

untenured 1.3
Summer/Fall 2022



TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

Autodidact of Grief – Alden Wallace
Wedge Issues – Doug Stuber
lipstick [of] color – Erika B. Girard
Green Fields and Scars – Patrick Sylvain
Streams of Light – Patrick Sylvain
Vagrant – Patrick Sylvain
Morning Walk – Judy Belk
Entrepreneurship – Henry Kneiszel
This is just to say – Henry Kneiszel
Dancing Wildly With My Eyes Closed Across A Stage That Knows Where To Catch My Feet
Because It Was Built That Way, Damn It – Henry Kneiszel
The Worm – Michael Edman
Moldy Figs – Michael Edman
Blue Didactic – Michael Edman
The House on Del Amo Boulevard – Judd Hess
Trying to Understand Insurrection through Macbeth's Act V – Judd Hess
Right to Left – Judd Hess
In the Driveway – RW Mayer
Resilience – RW Mayer
Some Things Never Change – Mo Corleone
The Perfect Mix – Mo Corleone
Pilgrimage – Mo Corleone
Public Housing – Ryan Thoresen Carson
Whether the Weather, Whatever the Weather – Ryan Thoresen Carson
Faces in the Crowd – Ryan Thoresen Carson
On the American Ethos – Vinnie Sarrocco
Waxing Molasses – Vinnie Sarrocco
Ode to the Dumpster Fire Behind My Apartment – Vinnie Sarrocco
After Sunday School today I walked home – Gale Acuff
Blue skies and yellow wheat – Oleksandra Birher
Over an Abandoned Courtyard – Ryan Harper
After Goliath – Ryan Harper
Before the Vanity – Ryan Harper
Unsettlement – Raymond Calbay
Aydin Akin – Patrick Maynard
Taciturn Paroxysms – Alex Russell
Mystic Needs Body Apply Within – Alex Russell
Showing Up Late to the Dance All Right – Alex Russell
Those Meetings – Paul Hostovsky
Revision – Paul Hostovsky
Hopscotch – Harry Palacio

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Castle With Bipolar Symptoms – Joanna Acevedo
France, Places We Never Wanted To Go – Michael Edman
Clinic – Patrick Carrico

FICTION

The Fight Started at the Edge of Space – Paul Smit
The Riot – Sid Katragadda

cover art
“Divine Feminine” by Andreea Popa

Autodidact of Grief
By Alden Wallace

In the long hours when dreams should be unfolding a child forced to grow too soon must labor to draw honey from a dry well under a facetious moon that pans slow as a lame searchlight. The ocean swells and retreats like the belly of an exhausted mother. Trees whine in the breeze like enormous slow-shutting doors or cats grieving in legion. And from that riverbank hut the lights across the water appear to her as though fond memories of a past life or the place where the dead have gone or what is the difference. All this life, she wonders, has it been but a trial or a preparation? And until the world falls mute and the ocean dries and her heart becomes stone she will breathe patiently for a response.

Wedge Issue
By Doug Stuber

Tilt-A-Whirl maple bends over the back
entrance of an asbestos house, now quadplex
in the Wedge, Caroline Street: a neighborhood
blessed with an old trees-to-old houses ratio
wider than three to one. The back entry is
surrounded by blinded and curtained windows
that effuse a sense of abandonment, as does the
moldy door. A tree of life shakes violently
at the notion that, no matter how humble, this
hovel makes a perfect shelter for the Proud
Boys enemy #1. A rusted Ford Econoline,
not parked by Neil Young, is no get away car,
but might add a bedroom to this joint, but
not in a Rochester winter. Why do undulating
green maple leaves matter? Because safe havens
are becoming scarce, especially if Hispanic or
Black. Dark clouds add humidity, not rain.
Today concealed weapons are elsewhere.
Single-shot suicide deaths win the derby this year.
Clandestine entrance shelters a justice warrior.

lipstick [of] color
by Erika B. Girard

[Editor's note: this piece contains imagery of injury and violence]

ooh, she fine aight
perfect primary color
i stare at my fingers
in front of my face
wonder at this
vivid liquid smeared
like melted lipstick
across the lips, *no, not*
lips tho they look it, tips
of my index finger and
flippin finger tryin
to recall the word for
the exact lipstick
color, it's, it's

Rules of Attraction

Cherry Bomb

Lady Danger

Ruby Woo

Flamenco Red

Red Red Red

yeah, that one, my girl
use that one, always
try to smear it
across my mouth
but i remind her
no red in my beard
it make me look gay
it make me look
like i ain't never
been on the streets
like i like
to wear heels and
skirts, dress in drag
and twirl

then it hit me, hit me

like a bullet, this red
ain't her lipstick,
melted, melted, i
touched myself
my chest
it came away red
it won't stop red
they shot me red
the world bleed red
i stare at them red
they eye her white
i forget which red
she uses on her lips

her cheek flush blush
no going back black
we fall down brown
i lose sight white

white

white

wh

Green Fields and Scars
By Patrick Sylvain

Along the slope of my black back
are ridges of scars carved by lashes
of sugarcane. Here caws and squawk
of an uncertain existence are bellowed out,
and mockingbirds mimic hunger cries
of infants strapped to their mothers' backs
hoping for evening to fall as fast as ripened fruits.

Over emerald green fields, heat danced
like white ghosts escaping a furnace.
Brown bodies with bandanas, straw hats,
and American baseball caps are pummeled
by stifling drafts, forced to sit on grass
to chug cold water while brandishing
overwrought arms that just carried buckets
of apples against an indignant midday sun.

In the evenings, those wayfaring migrants
with soiled white shirts and earth-spotted
blue denim stagger from their squalid
camps to find rest in their wooden shacks.
Meanwhile, just over the fields, wine glasses
overflow with merlots and shiraz
around pinewood tables.

At dawn, without the Angelus bell ringing,
they sing their canciones of existence like
“Somos más americanos” or “El Inmigrante”
as shovels, hoes, and machetes are marshalled
for the clearing ahead—the long picking
of sweetness for the well-doctored teeth
and those obsessed with youth, devoured
organic strawberries. Meanwhile, the nameless
give their Christ-blood on the fields as the sun
flares without mercy. Their reliance, a daily
ritual that brings night to ease their torments.

Streams of Light
by Patrick Sylvain

Before words were uttered
into a rhythmical language
releasing intent into the world,
before babbles were cooed
as cute sounds, and even before pre-language
recognition showed signs of linguistic
possibilities, there were
fibers of thoughts that flashed
in your nascent eyes and were locked in your gaze
as your grasping fingers indicated want.
I cannot forget your lips, pressed tight
with your tongue like a tiny soldier
guarding the entrance of your mouth.
Seven years later, not a morsel of banana
has slipped into the fortified wall of your mouth.
When it comes to water,
although you don't like drinking it,
your body shivers with glee ever since
you were bathed in your blue basin
where your eyes were stars. Now, we watch
you plunging into waters like a ritual
of sacred entries where light seems to stream
through you as if water is your house of dreams.

Vagrant
By Patrick Sylvain

A poem is
a gateless palace
for curious eyes
where words are
permanent vagrants
wandering the grounds
of language
without interruption.
It is as if time
does not exist.
There is a family, giddy
in their affecting. A father,
burly, pretending to be king.
I study the vines crawling
on the granite blocks.
There are birds
carrying their own tunes.
I wanted to follow a cardinal,
but I remember that I'm just
a temporary visitor
exploring the garden of Babel
with my vernacular tongue.

Morning Walk
By Judy Belk

Exploring morning on Whidbey Island backdropped by Mt. Rainer and Useless Bay which is anything but.

Another glorious wake-up call forcing me to open eyes and heart.

Sharing this day with hushed birdwatchers hauling telescopes, binoculars, cameras.

Each hoping to be the one to catch a rare glimpse of the Eastern Phoebe far from its cross-country hometown.

I meander along the pathway splitting Deer Lagoon in a double take of calm serenity.

A small dog gets ahead of his owner.

Sniffing at my shoelaces.

An elderly white lady struggles to catch up.

Eager to engage.

She's here from Texas. Twenty years.

She's a local. I'm a visitor, like the Phoebe, far from home. Another rare island sighting.

We go deep quickly, speaking of our love of books, morning walks, and this place.

But she's ready to share more than I want to know.

"I have a biracial granddaughter in Texas who I've never met. My fault."

I cringe, hopes dashing that maybe for once, my blackness might be inconsequential.

And we could just be two beings meeting on a morning walk.

But she's in colorblind pain, desperate to connect with anyone.

She turns from me, quietly weeping.

"She's twelve. I want to show her this place."

She wipes away tears and snot.

The silence and discomfort broken by the honking of geese.

Hundreds of them.

Watching the two of us watching them.

Entrepreneurship
By Henry Kneiszel

I have taken out a small business loan and hired 10,000 songbirds

Why?

Ha!

I wouldn't tell the IRS and I'm sure as hell not going to tell you!!

Just kidding

It is for love

The investors are furious.

This is just to say
By Henry Kneiszel

I'm the one mailing you tamagotchis every year
The winters here are long and cold
So I pepper them with ritual
I need the annual reminder
That reaching out is easy
And whimsy springs eternal
If the winters there are long and cold
It might be nice to love a plastic hamster from the 90s
Or at least to get some mail you can expect but never understand

**Dancing Wildly With My Eyes Closed Across A Stage That Knows Where To Catch My Feet
Because It Was Built That Way, Damn It
By Henry Kneiszel**

I'm living on the edge of what I like and where I want to go
I'm making proclamations
I'm racing when I want to
I'm wearing pretty dresses
And I'm dreaming in tornados

I'm walking with my backpack like a brave midwestern cowboy
I'm not afraid of strangers and I'm loving every minute!

I'm a star and a smile and an optimistic lover!
I've got a sunrise in my window and the gas to keep me moving

I'm going through the motions like a caveman in a candy store
I'm sleeping like a hot bath
And waking up in sync again

I'm eating mangos naked in the shower with my hair back

I'm living on the radio
I'm trying every recipe
I'm staying on the ferris wheel
And telling time organically
I'm writing more than ever
And I'm doing shit that's good for me!

The Worm
By Michael Edman

I went out to check the mail
at midnight
and it was wet
and I could hear the worms
coming up from the dirt.

I crossed one, a large black vein
trying to escape the driveway.
It was dark
and safe.

The worm moved slowly
worming its way
in the wrong direction.

It was heading for the road, its end,
concrete and asphalt
and no dirt
and it was still wet.

I could not leave the worm this way,
to be fooled, conducted
down a path
that certainly meant death.

I took it in my hands
and it was afraid
and I had to be careful.

I lifted it in my palm
segments of its body
coiling into patterns of wet ribbon
and held it softly.

I lowered the worm
where it could hide
and possibly live.

Possibly, although I couldn't be sure
it wouldn't make the same mistakes
within the chorus of worms
digging up into the air
when it was night and wet
and warm enough to walk out.

And as I walked back
and up, to open
the gray slat of the mailbox
I looked
and it was empty.

Moldy Figs
By Michael Edman

Figs have no sense. Words deny
a vernacular of plums, spheres
speaking the syrups of twilight,
spilled from the mouths of quick birds
as they inspect
a fruit's luminous flesh.
Drips for the fireflies,
pits of neon fire at Birdland,
where light and life are eaten.

