

Fahmidan Journal
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Editor in Chief
A.R Salandy

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Yasmine Dashti

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Inheritance
LA Felleman

On reading Tanaya Winder

Ascend to a cruising altitude
Peruse the material carried
on you

Read that her ancestors are light, love
Imagine those remains in her veins
But yours?

Summon your ancestors
Clear them to take off
to you

Assume closed-eyes, upright position
Stow breathing down with the diaphragm
so you

Check into the seat of this moment
Float above the turbulence bouncing
then you

Receive instead the Christ
Meet him who comes first
before yours

Perceive his familiar communion
Respect what the overhead has been
with you

Mean him no slight and no dishonor
Lean yet sideways to see beyond him
as you

Fasten past his presence
Establish contact
in your

ancestors. Intuit their coldness
Feel the flight from anything other
not yours

Confront their offensive construction
The white bulkheads they built
around you

Catch a whiff of their scent of sterility
The artificial life they left

for you

Exit to the nearest departure
Unbuckle familial connection
at you

Turn again to Him who
welcomes as kindred
all of you

Poisoned
LA Felleman

Pollinators' friend
undulating lilac
majestic branches spreading
inflaming my love

Undulating lilac bush
billowing bee attractor
inflaming the eyes of my love
with the bounce of every blossom

Billowing butterfly lure
towering eight feet above
each bounce of every blossom
inflaming his throat, my love

Eight feet the branches reach
filling the air he breathes
inflaming the lungs of my love
the pollinators' friend -- his poisoner

Currently, LA is a financial analyst at the University of Iowa. Before that, she was a seminary professor. Prior to that, she was a pastor. She credits the Free Generative Writing Workshops, the Midwest Writing Center, and workshops offered through Iowa City Poetry with her development as a poet. To give back to the writing community, she organizes a writers open mic at the public library (or via Zoom during pandemics) and serves on the advisory council of Iowa City Poetry. She is the author of the chapbook *The Length of a Clenched Fist* (Finishing Line Press).

Moleskin
Lee Eustace

I curl my feet up under myself and use my left elbow to prop my notebook wide open. *There's something uniquely satisfying about disposing of things that have gone beyond their intended lifespan.* I shift in seat 10D as I jot down my thoughts and shield my eyes from the elevenses sunshine glaring against the window.

I watch as the page accepts the ink, how the indentation is both active and passive in the drying process.

Moleskin. Coral coloured. Lined pages. A5 sized. My newest confidant.

Forty-eight years of inhales and exhales. That's how long I've been playing the game. The pen's indentation is scarcely dry when I hear a few newer players of the game send a chuckle in my direction. I don't need to hear the punchline to figure it out.

Side-eyed. I examine the source of the chuckle that has just dried in the carriage. The rows upon rows of seats – some two abreast, others three – give the carriage a 'lined-page' feel.

I've heard their joke before. It's as faded as the worn red upholstery in the carriage. Yesterday's moleskin. Yesterday's joke. *Yesterday's woman*, I reveal to my confidant. This time, I trust the drying process and I turn my attention away from those letters towards the Interrail pass sitting on the opened stowaway table.

Who'd have figured that an A5 sized piece of paper could be so amusing? But then again, I know that it's not the paper that they find intrinsically funny. The same funny that the other group pointed at just last week. 'Look at the age of yer' one,' or whatever the equivalent punchline in their respective language.

I don't speak Slovenian. Or German. Not even a pigeon amount of French. *Sure, it's probably little surprise to them that I don't possess those skills. They must figure it was Latin on the curriculum when I was educated.*

My husband would love at that one and he's even older than I am.

That was the idea of our trip: Moleskin and I. She looks up at me now that I've paused. Her call is as loud as the laugh which distracted me. She begs me to illuminate her further. See, that's what I'm not sure of with our friendship.

She knows me not well enough.

With all that space she inhales my words hungrily. Sometimes she exhales and I consider the tone of her breath as if I'm a medical practitioner examining a sick patient with a stethoscope. But, for now, she does that thing that I hate.

More: she silently orders. "What do you mean by 'beyond their intended lifespan'?" the voice she has assigned herself often veers into this unsettling territory. More. More. She wants examples and I strain my mind to deliver them to her.

A handbag?

