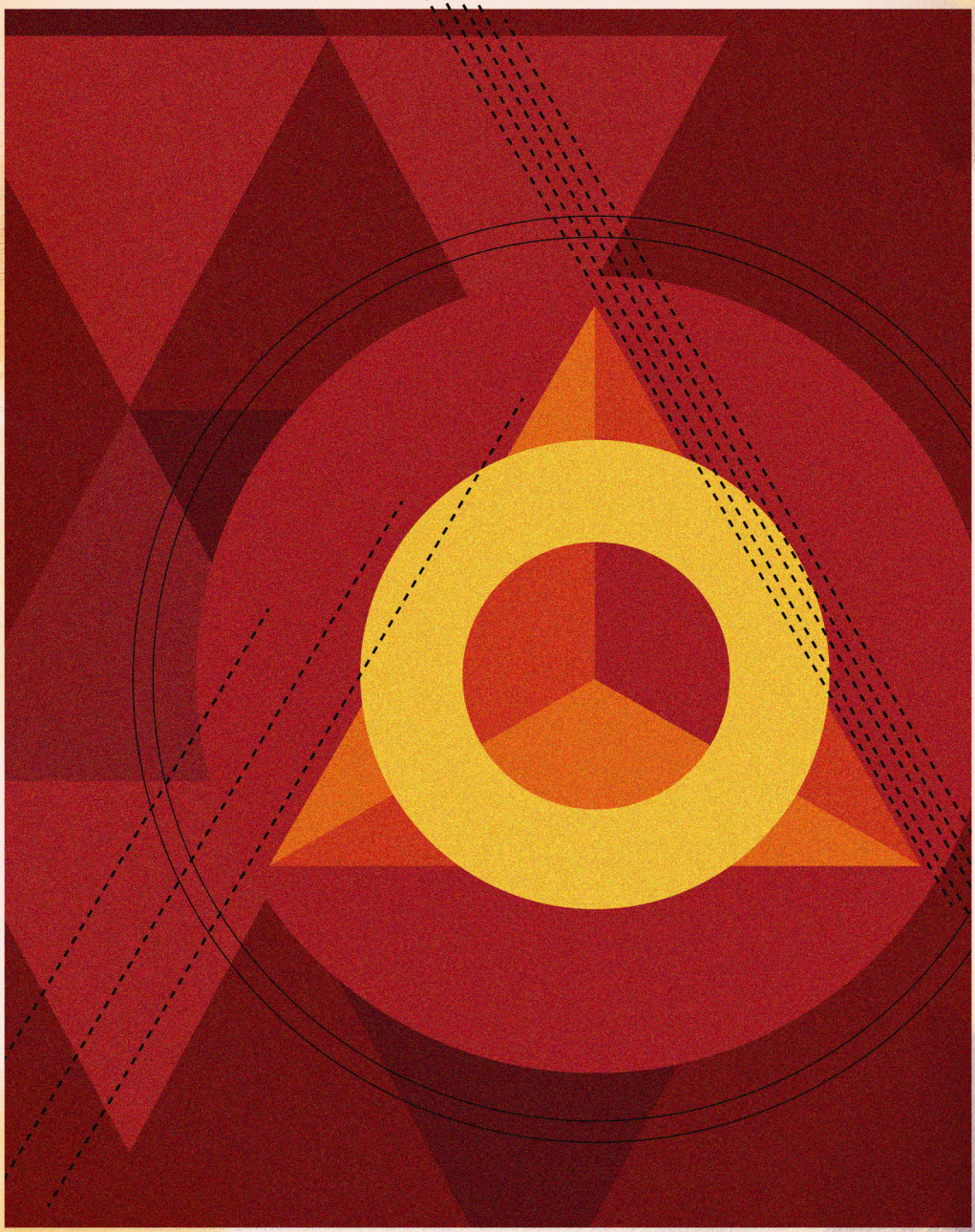
CRAFT CHAPS

THESE VITAL RUPTURES: BODY HORROR AS WORLD MAKING

BY MEG CASS



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The symptom: a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non- assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire.

—Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*

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THESE VITAL RUPTURES

I've written body horror for years, yet I've often struggled to describe it. I revert to listing the body horrors I've experienced as a queer, trans person who grew up in the nineties. I might mention my sexual assault, or my eating disorder. I might mention how last August, in the middle of the night, I booked an appointment at a Planned Parenthood across the state line to make sure I could access testosterone. But body horror is so much more than what happens to us. It poses questions, transforms, threatens social orders, begets slimy, tentacled, fleshy, sublime new worlds.

In his 1983 essay "Horrality: The Textuality of the Contemporary Horror Film," Phillip Brody first coined the term body horror as a specific narrative technique. He writes, "The contemporary Horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it." The essay explores anxieties around violations of the body, the vulnerability of the body when it is forced to undergo transformations.