Blue Didactic
By Michael Edman

I say water, think horizon,
and so my words may be
looking at an edge.

But a color has no fringe.
It is to be looked at, stared at, lost in.

Hounds of a talkative world slobber like my dog does
with her overly sensitive jowls. I watch
as they barter insecurities, living within themselves.

Their eyes have lost the blue, trading depth
for safety and certain yellows.

I separate myself to walk the deep trenches
observing water-logged volcanoes
as they lay the foundations of base earth.

Sing with me, oh sunken dreamers,
Find yourselves awake.

Find yourselves overturned,
whale-born in the painted few,
dropping and fluming off waterfalls

into the open air and forever drop, unafraid
with no ground upon which to place your feet

The House on Del Amo Boulevard
By Judd Hess

In my moments most windswept, you
have often offered the comfort-image of a sapling
pushing up wearily through snow.

But no, I go
instead to that old bungalow just past Crenshaw,
the one that abuts the train tracks and oil refinery,
surrounded by the hollowed gold grasses of July

and torn down to the studs.

Between its undressed bones
the heat-breezes saunter leeringly, caressing joists
and exposed pipes like an abuser
among the nakednesses of the mind and body.

I have been that house.

A chime still hangs from the flayed porch.
A modest pile of drywall spills onto the sidewalk.

The neighbor houses limp toward dilapidation, but
this one has had every accoutrement stripped from it

because someone loves it,
plans to rest in its corners,
fill it with breakfasts and laughter,
shelter children within its ribs.

Trying to Understand Insurrection through Macbeth's Act V
By Judd Hess

For a few years, every publishable poem had to
stage-perform the signifier *phlebotomist* as though

“memorable speech” were the same as novelty.
We might as well scrawl Popean odes to *confefe*

or excuse the conflation of clickbait for journalism.
Late last night as the fire died, through my window

fell sideways a postmodernist septuagenarianism
like hordes of *fake news* storming the Capitol camo-

jacketed and bloodthirsty. Such sound and fury always
flood the field in Act Five. And I? I tumbled from sleep

into labyrinthine battle, scouring the master retreat after
the many-colored truths that I'd been taught not to long for.

I wanted to feel the so many lives I have lived and have not,
none less nuanced than a river of blood and its villages.
I wanted their market talk. I wanted their wind orchards.

When I woke, my world had become its father: the tools
of deconstruction pulling at the same nails fascism had.

I felt slip like damp wallpaper from *All Is A Construct!* to
Nothing Matters the masqued death-grin of *différance*.

Age need not be spoken, nor a tyrant, nor vials of lies;
and to fill the mouth with fruit can be the best rebellion.

I, too, losing faith, blood-offered my bit tongue to nothing,
when my shadows would not leave off their dust dance.

Trees opened their veins and suckled my poor prayer:
May novelty erode with the life-price like Salome

did the armed thain's head; May pertinence resurrect
ours from tomorrow, to tomorrow, to tomorrow.

Right to Left
By Judd Hess

:say You
woke all talking you're if think You ?What
?white be won't You ?you accept They'll
no is There ?cancer the feel won't You
.libtard ,you maybe Except .cancer
.me as same the You're .dying You're .dead You're

know They .Them that for write don't I But
decomposition deep the knows soil the than better
you to blight our speak I .sprouts frowning and
skin this ears our in poured had We .way mirror our in
inside regrown ,okay you want I .bleach like us at eats that cancer
to have I .you love to have I .to have I .again clean ,out
.sun the in green myself like to, decomposition this from wake

In the Driveway
By RW Mayer

A Sunday afternoon driveway concert; a nice way to end another pandemic week.
The temperature is in the mid sixties. The jazz band is set up right in front of the garage doors.
A lead guitar, a stand up bass, and a drum set with a young woman singer out front.
They shine— covering beloved standards and unfurling newly written songs.
Twenty or so people have driven or walked over and plunked down fold-out picnic chairs,
unholstered their drinks, and doled out smiles.
The rest of the driveway is a slightly sloping gravel way with enough room for social distancing,
small dogs to share with strangers, and appreciative applause.
These are the simple ways we soothe ourselves: A vivid historical fiction novel that takes us
way back into a world that we could never inhabit, but do, now, in our mind;
or listening to music at home, the tinkle of the piano on a jazz standard so creatively nuanced
that the melody barely appears but is always in the shadows;
a Bach suite for cello, expertly played on guitar such that it is a meditation all by itself;
a poem that describes nature and restoration bringing a catch to your breath;
a tree on your morning walk that is alive with courting squirrels chasing each other up and down;
old family photos and objects strewn about the living space— reminders.
We've had so many pleasures and pursuits taken from us during this period. The ones left us, we
pull and knead into new shapes and hug close.
What have I left out, Dear Reader, that consoles you? Add it to the soup; a double helping. We'll
need it to last awhile longer. We are together in the gathering of our world.

Resilience
By RW Mayer

We live inside each day
both protected and knocked
about like pebbles in a cup.
The setbacks that derail us, some so small;
others much larger—so huge that we are
stymied in ways we hadn't measured.
Almost incredibly though, we
come back. We survive
and get stronger, wiser.
When we don't let sadness and
anger overwhelm us, we can
take stock of what is left to work with.
That is the human spirit that
wells up and overflows into
a geyser that each of us has.
Remember: Each one.

Some Things Never Change
By Mo Corleone

Almost a real family
Bonds weakly held by a shared name
Connections like loose wires or
distant, audible gunfire -- mostly safe?
Exposure to your antisocial,
frustratingly narrow worldview
gives me precious little
hope for our future, but some relief since
isolation forces your waterfall of
judgment into a closed loop which
keeps you churning in circles while
letting the rest of us, mercifully,
move freely toward friendlier shores.
Never underestimate the power of a cult leader
Oppressing your destiny
Presenting your inferiority through
quiet, constant manipulation
Remind me again why I hold out hope?
Something about the sheen of other examples
traps me in momentary belief that
underneath the violence and
vile nature lives a sliver of humanity. The risk is not
worth it; I am confident Hell looks
exactly as I remember --
You still its fiery czar and eternal
zealot, and me still unable to love you.

The Perfect Mix
By Mo Corleone

wish i would have known
when i was less than grown in
my home town
tried to do my best
on the iowa test of basic
worldviews
every year a scar
by far the hardest question
the race box
pencils down
a bit too brown to avoid
what are you

two patches sewn together
do not an identity make
a quilt is not a color
for the blind
patchwork DJ rockin' doubles
two turntables play more than
two songs and nobody
asks them
what are you
if you listen you'll appreciate
good trouble
the perfect mix

Pilgrimage
By Mo Corleone

i should have
tried harder to discern more phrases
none spelled the way i heard them
akai o shiri no saru
little me, little brothers, red butt monkeys

i should have
paid attention to the *hanafuda* cards
mobile home chair, chain-smoke air
jingling gambled pennies
the humblest little reno in the world

i should have
asked what you first foresaw
the second you boarded that plane
under the wing of the air force mechanic
vanishing, tiny son in tow

i should have
confronted the boogeyman
behind the shield of your favoritism
if we stood together
i might've had a fighting chance

i still can
show up to my japanese lesson
allow the shattering of myths
genetic advantage fantasies
learn like you from nearly nothing

i still can
arrive as the last woman
in okinawa carrying your name,
your blood, and dig for history
between the military bases

i still can
urge my first generation heart to
reflect on second chances
intermittent stitches closing wounds
fresh cuts atop old scars

i still can
lower unashamed face to soil
water cherry trees with tears released
at last from the vault
that locked when you passed

Public Housing
By Ryan Thoresen Carson

He lays to rest on the concrete
and I'm suddenly in his bedroom,

intruding on space which should
no longer be public. We are both
embarrassed and wish we could
do something more than acknowledge
each other. But he tells me he sleeps

here because while he can't trust
his neighbors to intervene to house
him, they may at least keep him
safe from further misfortune.

Whether the Weather, Whatever the Weather
By Ryan Thoresen Carson

The lady on the street's dog is named Watson
and he wears shoes to hover above
the fervor, it's too warm for April, they haven't
turned off the heat yet in my non-profit basement
so I'm outside for some fresh air and the yell
of the construction workers' contract negotiation.

There's always a protest at city hall
and I join for a minute but I'm preoccupied
with the weather.

Always reminding myself to differentiate
between climate and weather.

Though the pavement stays
liquefied by the continuous hum
of the sun, that New York City provides
opportunities while the waves continue to rise
whether for work or to leave a mark
on the soon to-be streets.

The cigarette breaks feel eternal with the many
moments ticking by at once.

The art supply shop has pictures of the people
we could be in the sun if we didn't have to return to work.

Faces in the Crowd
By Ryan Thoresen Carson

I'm trying to avoid thinking about you
so I'm reading a click-bait article

on Jonah Hill, as a fashion god,
because he wore a basketball jersey
tucked into dress pants, and yeah
I do that all the time, and sure,

I'm trying to speak impossibility,
for the individual in the masses.

What we're both doing:
it's the vivid oscillating
between pursuit and anxious repose.

In the crowd, one night, the police clatter
with waiting and I lose you in the faces
and I start to feel like I'm losing my voice.

Not physically, I can shout for days,
but now I feel like I don't have control
over my lines, just everything
I wish I could say to you:

Does he read clickbait?
Does he read clickbait, smoking
while avoiding texting you back?

Have you had lunch yet?
Are you going to that demo tomorrow?

What kind of place did you want
to live in when you were growing up?

How do you make this place
like that one you wanted to live in?

We've been marching all day
and are just ready for something to happen,
there's only so long until we have to disperse

and I lost you.

On the American Ethos
By Vinnie Sarrocco

There will be days when you will be overwhelmed
by decadence. Where your body will become
a licentious receptacle for all things
cloying and dense with intemperance.

The floors of your home will be carpeted
with the fur of blue-blooded minks,
and the walls will drip truffle oil
instead of murky acidic rainwater.

You will endlessly salivate, having become
glutton incarnate. You will feast to excess,
lean back, unbutton your jeans, and remain unsated.

In the haze of your wanton consumption
you will search for contentedness,
but find only the shadow of such a thing.

In the memory of hunger
you will observe the clarity that accompanied
the high-pitched shriek of a need unmet.

Outside your window, you will see
another window, with another man
looking ravenously upon your living room.

Waxing Molasses
By Vinnie Sarrocco

First haircut in fifteen years—
wear a hat out of habit,
trek across the bridge,
holes in the grating
pollute my soles
with fragments of canal.

All of North End drowned in molasses once.
They simply scuppered the city sidewalks—
sent the sugar to the center of the earth.
A century later, and
summer still smells like syrup.

Before engineers, perhaps
the whole world was waterways
and sticky black treacle.
Summer comes early these days, and
they say that we'll swim again soon enough.

I've removed the parts of myself
that would drip into your eyes.
It's painless, like fingernails.
Severance is funny that way—
the ways in which we come apart,
only the sound of snapping keratin
or buzzing barber's clippers
to signal the separation.

float home, pause briefly on the bridge
hat held dumbly in hand,
yacht-shocked water beneath,
or a gluey current of resurfaced molasses.

You could fall.

You could fall, but
would you even feel it?