She remains steadfast so I give up on my side-eye extra-curriculars. *Fine*, I concede to her voracious innards. She digests the four letters with the assistance of the airborne bile that surrounds us. *Something beyond its intended lifespan... Like the Sydney 2000 Olympics t-shirt I brought in my solitary backpack.*

Though there are fifteen kilos of it. Backpack, that is. Someplace between carrying that load and sitting slumped over on train seats, my shoulders yearn for the kind of massage that only my husband can give. *But, then again, the intended lifespan there has lapsed as well. Though, I wouldn't necessarily use a verb as harsh as 'disposing' to describe the action.*

Then again, he's about to be trash just like the Sydney t-shirt and Moleskin's mother whose voice was too loud for my liking.

Lee Eustace is a writer and poet whose work centres on the themes of relationships, social constructs, and culture. Lee is featured in Apricot Press, The Martello Journal, Please See Me, Free_The_Verse, Dipity Literary Magazine, SeaGlass Literary, Eunoia Review, and the London Wildlife Trust. @creativeleestorytelling on instagram.

Lucky
David Estringel

The initial shock of seeing my mother dead finally let up after about fifteen minutes. Maybe it should have lasted longer, but I think I had already begun to prepare myself in the car on the way back home to South Texas from Austin. After my sister, Lisa, said those two words, “Mom’s dead,” I know I tried to picture what that was going to look like. I even thought about what my reaction might be, quickly vetoing any kind of hysterics or overtly emotional reaction. I remember what my Aunt Thelma looked like at my grandfather’s funeral when I was twelve (or so). I had never seen anyone wail before and was quite grateful for that little gift from the universe after witnessing such a spectacle. She always had a knack for pulling attention from a room, but one would think such antics to be a bit much for a church for God’s sake. I remember looking at her with contempt, pissed that she was trying to make that moment about her feelings instead of the great man that was lying face-up in the coffin up near the alter. No. I knew I had to keep composed, so I tried to get as much of my crying out of my system as possible on the road, figuring my tear ducts would exhaust themselves between Three Rivers and George West, preventing a scene later.

The drive there was a blur and—to this day—I can’t recall a second of it. At her bedside, there was about an hour of internal dialogue and verbalized *mea culpas*. While I did manage to keep my composure, my theory about tear ducts depletion was quickly disproven, as I proceeded to weep like a child that had just discovered that Santa Clause and the Easter Bunny were a lie. Regardless, there does come a point when one becomes very aware that they are talking to a corpse and that a response is highly unlikely (if not preferred). Recognizing a bit of Thelma-like behavior in myself, I opted to sit there in silence, holding her hand. It was cold but not as cold as I had thought it would be. Still, it didn’t feel like her

hand anymore. I held it the entire time I was there, maybe in a futile attempt to warm her's up or feel the slightest hint of a quiver of a finger.

Lisa called, again, from her car on the way down from Corpus Christi, but this time Facetiming me on my iPhone. She looked like a hot mess, letting me know that she had left her house and was going to be at the nursing home in an hour and a half. It hadn't escape me that we had last talked two hours prior to that, and she was just leaving at that moment, but my inner critic was quickly silenced by a lesser jaded part of myself that reminded me that there was no "right" way to 'do' the death of one's mother (per se). *Plus, it wasn't like either of us were going anywhere.* I told her that the coroner wouldn't be there for another three hours and that there was no way I was going to leave mom alone. Lisa was surprised by the coroner's delay, so I had to reminder her that we were smack dab in the middle of a COVID quarantine and people were dropping like flies everywhere. *Was it COVID?* I thought to myself. *Is that how she died?*

I don't think I took my eyes off my mother for a good two hours, trying to capture every nuance of her face, so I wouldn't ever forget. After a while, though, it started to be too much, so my eyes were pulled to the details of the room. Normally, her bedside table would be littered with candy wrappers and half-eaten Jell-O cups, but it had long been cleared before I got there. If anything, I noticed a lack of clutter in the space. The nightstand, like the bedside table, was clear of junk and had been wiped down. The wall TV that loomed over us like the eye of God was off and the array of toiletries and grooming products that usually littered the room's built-in vanity was starkly vacant. Any evidence that a life—no matter how sad—had once been lived within those four walls had been erased and sanitized away into oblivion, all wrapped up in a clean, tidy package.

Lisa finally showed up sometime around 6 PM. We both burst into tears when we saw each other and found ourselves, adhered, in a long overdue embrace. She whispered, "Thank

you for everything you've done" in my ear, finally acknowledging everything I had been left to deal with in terms of my mom's care, which she never seemed to have time for save the occasional visit for a quick Facebook moment. Pulling away from her, I gave her a nod and told her I needed to get back home to get some sleep for work the next day. The walk out of the nursing home seemed to take forever. The determination I had initially displayed upon my arrival was long gone, replaced by emotional and mental exhaustion. It's cliché, but I really did feel like I was leaving a part of me behind—a part that is still missing today. I'm not sure how long it took me to get to my car, but I found myself behind the wheel, just staring out of the windshield at the front door of the facility. The coroner's van had just pulled into the parking lot and parked in front, snapping me out of the moment I was having. I stared at the van, knowing I couldn't stay to watch her wheeled out, covered and motionless, like a thing. That would have meant she was really gone. I couldn't help but think about how macabre it was to sit there with her dead body for three hours, holding her hand, but that thought was quickly replaced by the realization that no one else was going to have that, just like many of our moments over the past six years. How lucky I was.