A key dimension of body horror, in my work and that of many other queer and trans writers, is the role of the state and other external systems of oppression in dictating our experience of our bodies. It isn't our transformations in and of themselves that cause terror, it is the ways in which we are denied autonomy over them. It's the loss of our ability to make changes (or stop changes) based on our intuitive knowledge of ourselves.

In the introduction to *Your Body is Not Your Body,* a wondrous body horror anthology published by Tenebrous Press in 2022, M Belanger writes, "body horror hits differently when you are trans: your very flesh can become a prison; all the familiar horror tropes of monstrous transformation strike you viscerally where you live, and there is no escaping the marrow deep dread" (i).

Body horror often draws from or directly represents lived experiences that are already body horror: medical experimentation, unwanted pregnancy, infection, dysmorphia, dysphoria, and other forms of trauma. Prominent examples include *The Thing, Rosemary's Baby, The Fly, Akira, The Brood, Get Out,*

Raw, Titane. These stories ask, in part, how trauma shows itself in the body, especially those emotional experiences white supremacist heteropatriarchy perpetuates, then seeks to deny, erase, silence. The things we are forced to repress.

Much early body horror centers cis white protagonists and shows forms of bodily violation that many marginalized people in the U.S. already experience as part of their reality. The horror is that cis white men are experiencing it. As Anne Elizabeth Moore writes in her essay collection *Body Horror: Capitalism, Fear, Misogyny, Jokes:* "What I offer for consideration is this: that perhaps what scares cis men the most—as evidenced by the fears we are given to consume as entertainment in the horror genre—may often be the things that the rest of us have learned to deal with on a daily basis" (246). What is body horror for cis white men, in other words, has become normalized for the rest of us.

The Thing is perhaps the most iconic example of this. It focuses on a cis white male scientist working in an isolated research station in Antarctica. The alien monster surfaces beneath the layers of ice and snow and secretly invades the bodies of the all-male research team. The monster hides within their bodies, disguising itself by mimicking their behaviors, then killing them off. The film uses the uncanny—a body and self that appear unchanged but have been dramatically altered—to intensify the horror as the men try to determine who has been infected. The film has been roundly critiqued in recent years in terms of representation: it includes only one Black character and the complete absence of people of different genders.

In their essay "The Future of Body Horror: Can Our Art Keep Up with Our Suffering," (2017) Davey Davis calls for a body horror that decenters white male experiences. They also envision a body horror that represents the *systemic* forms of oppression underlying these experiences and its impact on the collective, rather than just on isolated individuals. They write:

> If classic body horror reflected the anxieties of the 20th century, then contemporary body horror that wishes to be successful (read: honest, evocative, pertinent, artistic) must wade into the nightmare of our geopolitical reality: privatization, austerity measures, mass incarceration, the police state, and the manipulation of big data, militarization, and surveillance technology to accomplish it all.

Recent examples of body horror in film and fiction in part answer Davis' call. In *Get Out*, upper-middle class white people kidnap, brainwash, and partially lobotomize Black people whose bodies and talents they deem desirable. Robin Means Coleman writes in her groundbreaking study *Horror Noir: A History of Black American Horror from the 1890s to Present:* "It's slavery, pure and simple. It begins with mental enslavement through Missy's hypnosis and then leads to physical enslavement of the most horrific and insidious kind: brain surgery in which the personalities of white folks are transplanted into black bodies." The body horror isn't confined to Chris, the main character, or even to our specific contemporary moment. The Armitage family reveals that these "transplantations" have been occurring for generations, have become their own institution. Namwali Serpell argues in "Double Consciousness and Zombies", "The film literalizes double consciousness through sci-fi "zombies" who are black and white, slave and master, in one body." The title takes on layers of meaning as the film shows how white supremacy infiltrates its victims emotionally and psychologically as well as physically.

Climate change, colonization, and body horror intersect in Leslie Nneka Arimah's title story, "What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky". Extreme flooding has caused the loss of whole continents, leading to mass displacement and along with it, the reinforcement of colonial oppression. Britain, America, and France control, brutalize, and subjugate Nigeria, Mexico, and Senegal respectively, through a range of often familiar tactics: the changing of colonized people's names into the colonizers' language, the displacement of colonized people from their native land into refugee camps, and genocide through the creation of a new disease.

Within this context, human beings also claim to have discovered a formula which makes human life limitless, unlocking the key to seemingly impossible physical and intellectual abilities. A select few known both as "mathematicians" or as "grief workers" are able to calculate and subtract other people's griefs, "drawing them from living bodies like poison from a wound." The main character, Nneoma, possesses this ability as does her ex-girlfriend Kioni. While Nneoma works primarily with the upper-middle classes who can afford her services, Kioni's grief work focuses on the most traumatized victims of environmental destruction, of empire.