Ode to the Dumpster Fire Behind My Apartment
By Vinnie Sarrocco

It's become synonymous
with politics
shorthand for the exhausted
to drip out when bearing witness
is longer viable
when the headline becomes too absurd
for earnestness
Or it's the lives of American 20-somethings—
the way we self-deprecate
through the unforgiving
ba-ba it me
meta-narrating our own emotional stuntedness
like awareness is enough
like holding it on our tongues makes it any more ours
like irony could be woven into kevlar
and sold to Jansport

But I'll tell you
fresh idioms aside
there's truth in flame
honest-to-god truth crawling
up the graffiti murals
behind my apartment building
burning away pretense
the smell of immolating refuse
and affectations wafting down the alley
in thick wisps of black smoke
while I jot away
at what can at best can be a sketch
of truth's potential

After Sunday School today I walked home

with "Jesus Loves the Little Children" in
my head and I'm ten years old so I'm no
longer a little children--little
child that is--if I live long enough then
next I'll be 11 and then 12 and
so *ad infinitum*, I learned that one
in regular school but of course I won't
live that long but I learned about death in
Sunday School and regular school settled
it, a kind of confirmation, ha ha,
then again I don't know about the kind
part and as for the Resurrection, that's
strictly Sunday School so by the time I
hit the back porch I was born again bad.

- Gale Acuff

Blue skies and yellow wheat
By Oleksandra Birher

we sit at the dinner table
discussing the life we once had
the bright blue skies
and the yellow wheat
my grandmother tells me
about the the shimmering kilos of gold
she once had
about the tears she spilled
about her mother's hot anger and cold love
i listen and learn
learn so my children will know
of the place they come from
of the resistance their people showed
of the culture so rich
it scares those who want us gone
twelve years seems like such a short time
now that i'm here, an ocean and a sea
apart from where i used to be
apart from the cobblestone streets and orange sunsets
i wish i didn't fear coming home
i wish it didn't shake my bones, the thought of never coming back
Can my children ever know our land?
will their feet stand on the streets mine once stood on
will the sun bask them in, like it once basked me
will they ever know the flavors of our delicacies
the colors of our celebrations
or will it all be gone?
destroyed, under the ruins of political conflict
unlawful occupation, of land so beautiful
i once called
mine.

Over an Abandoned Courtyard
By Ryan Harper

Tender long gone the walls are given over
to ivy; rough glyphs flaking
from the mortar lines,
white in the cleft mold—
tell of rains and browning
black grill, mesh metal patio
set, buttresses of the hanging planter
boxes, soiled, unseeded. All is rust—
iron wrought living, left alone.

And the rose of Sharon faint but flowers
through the lattice,
under the dogwood, half-lit,
thickening the day's solvent shades.
Across the square the tree of heaven
angles, seeds for the suckering
on the stone floor, moss uprising
spread flecktarn over the herringbone—
tell of the unkept, the bosky
geometries, the tender left
out of the way.

After Goliath
By Ryan Harper

I cannot walk with these, for I am not used to them.

Thinking the giant bigger dead
he dropped the sling: boy over warrior
seized in the ambient silence of surprised
armies, arrayed. Did he betray
relief? How fast a new sensation
considers his reputation, and god's. Aligning

feet to shoulders he took the philistine
in. The bestial analogies
had been wrong: to a point,
the spear filigreed; greaves of bronze,
measured, fit to form; the hauberk,
each hinge a life study, bowed
precisely as a lyre—the delicate
arrangement of killing men.
Believing himself
immobile, so mettled,
he had rejected these, before. Now
the graven, costly brilliance
of the decorated soldier shamed
and absorbed the tender
of sheep: war was artisanal,
down to the burnished baldric
—its fineries, dominion—

what—what seizure—
what let in what young
clench—what heart after what
thundering void—what files what
crafts—what rank holding—what

—cheers of his countrymen broke
and woke him, warrior's sword
in right hand, head in left. He had
not spoken, could not run,
would not remember
the blood for years—when,
arrayed as his prince, betrayed
by his king, he would take
up the same sword,
behind the altar of his lord,
giant among his own.

Before the Vanity
By Ryan Harper

He pays no mind
to the cracking door—
naked, just the man
with his eyes holding
the scene in the mirror,
lone stage of his power.
Just without suit,
just a cornflower
tie on his bare neck,
his arms slow dance
the four-in-hand—
tuck, loop, backlead
and shadow position.
He is tracking this day
the light limbs' passage
unto the knot, *fermé*.
Dropping his arms,
he straightens, eyes
wet with recognition.
“There we are,” he says,
smiling, minding
no one. “There we are.”

Unsettlement
By Raymond Calbay

1. Douse a cat in gasoline, set it on fire,
And then let it loose aflame into the shanties.
A sky lantern will also do the trick.
2. Spread gossip that others are getting more
Compensation. Neighbors turning against
Each other always leave with less than.
3. Demolition threats are not taken seriously.
Barricade the exits. Trapped from the inside,
See how they want out in an instant.
4. Start adjacent construction anyway. Dig night
And day, full throttle. In the wake of rain,
Potholes are great for mosquito breeding.
5. Look them in the eye, especially the young,
And tell them it is criminal to stay here:
Land they don't own, but dirt they bring in.

Aydin Akin
By Patrick Maynard

We hear you peddling
From a block away,
With your whistle
And your speakers,
Blaring a football chant.
Who is that? A friend asks.
A friend from out of town,
Who has never been told to go home,
To go back to where he came from.
What's his deal?
So we tell him,
About your desire to vote,
About your trips,
Around Berlin's winding streets,
With your signs and your sounds.
They stripped voting rights first,
In a gray 1935 November,
Saying who could have a say
In who could say who
Could have a say.
Now you try
To force a better choice
With your
Ole ole ole
Ole.

Taciturn Paroxysms
By Alex Russell

Soft uneven
reflexive
smiling (holy)
person-thing

The new image of Man is very,
very old (in the mind)...

The wind system on planet Earth goes:
the new image of Old freeform law-making,
grizzled features on the old monk's bookcase;
terrible legends, taciturn paroxysms...

(parenthesis or no
parenthesis

Mystic Needs Body Apply Within
By Alex Russell

Inside the hole
The wound
The cell for home for
 funny monsters without faces
 with looks and
they're game for anything, even for life, and living

But there are the legs
and the moving of cells and
the music of breathing, eating, solace and making it through
the day—like any other creature does & would—
and it's not as foreign
to you, when you
think over at yourself
from the protozoa's world-view,
“

That tall, strange, foreign giant, what is it?
What language might connect us?
”

All kinds of wonder

Showing Up Late to the Dance All Right
By Alex Russell

Her wavelength goes through me
...the difference in particle vibration

Did we live in one mammalian density
last Spring? Why did we start
capitalizing “spring” anyway
?

It’s an infection, but infections work for their living too
I was there and you were there and so was she...eyes dark
like Stalin’s mustache;
unfettered blue dress; gray lipstick;
nails at 26 degrees—
in time to be late but on time with civilization—
even when it sometimes shows its less-than-civil
side, with the teeth & total abhorrence directed at
frolic.

It’d be great to have some fun someday.
It’d be great to finally talk with dolphins.
We’re not interesting enough yet probably.
but it really doesn’t hurt me any to dream like this.

...and I’d love to focus less on the problem of
poetic endlessness & more on having fun with
the actual writing

Those Meetings
By Paul Hostovsky

Are you still going to those meetings?

Those meetings are like no meetings you've ever attended
they always start on time and end on time
and everyone introduces themselves before they speak
so that no one forgets who they are or what they are
and they don't interrupt each other or even address each other
they just go around the room and tell these stories
and the stories are true and they're all the same story
with slight variations in the precious indispensable details
and everyone thanks each other in a chorus of thank-yous
and no one takes minutes and there are no action items
because everyone's action item is the same action item
and they do it together and they do it alone and no one
checks to make sure it got done and no one checks
to see who belongs at the meetings and who doesn't belong
because everyone belongs if they say they belong
and they can't kick you out unless you're disrupting the meeting
and in that case they do it gently and invite you back
and there are morning meetings and lunchtime meetings
and nighttime meetings and beginner's meetings before the meetings
and there are no executives and there is no meeting agenda
and they take turns running the meetings which always run smoothly
and everything always gets done that needed to be done
and everything always gets said that needed to be said
and they'll tell you there's no such thing as a bad meeting
and if you think your meetings should run more like those meetings
if you think your work meetings or town meetings or city meetings
or state or country's meetings should run more like those meetings
if you think the whole world should run more like those meetings
the people who go to those meetings won't disagree with you
but they won't be interested in extrapolating from those meetings
how to run the world because they're not trying to change the world
they're just trying to change their minds about the world

Revision
By Paul Hostovsky

This poem is made of 100% recycled material.
All the words have been used before--there isn't
a word in this poem that you yourself haven't used.
And the spaces between the lines, and the spaces
between the words and between the letters--and even
inside of the letters--are the same perfectly breathable
open spaces that you and I have been passing through
all our lives. We are passing each other right now--
grazing each other almost imperceptibly--in the space
of this poem, occupying it at the same time for the briefest
time. Because time in this poem is also from another
time. And the ideas in this poem are recycled ideas--they
flew into my head, a recycled head with curly hair and
a Jewish nose--a nose that's been recycled on Jewish faces
since the beginning of the Jewish calendar, which by the way,
is made of 100% recycled material: all those recurring
Holy Days, daily Psalms, scrolling Torah portions to be
read aloud often. Please read this poem aloud often.
Reuse it, recycle it, share it, post it, compost it, give it
away, copy it, paste it, plagiarize it for all I care: my name
and bio will biodegrade but the poem will go on being
itself, reshaping itself, revising itself, making itself stronger.

Hopscotch
By Harry Palacio

Ash and dust collected on the tongue of the ashtray, loneliness like a gaze in trepidation awkwardly floating away never to meet the follicles or ends of your eyes as they are the ravines reserved for people cast aside bearing tiny hubris for that unwelcomeness. Building stony factories of incandescence with the irksome weight of abandoning homeland and namesake. Grief swelled the lips of the sucking bird as she nursed agony despondently like a trucker gleaning the road daydreaming of family. Stories that bruise, a brute familiar daze ripening in the recourse of a gesture, wordless like a fortress in a Dominican heat with those sienna skinned women and men like carnal folkloric apparition dancing that invisible dance: invisible to the tourist, the megalomaniac. With a trancelike hopscotch like a sheath over the old pueblo, its timbre speaks to the traveler in a Haitian accent selling maní, women en luto dressed in black like death refuse to hear the musicians, their spiral of heaven.

Castle With Bipolar Symptoms
By Joanna Acevedo

I tell my gynecologist I have Bipolar Disorder and she says: “I’m so sorry,” as if I have a terminal illness. Feel weird about this. I have the perverse need to explain to doctors that I am fine, managed, sane, as if struggling would belie some kind of innate craziness that would not allow them to treat me. My neurologist treats me like a zoo animal. “How often are you manic?” he asks.

“About four times a year, every year, since I was nineteen,” I tell him.

“Wow,” he says, fascinated. “That’s a lot.”

Note to self, I think. Look for new neurologist.

“Uh, that’s not that much,” I say. “I have Rapid Cycle Bipolar One. But it’s totally managed with meds.”