David Estringel is a Xicanx writer/poet with works published in literary publications like *The Opiate*, *Azahares*, *Cephalorpress*, *DREICH*, *Somos en escrito*, *Ethel*, *The Milk House*, *Beir Bua Journal*, and *The Blue Nib*. His first collection of poetry and short fiction *Indelible Fingerprints* was published April 2019, followed *Blood Honey and Cold Comfort House* (2022), *little punctures* (2023), and *Blind Turns in the Kitchen Sink* (scheduled for July 2023). David has also written six poetry chapbooks, *Punctures*, *PeripherieS*, *Eating Pears on the Rooftop*, *Golden Calves*, *Sour Grapes*, and *Blue* (late 2023). Connect with David on Twitter [@The_Booky_Man](https://twitter.com/The_Booky_Man) and his website www.davidaestringel.com.

Oyster
Joseph Boyle

Milk dish,
sour salty sea,
dumb razor, poor skipping stone,
an elephant's toenail,
stone age flying saucer

Shallow bowl
emptying into the mouth
of a depthless hole,
a grey nugget chipped from
endless black: sea

A jewel
a compact mirror,
incubator of dreams, smooth,
clenched like cloth and tooth,
a mother turned on her side
and set in the sand,
a slow mountain

The birth of glass: love,
a feast of last resort
when the ibis stalks the puddles
and snails have been plucked
from the wild plum tree

Little great respirator of the sea,
skeleton, brainpan, all,
one thimble full of
flesh

Joseph Boyle lives in Sacramento, works as a counselor and spends his free time metabolizing sugars and admiring the way wind moves through trees. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from University College Dublin. His poems have appeared in Book of Matches, The Madrigal, Lemon Peel Press, Tiny Seed Literary Journal, Inksounds, The Stony Thursday Book, and others.

Death of a Stranger

Sura K. Hassan

It started with a simple call. A simple sentence, really. A birthday wish, in fact, that wasn't appreciated. Every year, on the second of July, since the day she was born on a sunny Wednesday, where Father was conveniently held up in Brussels and Mother was promising herself that she'd never *ever* put herself through childbirth again. Or, according to the calendar, a bleak Saturday afternoon. She didn't know which day it was; but the details were so specific that a mistake just seemed... *off*.

But that didn't matter.

What mattered was that, every year, since the day she was born, on the second of every July, she would wish her Grand-pappa, a very, very jolly birthday. It was an inside joke. It was their *thing*.

It had been their thing for eighteen years.

So, when he didn't understand the reference, she felt...disturbed.

The end was imminent.

Yet, it couldn't be the end. Surely, he had at least a decade... *right?*

Dementia, schizophrenia, and similar diseases ran in the family. Grand-pappa's side was rife with them. But surely-

The doubt seeped in.

But she refused to acknowledge it.

And so, instead of calling him everyday, making sure that the dementia wasn't getting any worse, she buried herself into work, into university, and anything she could think of.

Before she knew it, another year had passed.

This time, Grand-pappa's birthday aligned with the end of a relationship. So, in a desperate attempt to save it, she spent his birthday with her significant other, watching him play some absurd war-simulator game with his friends.

The birthday wish lay forgotten.

It wasn't until the relationship crumbled in November that she had time to speak to Grand-pappa again. By then, it was too late.

"It's me," she said, feeling a little guilty for not calling earlier.

“Who?”

Her heart sank. She mumbled her name. Grand-pappa was baffled, and suddenly reserved.

“Ah, Princess,” he spoke with a formality he kept only for Father’s side of the family, the side that were titled Indian Princes. “I wasn’t expecting your call. How’s your husband? I heard the riots in Calcutta-”

She took a deep breath, interrupting him, explaining that she wasn’t her titled great aunt. Why, the woman died back in 1961 well before she was born. But Grand-pappa didn’t remember.

He handed the phone to her aunt, grumbling about dementia in the family.

“We’ll talk later,” her aunt ended the call, her voice on the verge of breaking.

The evidence was jarring. But she still clung onto *hope*.