This work is taxing on both characters' minds, bodies, and relationships. Nneoma is estranged from her father after he asked her to remove his grief over her mother's death. Nneoma and Kioni break up after Nneoma asks Kioni to work on her father's grief. After doing this work, Nneoma must recover physically and mentally: "At home, Nneoma went straight to bed, taking two pills that would let her sleep for twelve hours. After that she would be as close to normal as she could be. The rawness of the girl's memories would diminish, becoming more like a story in a book she'd once read" (169). At the end of the story, Nneoma finds Kiona suffering from a particular form of self-harm that affects grief workers: they attempt to eat their own bodies. Kioni is unable to think clearly, as there are "Ten thousand traumas in her psyche, squeezing past each other, vying for the attention of their host" (173). While all genders in the story can conceivably be grief workers, Arimah's particular focus on a queer black Nigerian woman and on the ravages of colonization invites both a decolonial as well as a feminist reading. Woven through the everyday world of her characters, her body horror shows how queer women of color often bear the greatest physical as well as emotional burdens of environmental destruction and its resulting traumas.

Some critics, like Moore, argue that body horror in large part merely reflects what many of us experience daily, and thus is boring. There is an understandable weariness in this critique. *We know how awful the world is for our community; we don't need body horror to confirm it.* Yet, I keep coming back to the disruptive power of these transformations. Body horror's messy, non-realist realist strategies jar something awake within me. A person grows a monstrous second consciousness in the form of a tentacled vagina monster (*Queen of Teeth* by Hailey Piper); a woman's repressed self appears inside her toilet and builds a body from the shit, piss, and blood she receives ("The Head" by Bora Chung); a woman gets weight loss surgery and is haunted by the part of their body they've cut away ("Eight Bites" by Carmen Maria Machado).

There is a vitality in these bodily ruptures, in the often chimera-like creatures they engender, in the refusal to abide by the agreed-upon laws of nature, of physics. Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject speaks to this vitality. In *The Powers of Horror,* she describes abject objects as those which unsettle the boundaries between seemingly fixed categories such as life and death; self and Other; normal and abnormal; clean and filthy. Examples include corpses, "a

wound with blood and pus," and sewage. The abject represents the things in our lives we throw away, discard, define as without value, as useless, as separate from ourselves. For Kristeva, the abject isn't merely gross: "It is…not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (*Powers* 4).

In the body horror I love, normative bodies and normative systems are, however briefly, defamiliarized, fractured, exploded in ways that open up space for hauntings, for revisioning. I think of the women who slowly become translucent in Machado's "Real Women Have Bodies". Disembodied, they are stitched into prom dresses that teenage girls then try on at the mall:

> When they come out, I can see the faded women all bound up in them, fingers laced tightly through the grommets. I cannot tell if they are holding on for dear life or if they are trapped. The rustling and trembling of fabric could be weeping or laughter. The girls spin and lace and tighten (137).

The ambiguity of this moment, the uncertainty around the desires of these new ghostly beings—who we learn may be engaging in forms of electronic protest—helps us see life under patriarchy more clearly, unsettles us with its eeriness.

Julia Ducournau's *Titane* likewise cracks our world open and offers a new one through body horror. The film follows the titular character as she experiences a violent car accident as a child and has surgery in which titanium rods are used to stabilize her body. As an adult, her sexual desires center around cars: in one hilariously campy scene, she fucks what looks like an old Chrysler. Later, she learns she's become pregnant and attempts a gruesome self-abortion. Through this fantastical premise, the film looks at the alienation and horror of unwanted pregnancy for people with uteruses. The car fetus slowly punctures Titane's body as it grows, leaking motor oil.

Some trans critics have also read the film as an exploration of the horror of the gender binary. To escape the police, Titane disguises herself as a missing boy who's re-emerged a decade later as a teenager. Many of the most painful scenes in the film involve Titane binding her pregnant body—in a very dangerous manner—to keep up the facade. Drew Gregory writes in Autostraddle: "*Titane* is not a film that can be solved. Its allegories are sensory. Its themes

only felt. And, for me, I felt something very true. About masculinity, about femininity, about bodies and violence and pain and connection. About queerness. About transness. About life." To me, the idea of embodying a missing person returned is at the heart of this film's trans allegory. My childhood journals stop at my unwanted puberty, pick up near the end of high school. For years, I was missing from myself.

Titane also presents fresh forms of relationality: the protagonist literally burns her bio family away, then becomes a fire fighter's vanished son. When he catches her wearing his ex-wife's dress, a garment his vanished son also wore, he claims her as family. It's this memory of non-normative gender expression, preserved in an old-school family photo album, which cements their bond. This doesn't make their relationship "healthy" by any means, but they are able to dance together, to care for each other. She revives him after a testosterone shot seemingly stops his heart.