“Interesting,” he says, making absent-minded notes.

I’m at the neurologist because I have migraines, which have not been explained by the Bipolar, the two CAT scans I have (one in the ER, complaining of seeing flashing lights and double vision), one with contrast. The headaches come once or twice a week and are debilitating. I have a deep fear of doctors. I have a deep fear of hospitals. I walk through the hallways dressed nicely, holding my head up high. I am not crazy. I am simply a young woman looking for headache treatment, psychiatric help, and, occasionally, gynecology, the various reasons people go to doctors. I am a normal person. They will not keep me here and throw away the key.

In Nashville, in July, I have an ocular migraine. It is terrifying. I feel the symptoms of a migraine coming on—the head feeling like a balloon, the tunnel vision—but then the pain never

comes. I lie down in a dark room, but patterns dance in front of my eyes. I see flashing lights and my vision splits into doubles. I am away from home and unsure if I should go to the Emergency Room. It lasts about two hours, as I fall into a fitful sleep.

In the morning, I message my doctor. “Have you ever had an MRI?” she asks.

“Two CAT scans,” I say. “But never an MRI.” I am afraid to ask what she thinks is wrong with me, what she wants to rule out. Visions of brain hemorrhages dance in my head. Usually my migraines are painful, deep, throbbing pain that cuts through everything, making it impossible to think, breathe, or speak. I don’t know what this new kind of migraine means, or what it means for me.

She talks about Botox for the headaches, which could eliminate one of the pills I take daily, something I’m very interested in. I almost always have a headache of some kind—I’m just a headache person. “What will the Botox do, exactly?” I ask.

“It will loosen the muscles that clench when you have a headache,” she says. “So you won’t be in so much pain.”

Sounds good to me. I’m desperate. My migraines have taken me to the ER before, made me think I was having a stroke. Still, I don’t like the idea of more medical procedures, more doctors, more of my life in their hands.

Sometimes, I’m learning, you need to trust.

Also in Nashville in July, I go to the ER for a side effect from my antipsychotic, an eye motion disorder where my eyes roll back in my head. My hospital trauma is triggered, and I spend the night hysterical, the EMTs trying to convince me that they’re not going to kidnap me, as my heart rate goes through the roof. They think I’m on drugs. I can’t explain where the fear, the PTSD

reaction, comes from—my hospitalization was over two years ago, but I still have nightmares of being locked in a place and not being able to get out.

The triage nurse knows what's going on, and is able to calm me down to the point where I don't believe he's trying to keep me in the hospital permanently, plus he doesn't think I'm a drug addict. Most of my experiences with doctors have been negative, but there are some wonderful nurses out there. My eyes start to calm down, and eventually, I'm able to leave. But the fear remains, and within 24 hours, I have a nightmare in which I've gone permanently psychotic, and have to dial 911 in order to get EMTs to reach me, only I'm paralyzed and can't make them understand me. I wake up from this dream sweating and terrified, and remind myself over and over, *it was just a dream*.

But it's not.

Still in Nashville, I make phone calls to Bipolar clinics asking for psychiatric appointments, inquiring about ECT—electroconvulsive therapy, the shock treatments that surprisingly work almost 80% of the time. No one calls me back. “My name is Joanna Acevedo, I have Ultra Rapid Cycle Bipolar 1, and I'm looking into alternative treatments for Bipolar Disorder,” I repeat over and over again, leaving my name and number in endless voicemail boxes. My request is either too obscure or too specific, and no one wants to deal with me in person. Like many people with mental illness, I've gotten almost too good at pretending I'm completely normal, so that doctors aren't intimidated by my symptoms. My beloved outpatient psychiatrist, Dr. C—, says I use my intelligence as a mask to hide my symptoms, because I don't want people to think I'm crazy. I worry that he's right.

Back in New York, I've stabilized somewhat, so I could call more doctor's offices and listen to answering machine noises. It's exhausting, repeating myself over and over, baring my darkest secrets to secretaries who don't know Bipolar from a hole in the ground. Still, they are the gatekeepers, they hold the keys to the scheduling monitors of the doctors, who, theoretically, can fix

me. I have such a mistrust of doctors, yet I put all my faith into them, begging them silently as I sit in their offices, to give me more pills, more treatments, more hope.

I think I could live off of it—the praying, the begging, the pleading—the hope that someday I will be normal, not too histrionic, too dramatic, too much. The moods are too much, the depression eating away at me, the mania taking me and turning me into a chattering, grinning skull. I lose weight. I eat strange things. Exhausted, I take afternoon naps.

I basically live in fear. Another manic episode, another migraine. The headaches come unexpectedly, and when they come, I can't do anything. I take a low-dose antidepressant to stop their frequency, which works, sort of—I have about five months of remission before they start again, and then, less often—but the dosage can't be upped to be more effective because it gives me manic symptoms. My neurologist, when informed of this, is surprised and nonchalant. “Sounds good,” he says, when I inform him that I am going back to the lower dose of the drug and that I have had a manic break. That he can play with my mind this way, without warning me, disturbs me, and my outpatient psychiatrist tells me that doctors are like that; they don't notice things, or forget to inform you of possible side effects, because they're arrogant and think nothing bad will happen.

In the hospital, in 2019, my attending physician informed me that the best combination for Bipolar was lithium and Lamictal (a mood stabilizer). I'd tried both drugs previously, and found them intolerable. “I can't take Lamictal,” I told her. “Call my psychiatrist. He'll explain what happened.”

On Lamictal, which is considered first-line treatment for Bipolar Disorder, and was the first drug I ever tried, I lost twenty pounds in town months, couldn't keep food down, and tried to kill myself. I had what's called a manic switch—when a medication works too well on your depression,

and you flip to the other side of the spectrum. I've since tattooed over the box cutter scars on my outer thigh from that episode.

Lithium, on the other hand, gave me severe IBS symptoms and I actually gained thirty pounds during the nine months I took it. Lithium is the gold standard of Bipolar care, and many well-adjusted people who have Bipolar swear by it. But it comes with a host of nasty side effects—constant dehydration, diarrhea, shaky hands, weight gain, and it can become toxic if the levels in your blood are thrown out of whack.

“I’m not going to take either of those drugs,” I told the doctor.

“Well, you can’t leave the hospital until we find you a treatment plan,” she said.

I didn’t want to be seen as refusing care. I wanted out of the hospital, and fast. But the drugs she was offering me weren’t going to help. Frustrated, I sat back in my chair. It was Christmas Day.

Finally we agreed that I would take the lithium temporarily, which would be changed several days later, when I finally convinced another doctor to switch me to Topamax, a different mood stabilizer, which I take to this day. They let me out of the hospital. I’m never going back.

So I schedule the MRI. “I hope I don’t have a brain tumor,” I text my partner, making light of the fact that next week, I’ll have to sit in a space tube for thirty minutes while a machine takes pictures of my brain.

“If you do, you can borrow part of mine that I’m not using,” he says. “I’m left-handed, so probably the left side.”

I’m grateful for the offer. “What’s the plan?” he asks, when I tell him I’ve been looking for a new psychiatrist, one who’s more open to alternative treatments.

“Lobotomy,” I shoot back.

“Just make sure the ice pick is clean,” he says.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I have some answers, but they’ve created more questions than anything else. I’m still figuring it out—picking through the pieces, sifting through the rubble, creating a life where before, there were simply parts. I’m making it happen, one phone call to a doctor’s office at a time. I’m building a castle. I’m digging a moat.

France, Places We Never Wanted To Go
By Michael Edman

Erik Satie in the morning. Gymnopédie No.1 with a cup of coffee. It's cool inside the house and we sit with our feet out until the sweat on them becomes too cold. Then we put them back into a pair of slippers.

September along the shore. There's a man standing in a yellow fisherman's coat and waders. He's casting at the end of the beach where it meets a cliff face that goes straight up in layers of finely grained limestone. A daub of yellow at corner right, with the soft sea blue and green and grey washing up on the left. Between there is the textured white of the beach that meets, at its end, the rising texture of the cliff. It is raining slightly, some of that is sea spray, and the man is fishing in his black boots.

An old woman looking for a grave. She's speaking quickly to herself as she walks along the dirt paths that cross between headstones. Her language is foreign, and you don't understand what she's saying other than that you recognize the repetition of a last name. It's a well-known spot which you've just visited. You say the name then beckon for her to follow. She speaks quick French to you, as if you would understand. The rock is just over there. It has his name on it. She says thank you and you nod and smile.

Growing up, culture had been drained to a cliché. Paris was on pillows and cheap prints at Wal-Mart. A generation witnessed firsthand the explosion of selfies taken with the Eiffel Tower in the background. There seemed to be no other landmark. Wine, yes. Fashion, yes. Counterculture, counter to what? If you were lucky, you might catch the Arc de Triomphe in some romantic comedy.

So, we abstained. There were too many girls posting single pictures in a beret. We believed Pushkin when he mocked Rousseau. We learned different languages, Spanish and Portuguese and

German and Arabic. When it came time to dream about moving abroad, to study in or flee to another country, we acknowledged France in our minds but never treated it as an option. How could we? It had been so, done.

Time passes, then suddenly there's an opportunity. You take the chance, even if the risk is high. The right way, without money, scraping the fond of what's been seen. You have a tentative place to stay, no access to the language, and no way back. It's not ideal. That's why you have to go.

Fly for seven, sit for six. Reykjavik is all mist over black beaches. No clear demarcations. You spend an hour on a downstairs booth before realizing you haven't gone through customs. Lack of sleep makes all things new, even the time spent scanning an empty airport for somewhere to charge your phone. When you find it, you're too paranoid to sleep for more than twenty minutes at a time. Six hours later, you're on another plane for seven. The stewardess asks if you'd like something to drink. Your stomach is upset. You ask for a soda.

Moules in St. Germain. Notre Dame is burning but you haven't seen that yet. Never too dark to walk out with a can of beer and sit along the Seine, watching the rats play their games in the bushes. We never said much there, other than that we were satisfied. Catch a breath in place. To talk about it would be to test if it was real. We were quiet as the boats passed in tremors of house music.

Badaud by the tower at Montparnasse. A girl scowls over her cigarette. You keep walking. There's more smoke coming from tables down the street. The world is out in Paris. Every image is a replay of one already written. Then someone else took it to run with. You came and you're here, now, and your experience has been so consistently devalued that to tell anyone about it seems inconsequential. Of course, they say, I read that one already.

But those experiences aren't the same. The light wasn't correct. They missed the slipperiness of certain rocks, merchants putting out fruit to distract the bees, and the smell of linden wood which seems to permeate every crevice of the city. It's the end of summer. Europe is going through one of

its hottest months to date. The maids closet we've been staying in has no air conditioning. There's a single window overlooking a courtyard. We abstain from turning on the stove, or running the dryer, until the sun's been down for more than an hour. Penne with courgette in the moonlight. Wine and chevre from Carrefour. When cravings arrive and only the bars are open, there's still McDonalds by La Motte - Picquet Grenelle.

You go any way you can. Orwell in the streets, this is your down and out. Except, they won't even let you work in the hotel basement kitchen as it vents garlic and olive oil into the street. Visa issues. That has to be paid beforehand, shoveling dirt and rocks for a summer because it's the only way to make a trip happen.

KFC at the corner by Pere Lachaise. France was good to us. Like many things which are still beautiful after being run through, with time, they are restored. Patience makes the heart, and all that. It's a strange thing to say when for two years it was hard to go anywhere, much less across international borders. But things are slowly unfurling again. You can still see the imprint of a boot where old stems were shed. Car exhaust, rain over the cliffs by the Falaise D'aval, Chinese food at the docks in Le Havre. Sometimes you must go, if you can manage it, and don't worry when they won't publish you later. It's nothing they haven't heard before.

Clinic
By Patrick Carrico

“It's 3am when it's hardest. Not the craving but the reality of it. I am supposed to find joy in sobriety, but I just don't. I find myself alone in my parents' basement, 45 fucking years old,” Maria half laughed. “I do think that if I can get Buddy's ashes, I can get somewhere, some ‘closure’ or whatever.” She made air quotes around the word closure. It's a stupid word, we were in agreement on that fact.

“Where are his ashes?” I asked.

“Crown Memorial in Frankfort,” Katie said. “I spoke to the VA, they said they would pay for the cremation, but they need a receipt.”

“A receipt?” I asked.

“Yes, they won't just cut me a check, they need a receipt... but the funeral home won't give me Buddy unless I pay them. Do you see? I can't get the receipt unless I pay, I can't get the money without a receipt.”

I thought of my boss's Mustang parked out front of the clinic. I wondered what kind of Kentucky flex that was; ‘we are the Mustang of drug addiction clinics.’ Surely he could float the cash to get Buddy. “Who have you asked to borrow the money? I don't want to ask the same people,” I said.

“I've asked the VA, the Baptists, and the women's shelter,” Katie said.

I sat back in my office chair. It made a loud pop noise as some plastic part failed. “How about housing,” I asked. “Are you still with your parents?”

“Yes, my mom isn't doing well,” Katie said.

“Are you still considering being her caregiver?” I asked.

“Yes, she can't do a lot of things,” Katie said.

“Did you take a look at the application to be a family care provider?” I asked.

“Yes, I have that,” Katie looked at the time on her phone.

“Well, that's an option for some money,” I said.

“I should be getting survivor benefits too. I lived with that man for fifteen years,” Katie said.

“Have you spoken to the VA?” I asked.

“Yes, there is a case number,” she said.

Our fifteen minutes were almost up and we had only managed to rehash last week’s discussion.

“This week I am going to contact a legal aide and see what I can do about helping you get Buddy’s ashes back,” I said, trying to justify my job, to her and myself.

“Ok honey, I’m going to go pee for the doctor and get my meds,” she said and left me with the smell of her vanilla body spray.

Years of shelter work had ruined this job for me. It was like being in grade school and reading as a class, a book you had already read and loved. It was excruciating watching my coworkers inch towards the conclusion that was obvious to me. The counselors, the lab techs, the receptionist, the Physician’s Assistant were so reluctant to accept the plot twist coming, no one was taking their meds. They were selling them. The dose was too low, it was cut with Naloxone which ruins a high, and everybody needed the money. Of course they were selling them. God fucking bless them. Selling them was the only honest thing to do when an offered cure for addiction as pathetic as counseling with a bible thumper, an inept case manager and garbage medicine are offered. I guess to admit this pathetic nature, the counselors, the lab techs, the receptionist and the Physician’s Assistant would have to admit to themselves they weren’t christ-like figures. They had jobs in the junkie economy that were no more important than my job, no more important than the job of Katie... no more important than the job of Buddy. Selling your meds is no more dishonest than buying a Mustang with the profits from a clinic. “It is what it is.”

I googled Crown Memorial and pulled up their number. I got a recorded message, “Thank you for choosing Crown Memorial. At Crown Memorial we make it our mission to accompany you and your loved ones on your sacred journey. Please leave a detailed message and we will get back to you shortly.”

I hung up, I was not yet prepared to leave a message. I leaned back in my chair which again made a loud popping noise. I took out my business card so I could read my call back number confidently. I took a deep breath and called again.

“Hello, this is Patrick, Katie’s case manager at Health Recovery... I was wondering if I could ask a few questions about a problem Katie is having with... a loved one...” The more I knew about HIPPA, the more I was sure making any inquiry using names, words, letters, punctuation or numbers of any kind was a violation.

After hanging up I realized I hadn't left a call back number despite the fact I had been staring at my stupid business card. I was about to call again when Katie re-appeared. She was pale and smiling. "Guess what?" she said.

"What" I said.

"I peed for the doctor. Apparently I am pregnant," she said. "I'm forty five fucking years old."

"Well, Jesus Christ," I said.

"I am pregnant and forty five fucking years old," she said again. The smile bled from her face. She held the drug test results solemnly between her knees and stared blankly at them. "How do I take care of it?"

I leaned back in my chair which made a loud popping noise. "Well, there are a lot of options," I said, forgetting for a moment that we were in Kentucky where there were, in fact, very few options.

"How can I take care of it?" Katie repeated. This time her inflection confused me.

"I think the first step is seeing an OGB... OGB... O-B-G-Y-N and confirming the test," I said, picturing the half drunk Mtn Dew bottles in the lab refrigerator. God knows what they actually tested.

"I mean, this is insane," she said. "A lady doctor? Is that what an O-F-U-C-K is?"

"An OBGYN can rule out false positive test results," I stammered.

"I have to take care of it," Katie said.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I want to take care of it," Katie said.

I thought about the Physician's assistant, the counselors, the lab tech and the receptionist. Somehow I was this poor woman's first stop. I had no idea what 'take care of it,' meant in Kentucky. Did she want it or did she want an abortion?

"What does that look like to you?" I asked, trying to flush out some information.

Maria looked at me quizzically. "What does 'what' look like?" she asked.

“What does taking care of it look like?” I asked, sounding like some goddamn west coast Ted Talk.

She shrugged away the vague question. “What do I do?”

“Let's find you an... OBGYN to confirm the test,” I said. “There's a woman's clinic in Lexington.”

“How the fuck do I get to Lexington... Never mind, I can figure that out. I thought this body was done having kids. It's no god-damned temple, that's for sure,” she said, smiling at me with wet dark eyes.

My phone rang. I let it ring while I pulled up the webpage for the women's clinic in Lexington and wrote down their number. “Can you call these people and make an appointment?” I asked.

Katie took the number, folded it and put it in her purse without looking at it. The silence between us stagnated and we both began to fidget.

After a cautious knock on the door, the receptionist popped her head in the door, “You have a call on line one.”

I picked up the receiver, “Hello?”

“Hello, this is Britany with Crown Memorial services, I am returning a call from this number. The ashes you are speaking of are ready for pick up. We don't withhold ashes for failure of payment. They can be collected any time today. She will just need to sign a form... it will negatively affect her credit.” I slammed the receiver down, I guess to prevent Buddy from overhearing the news his wife was pregnant.

She was sniffing and staring off into the horizon. “I guess the lord doesn't give you more than you can handle,” she said then took a deep sigh. “It feels like I am cheating on Buddy. It does. I mean, he isn't even in the ground yet.”

I stroked my chin and made my best compassionate face. The silence allowed her heaving sobs to escape. Although this was not a billable service, I let her cry.

I smoked a cigarette and watched Katie get into her car. The clinic shared a strip mall with a monument company. To display their samples, they had set up a cemetery next to the parking lot. Each headstone had a generic name carved into it; John Doe, Jane Doe. I leaned on John Doe's headstone and saw Katie's car lurched into traffic as she had some sort of animated discussion with the shadow of a passenger. I considered a headstone for myself, then rejected it. I couldn't relate to someone who would want such a giant heavy thing laying on their forehead after they were dead. That seems too similar to living.

“Bro, a new client,” my boss said, poking his head out of the clinic door. He was young, trained in business. He wore short T-shirts to prove he worked out. Death was far from his mind. He squinted over at his Mustang, to confirm it was still as healthy and unmarred as he, then ducked back inside. I followed him back in.

“I look for things like money for rent. There isn’t any shame in getting that, it’s everywhere right now,” I said, describing my services to a new customer. He was my age, tanned, rough hands. Men were the hardest to break the ice with. Decades of being conditioned to never ask for, or accept help often turned their minds into lonely prisons where addictions calmed the rage and that overwhelming sense of futility. “I have clients getting months of rent paid,” I said, my voice trailing off.

“I’m ok with rent,” he said, staring at the wall behind me.

“Do you have a primary care doctor?” I said, looking down the list of questions I was supposed to ask.

“Yes,” he said.

My boss had encouraged me to confirm the answers to every question with follow up questions. Every piece of information given by clients he called, “A lead.” A lead could generate more billable hours of case management. This made finding any common ground to rationalize the initial meeting almost impossible. “Well good. Because you’d be surprised what health shit can come out of nowhere and knock you on your ass,” I said, trying to be colloquial. His icy stare remained unbroken on the wall behind me.

“Can I just confirm your phone number and email,” I asked. My boss insisted I do this because the medical billing software and appointment scheduling software generated invoices, sent appointment reminders and set robo calls to patients reminding them of their upcoming appointments for our brand human centered care.

The patient looked at me now. He had icy blue eyes. “Why?”

“Well,” I said, faltering “often I hear of new programs for things like new phones from the government... electric bill assistance. I forward them on to my people... right now the city of Frankfort is giving out 25\$ gift certificates for free as a kind of city economic stimulus. I have been getting people hooked up with that,” I said.

The man produced his own smart phone and put it on my desk. He entered his pass code and pointed to a folder on the machine. “This is how the Frankfort Police Department knows what I am doing,” he said. “That file right there. They hear everything.”

I considered the statement and its paranoid implications, then tried to ignore it. “Are you happy with your job?”

“Don’t contact my job, sir,” he said. “The Frankfort Police Department uses this file here as a portal to GPS coordinates and follows me. Do you know where I was arrested? The dumpsters at the Goodwill. Now how the fuck did they know I was at the dumpsters at the Goodwill at 5 am? This file. So don’t tell me you don’t know everything already.” The man took his phone back and resumed staring at the wall behind me.

“Are you here as part of the court? I can confirm to the court you are enrolled in this program, if that helps...”

“Which court, Franklin, Shelby or Carrol where my kids are?” he said. “Can you fucking talk to my other case managers and all have a fucking pizza party where you talk about ways to fuck up my life more? Are we done here?”

He was right, there were so many case managers in Kentucky, if they unified and armed themselves, they could make some real noise. “Can I try to delete that file off your phone?” I asked.

“Can you do that?” he seemed interested.

“I mean, I can try,” I said.

“I mean, why not, you can probably pull everything up on my phone from your computer right there,” he said. He handed me the phone. I took it and tried dragging the file to trash. It didn’t work. I knew nothing about phones and I resented them in my own life. Cell phones seem like fountains of useless information and illiterate people’s opinions. I had seen spy movies, though. I knew a thing or two about ‘burner phones.’

“What if I put the sim card in this phone,” I said, pulling out a phone I had hoarded from previously working in homeless shelters over the years. “I know you already have to have a phone and you might not trust me, but It’s worth a try. Sounds like you have nothing to lose.”

“We could try it,” he said. I fumbled with the back of the second phone with my shaky fingers, soon he became impatient and took it from me, adeptly removing the SIM card from his own phone and putting it in the new one. He plugged it into the wall and powered it up. For a few moments he flipped through the newer phone. “This will work, this will work,” he said.