Body horror creates a space to feel and reimagine the indescribable, a space where new worlds and words become possible. Towards the end of *Queen of Teeth,* we get this gorgeous description of Magenta, the vagina monster who once lived inside the main characters and has now come into her own:

> Magenta formed a palace of flesh and bone. Enormous tusks braced the edges as if containing the carapace-coated outside, an insects thick, grey exoskeleton. The front opened in a toothy maw. Doc had no way to tell what awaited inside without stepping through. But she stood in the breath misting-cold a moment longer and marveled at Magenta's transformation. The shape was wholly hers, immense and near immeasurable in the night.

Moments in texts like this remind me that I don't have to get used to the oppressions my body suffers, the shapes I've been made to take, or at least not entirely. I can hold two things at once: that this treatment is violent, horrific, and devastating, and at the same time quotidian, unremarkable, common. I can grieve this horror, and the joy it precluded, and within my work, within my queer community I can dream different embodiments, different worlds. I am and am not limitless in my capacity to transform. I can dismantle my inclination to repress my grief, my rage, my discomfort. "Of course, there is opportunity in failure, and it is the persistent failure of normative bodies to maintain their normativity, or even pretend to want to," Moore concedes, "that

suggests that body-horror films hold the potential to become radical visioning tools" (259).

Berlanger writers, "Rather than simply escape the horror of everyday existence, we harness our art to transmute it. We reframe our fears. We redefine what is monstrous. We seize control over narratives otherwise weaponized to hurt us or make us small. There is an inherent transness in such transformation: we find the courage to reshape what we refuse to tolerate, even if that means we must bleed" (ii).

We also see this radical possibility in Cronenberg's latest film *Crimes of the Future,* in which human bodies have evolved new internal organs, new capabilities for feeling (and for not feeling). Some members of this future generation can sustain themselves through consuming plastics, can experience surgery without pain. The film points to the need for dismantling categories such as "natural" and "'normal" when we respond to such bodies. These traditional, ableist, racist, transphobic categories in fact preclude survival. Body horror can be generative, can be a form of world making. It can mean hope, futurity, new ways of being in relation to one another, even if it often doesn't offer a wholly triumphant vision. We can immerse ourselves in its unexpected beauty and open ourselves to new pleasures.

VITAL RUPTURES: BODY HORROR INVITATIONS

1. Unwelcome Objects

   Write a story about a character who finds an unexpected object within their body. The object should disrupt the character's daily life in several ways. Perhaps it makes it harder to go jogging, or go to work, or have a one-night stand, or use the oven. Explore how this character responds to these disruptions.

2. The Body Horror Traditions

   Write a story about a body horror that impacts an entire community. Locate the body horror within an object or ritual that has deep significance within the community. Introduce the body horror within the first paragraph. Include a chain store and an insect in the story.

3. Transformations

   Write about a character who is struggling to stop their own bodily transformation. Include at least one animal, one ribbon, and one tree in the story.

4. What Won't Stay Buried

   Write about a character who buries something that came from their body. They might bury it out in their backyard or in the park down the street, or…somewhere else. The buried object can be as realist or as magical as you like. Start the story when the buried object reappears the next morning.

5. Dream Body Horror: Write What You Fear/Desire the Most

   This exercise is inspired by advice Stephen Graham Jones gave to emerging horror writers in a recent episode of *The Red Nation* podcast entitled "Chainsaw Hearts and the Horrors of Genocide."

He suggests, "write about what scares you, don't write about things you think the world is going to be scared by." He then shares a body-horror dream of his that inspired both a story and a novel.

To this end, write a story about an unsettling and/or erotic dream you've had about your body, no matter how seemingly illogical or absurd. Don't worry about explaining or rationalizing what has happened or how it matters right away. Begin with the scene in the dream and let the story unfold from there. See if you can get that fear and/or desire on the page.

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This piece is adapted, in part, from talks I gave at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and Saint Louis University (in 2020 and 2022 respectively) as well as my paper on feminist eco-fabulism presented at AWP 2019.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meg Cass (they/them) is a queer, trans fiction writer and teacher based in St. Louis. *ActivAmerica,* their first book, was selected by Claire Vaye Watkins for the Katherine Anne Porter Prize and was published in 2017. Recent stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Ecotone, Black Warrior Review, Foglifter, Honey Literary, Passages North, Mississippi Review, and manywor(l)ds.* Their flash fiction has appeared in the *Wigleaf Top 50* and in the *SmokeLong Quarterly Best of the First 10 Years Anthology*. They co-founded and co-organize *Changeling,* a queer reading series focused on works-in-progress located at the Granite City Arts and Design District. They were a co-founding editor of *Craft Chaps* and teach in the English Department at the University of Illinois Springfield.