“I get phones donated all the time, come back next week and maybe we can swap again,” I said.

He locked eyes on me and shook my hand. He wordlessly left my office while flipping through his phone. As what I did was technically illegal, I glanced over at his old phone and wondered if the Spies for HIPPA were listening to me through it via the mystery file he had complained of. I made a new paper file for the man whose name I had forgotten to ask. I wrote ‘Phone Guy’ at the top and put his old phone in it and put it in my file cabinet.

My next client was Ali. He had lost two feet to diabetes and his two walking canes clunked down the hallway signaling his arrival. I greeted him at my office door and motioned him in. He looked suspiciously both ways before closing my door. Once seated, Ali took a deep breath then resumed the week before’s conversation.

“Like I was saying, the dude had like seven people from the block on his payroll. Once a week they all piled into his Dodge Caravan and drove to Covington. I did it once or twice, we were like folded in there. He gave us a small amount of heroin before we left for the drug screen. Some of the dudes had been up all night already. We get to the clinic and like some sort of bus driver from hell, he gives us the copay as we get out. We walk over, stand in line, piss dirty and get our prescription. We get back in the van, he’s always listening to AM talk radio. We drive to the Sonic parking lot. He takes a roll of cash out of pocket, a gun from under his seat and puts it on his lap and he buys the scripts. He’s cool about it, he buys what we have. Like I said, he’s cool about it. Some guys give him just enough to cover the copay he fronted them. Like, they are real addicts who need the shit to live. But some guys just need the money. It was genius, really. Once the business is done, we drive back and he lets everyone out on the block. It’s big business though, I mean when I think about it. Not just the mafia bringing the shit into the hood, but the dudes running scams on the side. The residential rehab clinics in their big brick buildings and you and me, man. You and me. We’re all part of it. It’s a legitimate percentage of the mother fucking economy.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he continued, “But my ex-wife always said, Ali, it doesn’t matter if you are right about all this shit. It doesn’t matter. It’s not like someone is going to hear you and say, ‘Hay, that guy’s got it figured out! Let’s stop doing this obvious dumb shit! Down with dumb shit! No, but it’s kind of wild to just sit back and watch it all roll. I remember guys on the stoop when I was a kid and thinking those ‘those old guys are just some walking dead men.’ They lost the game of life. But now I’m on the stoop, watching and for once in my life I feel like I get it. I’m in the mother fucking ‘cat bird seat.’ See? Aint that some country shit to say? Cat bird seat? That’s exactly the kind of shit I would hear old people on the stoop saying thirty years ago. But now I’m there. I’m in the cat the bird seat. You get it. You are the mother fucking mafia drug pushing cat bird seat sitting case managing mother fucker, arent you?”

“I like to think so,” I said.

“I better get on out of here, I have to go tinkle for the doctor. Why does he need that? Is he some kind of piss vampire?” Ali asked.

Picturing the half empty Mtn Dew Bottles in the lab fridge again I said, “I honestly am not sure.” I walked Ali to my office door, looked both ways out into the hall, then let him by.

At the clinician’s meeting we didn’t discuss patients, but the boss's new idea for a website.

“We put the patient's case history online, sort of like Monster.com. Employers can see how far along our people are in recovery and hire them. Then, part-in-parcel with recovery, we provide employment stabilization services. I’m going to look to roll this out with Patrick starting next month so remember this on the intake process. You do the intake, you ask, hey would you like to be a part of our program finding better jobs for people in recovery? Sort of like Monster.com? They say yes, boom! I give you twenty dollars.”

“Do we give the patient twenty dollars?”

“No, you, the clinician, get the money. Think about it though. On top of the five dollars I give you for getting a positive google review, you get a few people enrolled in this new program a week... you are making good money. I mean, set goals for yourself. Make some money,” the boss said. “Set goals,” he repeated while peering out the window at his Mustang.

Mindlessly we adjourned the meeting and shuffled back to our offices. I stared at my stack of folders for a while. Then I remembered Katie and Buddy’s ashes. The absurdity of going to get him confronted me, storing him in a building with a fake cemetery out front waiting for his pregnant ex-wife to collect him seemed worse than the silent solemnity of a crematorium. I wondered too if the crematorium was hiring. Maybe I could post my resume on Monster.com; “Cynical piss vampire seeking employment in crematorium. Will work for stories.”

I ran into Katie at Walmart a few months later. She told me the reason she stopped coming in was she had been arrested on an old warrant. She had also miscarried in jail while coming off drugs. “Best thing that ever happened to me,” she told me in the cleaning products aisle. “It is what it is,” she concluded. I wanted to ask about Buddy, but that seemed like none of my business. She wasn’t my client anymore and it wasn’t my job to take care of it.

The Fight Started at the Edge of Space

By Paul Smit

In July of 2021, a shimmering spaceship, the long-awaited brainchild of a billionaire, flew just above NASA's definition of space. At the time, a handful of plutocrats were vying to send the first private vessels into orbit. Who would captain the spirit of our expansion into the great beyond? As launch dates moved up to ensure bragging rights, the representative for one company offered these kind words about a competitor: "We wish them a great and safe flight, but they're not flying above the Kármán line and it's a very different experience to what we have planned."

The toy-like looking pod of another would-be-captain flew a few months later. Much fanfare covered the surreal moment the pod landed safely in the Atlantic Ocean. Humans rejoiced at the vertical landing: their eyes saw a safe water landing on earth; their survival instincts saw further out - to the glittering oceans scattered across the galaxy.

Mankind's hubris, unlike its cellular body, knows no limits. One financier maintained that sending humans to Mars as quickly as possible was essential, "for preserving the light of consciousness." Others hailed the Red Planet as a second chance for humans. Considering the exponentially increasing power of artificial intelligence on earth at the time, the humanitarian overtures were tough to swallow.

While billionaires fought over who has the better vessel, another fight, one not covered by marketing hoopla or the bloodlust of Twitter, began to prickle in the background.

The contestants? Scientists. The monotonous, ethical kind - hence why nobody paid much attention. The topic? Terraforming.

Neither the distance nor the extreme temperatures of the Red Planet could stay the expansion of our ravenous species any longer. With all the necessary technology either readily available or far

along in the development pipeline, terraforming was no longer a dirty sci-fi innuendo. It quickly rose to the top of the agenda in memos and presentations. A small committee of international scientists convened in Geneva to flesh out terraforming strategies for Mars.

What should we plant in the greenhouses of space? “That’s obvious,” said Dr. David Merck, head of the World Health Organization at the time. “Plant what the astronauts eat. Their diets should determine what thrives. Establish stable living conditions for the humans first and then consider which genetically modified fauna could help introduce nitrogen and oxygen into the atmosphere.” Merck was adamant that you stabilize humans first, and the atmosphere second.

Jennifer Kim, China’s representative on the committee, disagreed. She maintained that genetically engineered bacteria should be sent in ahead, letting them run amok as they fight for survival. She maintained that the thinking of ‘establish a base and then bring in more of Earth,’ should be inverted. Kim quoted Gary King, a microbiologist from Louisiana State University, “Synthetic biology has given us a remarkable toolkit that can be used to manufacture new kinds of organisms especially suited for the systems we want to plan for. We’ll want to investigate our chosen microbes, find the genes that code for the survival and terraforming properties that we want (like radiation and drought resistance), and then use that knowledge to genetically engineer Martian-specific microbes.” Most agreed on sending the designer microbes, but only Kim wanted to send them in without a chaperone.

‘The world doesn’t have time for these ideas,’ maintained Avros Pushkin, a Russian delegate. ‘Now is the time to use force. Enough nuclear blasts would create tiny artificial suns capable of warming the planet and inducing an Earthlike atmosphere. Your microbes will be older than Earth by the time they have any impact.’ Silence. Nobody addressed Pushkin’s concerns. Kim resumed touting the advantages of designer microbes.

Strategy devolved into nationalism when countries demanded that root stock from their laboratories be given space in the planned greenhouses. A particularly loud delegate from Ghana secured space for his genetically modified Katla root, a root he declared as the father of food for mankind's next great civilization. He called it 'the happiest of marriages between a potato and a bushel of wheat; the kind of marriage that blesses the house and everyone in it.'

The face of space exploration started to look a lot like colonization by 2040. All the private companies were locked in a perpetual state of growth: grow the fleets, grow the profits, grow mankind's footprint, grow the patriotic sentiment (to avoid public scrutiny). The USA appeared to be cooperating with the rest of the world in representing the collective human interest, even if all data and design decisions still flowed through North America. For the first time in human history, private companies had greater access to outer space than any world army did. NASA and the military played supporting roles to the private behemoths carrying our hopes and dreams into the ether.

By 2045, the greenhouses on Mars are up. The very best human telescopes can spot the spectacular construction from earth as mankind stamps itself onto the Red Planet like a tattoo. The greenhouses occupy a footprint equal to the size of Utah. Not built out of steel and glass, but out of living organic material designed on earth, material that feels and feeds and collaborates with other living organisms – the pinnacle of human biotechnology gives us The Great Pyramids of the 21st century. Educational endowments on earth flock to arm young humans with working knowledge of this technology. The first graduates from these programs are all guaranteed free passage to Mars and become known on Earth as Stem Scions.

By 2046, two terraforming projects, one with nukes, the other with designer microbes, begin on opposite corners of Mars, far away from the greenhouses. Some disagree with this strategy. "It makes no sense," says one scientist. "Imagine we were colonizing earth, but there were no oceans.

Even then, why build greenhouses in France and then start your terraforming in Argentina? Safety first, yes, but this is overkill.” Scientists monitor the progress of the designer microbes and respond swiftly to any undesirable mutations by sending in SWAB teams.

By 2048, back on Earth, Hawaii has been surrounded by the Plastic Ocean. The Plastic Ocean, you may remember, began in its infancy as a small manmade island, sitting in the middle of the Pacific, collecting the discards of the world’s currents. Somewhere around 2035 it graduates from an island into an ocean, and shortly thereafter begins to travel.

By 2050, more than sixty thousand humans are living permanently on Mars.

An 8am press conference in New York on March 8th, 2051 informs the world of a space storm moving past Mars. It won’t hit the Red Planet, they say, but will cut Earth off from it. Think of it as a desert storm, say scientists, only on a much larger scale, and for a prolonged period. Communication with Mars will be limited at best, and for the next thirty years – a conservative estimate – travel to Mars will be impossible. The volatility of the storm makes it too dangerous to go through, and the size of it economically unfeasible to circumvent. For the foreseeable future, telescopes will gaze upon a kaleidoscope of elements burning up the night sky. Avros Pushkin, in his eighties at this point, explains it in layman’s terms: “Take a scale model of our galaxy, and then put an A4 piece of paper between us and Mars. The piece of paper is the storm. That’s what our fleets would have to go around to get to Mars safely. It quadruples the distance.”

May 27th, 2051. Mars and Earth exchange their final public messages. People on Earth can see the storm with the naked eye. Children marvel at the swirling green and amber sparks exploding across the night. Astronomers watch with unease, unable to look away from the event that might lead to the collapse of our new civilization. Regular civilians can’t shake a pervading sense of annihilation: viruses on Earth are mutating faster than ever before, ecosystems are collapsing, and social unrest is fanning

the globe, pulling even the most civilized pockets of society into the fray. Mars must work; it *has* to. The mixed feelings of hope and fear throw up all over social discourse.

Sentiment on Mars remains upbeat. The greenhouses are secured, the terraforming has been producing encouraging results, and the research labs on Mars are equipped with the most advanced technology known to our species. In the days following the final official Mars communication, social media is awash with emotional video messages sent between Mars and Earth relatives. “On Earth as it is on Mars” trends across platforms as prayers for the Red Planet fly from the blue.

In early 2084, audio communication with Mars is re-established. They are thriving.

Mars makes video contact with Earth on September 16, 2084.

Here’s what happened in the three decades Mars spent in isolation. Half the pioneers died within the first two years after a widespread greenhouse infection wiped out all but one food source: the Katla root, the genetically modified contribution from Ghana. Not all the original astronauts could digest the Katla root, and the replanted crops weren’t ready in time to stave off the famine that claimed thousands of lives. One of the astronauts who remembers the early years on Mars calls the Katla root, “Eggplant from hell. That’s what we called it. Back then, we had a saying: if you don’t eat *it*, then *it* eats you! What do I remember? Extended stomachs. It’s all I can see, even now. Men holding onto their lower backs as if they were pregnant. And then there were the sounds. Moans echoing through oxygen masks as the root swelled in the stomachs that couldn’t digest it. Those of us who could eat the root had to keep doing so, all the while watching the stomachs of our friends and colleagues balloon. You know how it killed them in the end? Explosion. Yes, explosion. We couldn’t figure out what made it digestible only to some. When you saw the stomach of someone in your family start to swell you knew it was only a matter of time . . . before the moaning. We couldn’t sleep at night; our ears kept waiting for the bursting sound. Their screams would turn into guttural diarrhea just before

they passed. Then you'd hear it . . . a faint pop, and the screams stop. The sound of gas and bubbling innards flowing out of the stomach would start no more than a few seconds later . . . it's a sound like no other."

But what the Katla root lacked in mercy, it made up for in ingenuity. A group of scientists left to their own devices in the absence of Earth directives established a Katla skin farm after modifying the genetic code of the root. Reams of the skin, which was as strong as rubber and could withstand the extreme temperature fluctuations of Mars, were grown in tunnels. Soon every external structure not requiring a perpetual oxygen supply was built with some variation of the Katla skin. After fifteen years, the first city of Mars, aptly named Markatla, was brimming with structures made largely from organic material. Biochemistry flourished in Markatla. The city became the playground for scientists who, for almost thirty years, had no red tape or safety protocols to straitjacket their imagination.

But on Mars, as on Earth, not all human imagination runs in the same direction. The Katla root tragedy had cleaved the young spirit of Mars, eventually splitting it in three. Markatla was the first officially recognized city. The greenhouses and their supporting structures, affectionately referred to as Basket Base, became the second. The third was simply named Nuke City. Nuclear terraforming, in combination with designer microbes and the Katla root applications, yielded fascinating results in Nuke City. From mutant microbes to fully sustainable underground plants, scientists forged ahead unbridled by fear and due process. Earth's politicians begin to covet the city teeming with new life. A silent wedge between the two planets goes up almost overnight when the oldest living cyborg on Mars declares himself the mayor of Nuke City.

October and November of 2084 are marked by a dramatic spike in geopolitical tensions on Earth as the fight for dominion over Mars reaches a feverish pitch. The narrative that Mars is the new, and last, frontier for the West only serves to fan already unbearable social unrest on Earth.

Dec 7, 2084. Three hundred Starships leave Earth, launching from across the globe. Of the roughly one hundred and fifty thousand humans racing towards Mars, one hundred thousand are politicians. Civilians on Earth storm government structures in protest. “You already have your Animal Farm. It’s called Earth!” yells one irate human. “Fly the whole lot of them straight into the sun!” shouts another. The Stem Scions emerge as the spiritual leaders on Mars; they make it known that the Red Planet will not be steward to the divisive rule of capitalism and fascism. An urgent meeting is called on Mars, summoning the Stem Scions from the three cities to convene. They decide on ten governing principles that will henceforth govern the holistic existence of the planet. To the humans, some of the principles seem alien and defeatist; to the Martians, they evoke feelings of harmony and rebirth. Every inhabitant on Mars must have the principles inked into their skin, the roof of each finger serving as testament to their commitment.

I WILL NOT ASPIRE TO HAVE MORE THAN I NEED.

LIFE IS NOW. WHEN NOW IS NOT, I RELEASE MY LIFE.

I WILL END LIFE WHEN I AM CALLED TO.

I WILL TEACH.

I WILL LEARN.

I WILL CREATE. I WILL DESTROY.

I WILL SERVE THIS PLANET.

I LEAD OR I FOLLOW.

I WILL NOT LIE.

POWER IS CREATION.

With all the furor surrounding the principles championed by the Stem Scions, one Martian had this to say: “It’s sad, all this hope in us up here. We can feel it you know, their desperation. What is actually just a base has somehow become a psychological outpost for a species. They’re looking to the stars for answers. Do we somehow have more insight simply because we live on a new planet? To this day, nobody knows why we are here. Some *think* they know the answer. Some *believe* they know the answer. But nobody *really* knows. Take it from someone who has lived on Mars since the beginning: only once we travel inwards, collectively, as a species, will we find any clarity. I’m not talking about love; I’m talking about inversion. Stars shine to light the way in the sky while hearts, and listen carefully to me now, hearts shine to illuminate the cosmos within. Sounds like rhetoric you’d spew in front of a naïve child, doesn’t it? Perhaps. But look at Earth, overrun by unhappiness despite all its colossal achievements. I feel, and please . . . note the distinction between thinking, believing, and feeling, that true human ascension won’t be in the stars. It’ll be through reduction . . . *within*. Only once we’re all looking inward will we see the true sky . . . and realize that space is just another floor.”

The Riot
By Sid Katragadda

As I stand under a flickering, incandescent street-lamp in the fading light, an auto driver pulls up and gives me an eyebrow flash, a coded gesture that roughly translates to, “where to?” He has a graying beard, shaved upper lip and an off-white lace skullcap.

“Colaba.” I say.

When he promptly shakes his head and engages the clutch, my heart sinks; he’s going to roar away, leaving me coughing in the smoke, just like the dozen other auto drivers who’d left me in the cold. Literally. It is a rather frigid evening for Mumbai standards. The monsoon rains have left a dank vapor in the air, and the ocean breeze cuts through my thin shirt like icicles. If I don’t get a ride soon, I may have to catch three buses to get home, a prospect I’m not looking forward to without a jacket for protection.

“I’ll pay you fifty rupees extra,” I haggle, trying my best to hide my desperation. Bargaining with auto drivers is all about psychology, a bit of acting, and a bit of timing too.

He shakes his head and turns the gears.

“Ok, fine... double fare,” I negotiate. I wonder if this man’s the kind that puts religion before money, the sort that takes their vengeance on the opposite faith whenever they find a vulnerable target.

After a moment’s thought, he tilts his head toward the back seat.

I sigh and get in. He must be a good Samaritan, after all. The man drives through the deserted streets with expert hands at a speed that defies the dangers of the slick, rain-water-filled roads. There’s an Arabic sticker on his dash, perhaps a quote from the Koran. Religious people don’t have the same fear of death as an atheist like me; they put their life into their scriptures and Gods. I admire the calligraphic beauty of the font, and wonder why the Arabs chose to write from

right to left when the whole world was doing the opposite. It's kind of like how I've often wondered about how the Romans could be such good builders despite their rather primitive number system.

At one point, we are supposed to make a right turn onto a flyover, but he speeds by it.

“Bhaisaab, you're going the wrong way,” I point out.

“It's okay, Sahib, I know what I am doing.”

“Look, I'm not new to town. I hope you're not taking me for a ride.” Pun intended.

He ignores my remark, and keeps driving.

“I want you to turn back or I am not paying double fare,” I demand.

“You don't trust me because I am Muslim?” he shoots back.

“What? No, it has nothing to do with your religion, it's just that I have seen and heard many stories about you auto drivers... even Hindu ones...”

“Why did you get in my auto if you don't trust me? You knew I was a Muslim.”

“Look, all I want you to do is turn back. Simple. Follow the standard route. Don't take me here and there to get a bigger fare.”

“What is your opinion about the mosque, Sahib,” he asks, suddenly changing the topic.

“What mosque?”

“The Babri Masjid.”

“Oh, I'm not into politics, honestly” I reply evasively.

“Is it fair for them to break the Mosque that has stood there for hundreds of years?”

I lied to him. I am very much into politics, and have been following the demolition of the mosque very closely. I had even watched it live on TV. Moments before its collapse, I had closed my eyes and tried to imagine its peace— everything quiet and tranquil inside, the way God envisioned our world before man destroyed it. I could hear the rhythmic wail of the Imam singing his azaan, the song of God, to the morning skies, waking up the birds and the people of the surrounding town. I

opened my eyes, my quiet moment broken by the piercing cries of victory—and of vengeance—and redemption. They were showing shots from inside the mosque. The ceiling shuddered, as if from an earthquake. The thud of metal against mortar was punctuated intermittently by the piercing screams of men. And then, the dome gave way to sledgehammers and crowbars. Rays of sunlight filtered in through the breaches, highlighting dirt, dust, and debris that was falling in.

The auto driver is adamant. “I just want to know what you think. I won’t feel bad if you say it’s fine to break the mosque. It’s your opinion.”

“Honestly, I don’t think it’s right,” I reply, although I have always been a bit conflicted on this issue. The Hindus have their rights, too. Sometimes, there is no black and white. The right answer is somewhat gray. This is not any regular mosque; it sits on one of the holiest places for the Hindus, the birthplace of Lord Ram—Ayodhya! It is here that just months before, a politician from the opposition Hindu political party had ended his famous ten-thousand-mile march, galvanizing the youth of India to his cause of destroying the mosque and building a Ram temple.

“You’re not lying, are you,” he prods.

I’m beginning to wonder if this driver is some sort of radical. What if he’s driving me straight into a Muslim area, where he has goons waiting for me? What if his turning back is based on my answers to his questions?

“So you don’t think the mosque should be destroyed...” he asks again, “...just to build a Hindu temple there?”

“No, but you know these politicians. They use these sentiments to come to power” I’m just trying to use a bit of diplomacy here. I need to get home. “Now, will you just turn back and take the bridge?”

“I still get the feeling you don’t trust me, Sahib.”

“Look... if you don’t turn back right now, I’m going to call the police.”

Before I get a response, I hear a loud bang.

The driver pulls over and sticks his head out.

“What was that?” I ask him.

“I was afraid of this,” he hisses, his voice shaky, as shopkeepers pull their shutters down in unison, as if animals in a forest have sensed the arrival of a lion. “I should have gone straight home.”

“What do you mean? What’s going on?!”

“The riots, Sahib. The reason I did not take the bridge was it would go into a Muslim Muhalla. There are rumors the violence has started. I wanted to take you through a safer route.”

For the second time, I feel my heart sink to a low place. Not just because of the grave danger we are suddenly in, but because I had put this man’s character to question over his faith.

As I peer out over the sea of homes and shops ahead of us, I see a plume of smoke suddenly erupt by the street corner, near the main road. Then, I hear an explosion, louder than the first; the force of the vibration rattles my bones. My heart begins pounding, as an unfamiliar stench fills my nostrils. No, it is not the smell of Diwali firecrackers, although people have still been bursting them a month after the festival. It is the smell of burned rubber.

It is only then that I see a sea of men storming the main road, just blocks from where we are!

The riots have started.

The already-poor visibility is quickly diminished by thick smoke billowing from the burning street. I hear a flurry of feet, and slogans, as angry men scamper through the smoke-filled street with machetes, rods and hockey sticks, shouting religious slogans. They break into a wine shop and set it on fire. Seconds later, they emerge from the burning building and vent their anger on vendor carts, turning them upside down and sending ripe vegetables and fruit all over the street. A police van screams through the street, sirens blaring. The mobsters jump in front of it and begin slamming it with rods and hammers. Windows shatter. Horns blare. As the police van is doused with gasoline

and set on fire, the policemen are dragged out and wrestled to the ground. One maverick cop tries to aim his rifle at his attackers, but he is quickly wrestled to the ground, beaten and stabbed with his own bayonet.

My heart begins to race. Evil scenarios begin to pound my brain. Are they Muslims? What are they doing here, in a Hindu-dominated area? Then, it dawns on me that a mile away, there is an Islamic neighborhood. My fears are confirmed when I see the skullcaps and green bandanas, and I hear the battle cries of Allah-u-Akbar!

“Hurry, turn back,” I scream at the auto driver as the mobsters turn into our alley. But the man seems to be in no hurry. He has nothing to fear; he’s not going to be cut to pieces by this Muslim mob! I am! “Go, go, go!” I yell at him. “They are going to kill me!”

It’s too late. Three men corner us off. Raw panic drives me to get out and run for my life, but my limbs betray me, having lost all strength. All I can hear now are the wails of the mob, and the sounds of petrol bombs going off. One man, in a green vest, with Arabic letters scrolled across it, approaches me. He yells in Urdu to his partners, “he looks like a Hindu!”

He slaps me so hard, I tumble onto the gravel, holding my face. As I struggle to my feet, something snaps in my head! I grab a tire iron from under the driver’s seat and charge my assailants, waving the weapon at the rioters. I even manage to take one of them down, but before I can have a go at the others, I feel a thud. It feels like a ton of bricks just landed on my head. I hit the pavement hard.

When my eyes open, I see three men, appearing now as six, then nine.

The green-vest-man grabs my collar and yanks me off the ground. “What’s your name?” he demands, in Urdu. “Say it, or I’ll slit your throat, Saala!”

Levitated and nearly choking, my thoughts become fragmented. I know that if I divulge my real name, they will not only kill me, they will chop me to pieces and dump my remains in the

Arabian Sea. The city is burning because of Lord Ram— and I was named after him. They will not show me any mercy once they know my name.

The man drops me on the road like a rag doll. I begin to crawl away from him only to have another man grab me by my hair and drag me to the middle of the street. Two men pin me down on the asphalt, scraping my elbows on the gravel. As I kick and fight back, a petrol can is popped open. The smell of noxious gasoline fills my nostrils. Rough, dirty fingers wrench my mouth open. The can is raised over my head. The pungent liquid flows into my mouth. It feels warm inside me, but cold in my brain. I smell my own blood, mixed with gasoline, a rancid odor like none I have ever smelled. I spit out and bite at the hand. The man smacks me so hard, my lips bust open. All I can do is whimper like an animal that's about to be put down.

“Open your mouth!” The green-vest man bellows through clenched teeth, as he fumbles in his trouser pockets and produces a matchbox. He strikes a match and swings the orange-blue flame inches from my gasoline-filled mouth! I try to shrink away from it, but my arms and legs are pinned down so hard, I can barely move. My elbows grate against the gravel, sending bolts of pain shooting up to my brain.

I can't even move my head, the man's grip on my hair is so tight. All I can do is watch the flame as it inches towards my flammable mouth. The wheels of the moment spin so slowly, I feel like time has slowed down to savor my death. In those last moments, I hear a burning auto-rickshaw going up in a final burst of soot and sparks. And then, I see the light; the light people say they see when they are close to death. I get glimpses of my new reincarnated life, and in it, I am a gutter rat. That last thought snaps me out of my spell. I would rather be a cockroach than a rat, as I hate rats!

The man sticks the match dangerously close to my lips. I can almost see myself with a burned mouth, lips fused together. I won't be able to speak, eat... or give presentations at work.

“Tell me your name, or I’ll fry your head and feed it to the dogs,” the man barks. His free hand is busy stripping my pants off, perhaps to see if I am circumcised. I feel a gush of warmth between my legs as a yellow spot spreads across my crotch. I blurt out, spitting out a mix of blood and gasoline, “I will tell you... my name is...” The roar in my ears is so loud, I can barely hear my voice as I stammer out the word that will be my death! “Ram.”

What! Even this close to death I can’t bring myself to lie. Why? I don’t even believe in God, or heaven. What harm could a small white lie do?

“Ram!” The man’s eyes twist with such anger and malaise, I have never seen anything so inhuman in my life. “Kill him!”

“Burn him!” says a second man.

“Chop his head off,” says a third.

“And hang his body up by the main road!”

“Send them a message! This is what we will do to them if they build that temple over the mosque!”

Just as the man prepares to torch my mouth, I hear a voice. Is it God?

No, it’s the auto driver, looming over me holding a pistol. His booming voice sets the birds off on the wires. “Let him go!”

The man waits for his words to sink in.

“You traitor! They destroyed our mosque!”

“I’m going to count to three!”

The green-vest-man, still holding the burning match, freezes.

“One!”

The mobsters stare at the gun, perplexed.

“Two!”

The men exchange worried glances, and murmur to each other in Urdu.

“Three!”

The driver aims the gun at the green-vest man—and fires! He misses! The man drops the match and backs away, just caught unawares. The driver reloads and takes aim, but before he can pull the trigger, the men take off like swatted flies.

As I catch my breath, vomiting out blood and gasoline, the sound of the gunshot reverberates in my ears. The driver offers his hand and I grab it. Blood drips down my bruised hand, collecting in the area where our palms meet. At that precise moment, I realize that the same blood flows in both of us. And no matter how many wars and riots have been fought— no matter how different we are from each other in looks, character and temperament— we are the one, in the end. We are human!

Gradually, the screaming and yelling of protestors fades to a deafening silence. I still hear an occasional bomb going off, and men screaming slogans, but it soon becomes evident that the rioters have moved on. The driver sticks the gun under his seat, helps me into the back seat, whips out a first-aid kit and offers me some cotton gauze.

“We have to leave,” he says. “Before they come back.”

As I hold the cotton ball to my wound, blood seeps through it and runs down my face. The scene on the main road is straight out of an apocalypse movie: charred vehicles; roads littered with stones, used as makeshift weapons; skeletal remains of motorcycles and burnt properties. Mountains of burned fruit and vegetables are piled up at every street corner. Gutted homes with broken doors can be seen across the neighborhood; electricity cables, melted in the fires, dangle dangerously above alleys strewn with stones and bricks. In a house nearby, a group of women in colorful head scarves sit cross-legged on the cement floor, in concentric circles, crying. At the center is the mother of a young man. She’s holding him in her arms and he seems to be...dead.

“Take me home,” I beg. “Please! Hurry!!”

The driver sighs. “It is not safe to go back now, Sahib. There are riots all over town! You need to go to the hospital.”

“I need to get home! My wife and kids are waiting for me,” I beg him, although I’m well aware that I should put my faith in these auto-drivers; they have the best idea about ground reality on the streets; they always have a finger on the pulse of the city.

“You need stitches,” the man says, examining my gash. “Chembur hospital is in a Hindu-majority area. The Muslims won’t dare come there.”

“Fine... take me there.” Seeing the man’s hesitation, I add, “I’ll pay triple fare.”

“It’s not the money, Sahib. That is not important now.”

Along the way, the driver fills me in on the happenings in town. “I have seen people being stabbed in front of my own eyes, Sahib. They are mostly Hindus—but that may be because I live in a Hindu majority area. But I heard there are even cases where Hindus are killing Hindus—and Muslims are killing Muslims.” He laughs, perhaps still in shock from what is happening to his city. “People are using this to settle old rivalries. The police can’t do a thing. People can do whatever they want to do under the disguise of communal riots.” He adds, “I would never encourage such riots. I live in this city to earn and survive. These clashes do no good to anyone and the people involved are mostly illiterate and belong to the lower class.” In his own words, only ‘faaltu, badmaash and harami’—the useless, unemployed, and the anti-social—do such things. “The middle-class and upper class are more concerned about their jobs and children. Only those people who have nothing to lose get involved in the violence. And the politicians take advantage of them. It’s just another means of campaigning for their votes. The innocent, illiterate public is made to internalize the ideology of the ruling party and are told that they are doing it in the name of religion. They face the violence and death while these politicians sit in their homes.”

Halfway to the hospital, when we are stopped by a group of belligerent bandana-wearing men, brandishing sticks and swords, my heart lurches, again. One bearded man sticks his head under the tarpaulin, his bloodshot eyes appraising me, trying to discern my ethnicity. I wish I had put on my traditional vermillion tilak, or worn my holy thread, which I did ceremoniously back when I believed in God, but it's been years since I left religion. The man slides his bandana down to reveal his tikak. They are Hindus! I inhale deep and long, as if breathing for the first time. They let us pass, with the warning, "don't go to the east side. Muslims are killing everyone there."

Further down, we are stopped by the military, a Sikh regiment, which has taken control of the town; the police, as always, have been found to be quite incompetent and ill prepared. The soldiers advise us to make a U-turn as things could get dicier further up, but on seeing my condition, they offer to take me to the hospital in their vehicle.

As they haul me to the military van, I pay the auto auto driver and thank him profusely. "Thanks for risking your life!"

"In times like this, we have to help each other, Sahib."

"You saved my life," I add. "I owe you."

"I didn't save you. Allah did. It was in your destiny that he chose me to give you a ride."

I sigh. "And I was serious. About not building the temple... over the mosque!"

"I know."

He gives a salaam and drives off.

It takes all of twenty stitches to patch my head. As I wait in the ward to be discharged, I have little energy to pontificate on philosophy, but the auto driver's last words have been echoing in my head. "I didn't save you. Allah did. It was in your destiny that he chose me to give you a ride."

Deep down, I know the man is wrong in thinking that one's destiny is predefined! That it's set in stone! That we have no hand in changing it. It occurs to me that there are three types of

believers in the world. The first are the blind ones who relate everything in life to God. The second are the ones in the middle, the kind that believe not in God but some strange force called fate, controlling our lives. And the third are like me, who believe in neither—but only in one's own actions. I close my eyes and ponder about the happenings of the day. A pang of guilt courses through me, that the entire country is up in flames because of a God whose name coincides with mine. Ram.

What in God's name were my parents thinking when they named me that.

UNTENURED 1.3

Editor
Poetry Editor
Fiction Editor
Nonfiction Editor

Andy Wilczak
Caroline Hayduk
Adam Griffin
Brooke Grasberger

Support us at patreon.com/untenured