Deluded, unrealistic and irrational hope; that it was just an episode. After all, her Grand-pappa wouldn’t forget her. He *couldn’t*.

Two more years passed.

More birthdays missed.

She rationalised that distancing herself was a kindness. She didn’t do well with emotion. So, when news of her Grand-pappa’s demise finally reached her, she was a thousand miles away. It was 3 AM and she’d just finished yet another disgruntled call with her now ex-boyfriend. Frustrated at the sheer stupidity of it all, she decided to read the digital copy of her native country’s Sunday Times. Current affairs always did the trick, and on page 6-

An unrecognisable, inhumane shriek escaped her causing her housemate to tumble into her room.

“Are you alright?”

Sobs wracked her body, the bubble that protected her from the reality of the situation, finally burst. Her vision blurred, concrete walls crumbled to the ground like sandcastles against a strong tide. Her hands shook as she ran them through her hair. Her arrogance, her ignorance, her denial of the obvious truth rushed over her like a tsunami. For a moment, she allowed herself to drown in it. She cried, she screamed, allowed her housemate to cradle her, asking *what’s the matter, what’s happened, surely, it can’t be-*

And then, when it passed, she picked herself up off the floor.

“Are you alright?”

She lied effortlessly. She wasn’t alright. She wasn’t sure if she could ever *be* alright. She had made the decision to waste her time, *his precious time*, on unimportant things, making mountains out of mole holes and now-

She was nothing but a stranger.

And so, she decided to play the part. “The stress is finally getting to me.” It was a sorry attempt at self-deprecation, but it did the trick.

“You kept mumbling about a death,” her housemate informed her.

“Nevermind that,” she replied, “I was just reading about the death of a stranger.

Sura K. Hassan lives between two coastal cities, Karachi and Istanbul, and finds solace in the works of Paulo Coelho. Her writings primarily focus on relationships, personal mythology and identity with splatterings of adjusting to adulthood after a sheltered childhood. Her works have appeared in Welter Journal, Defunct Magazine, Sublunary Review, The Minison Project and more.

2121 N. 166th Street
Cat Dixon

Take the house. I never wanted
responsibility for these walls,
for the hail-damaged roof,
your pending claim, your
own labyrinth of paperwork. Will
happiness be found when money—
it is always about money—
takes its proper place along side
a riff that's hundreds of miles
long? I never asked for more
time, landscaping, or carrots
to be planted. Soon you'll
realize the rabbits are pests—
how quickly they destroy. It's
truly the house and lawn—
miserable in upkeep—that keeps
you shackled. Take the house. You
are the chicken wire traps
and the roofer with his hammer.

Even you admit that life's
longer than expected—time
to plant, to paint, to power wash, to
see the siding fade, the sidewalk
that fluctuates with ice and heat as
it aches to break. Another crack
doesn't wait for spring when you
have battles planned with wasps, wars
to fight with rabbits, plants that need to
be covered from the frost. Isn't
that what you said? Isn't this the only
way to pass the days? I was an
only child who lived in apartments,
after that a shed, and then an adult that
you painted and repaired. Now you
give me a house on a dead-end, leading
up to prairie filled with dust, insects,
everything I detest—a house that
can no longer withstand the wind.

You with that damned bamboo
begin to plant it everywhere. I'm off
to a dark corner of a parking lot to
find home. Take the house. I'm
a foreclosure, an empty hall
way, a frozen shoulder. Take me
to the street where I can sleep. You

be the house. I'll be the red
happy for sale sign in the yard.

Cat Dixon is the author of the poetry collection [What Happens in Nebraska](#) (Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2022) along with five other chapbooks and collections. She is a poetry editor with [The Good Life Review](#) and an adjunct instructor at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

Portrait of Sibling Rivalry as Allegory
Natalie Marino

Abel loved Cain, even when he saw that rock— heavy with speech— coming for his face, spelling out the end of a sentence. And so it will always be with us. Our childhood mornings— pink with promise—when we pointed to the faraway trees and called them castles, when we played kick the can, when our laughter was like lemonade propelling us down the street. Our mother, beautiful like Eve. I don't remember exactly when she stopped holding us like round apples, when she stopped saying we could be bright red stars too, when we both simultaneously became good and ruthless — a mix of memory and dream— always trying to make up for the silence of a thousand maybes.

She left long before
she died, to become quiet
as a hummingbird.

Kaleidoscope
Natalie Marino

after Dorianne Laux

What is truth but a question asking you to let go
of an awful myth? Truth asks you to hold the sky
between your hands, to see there is still some gold
in the setting sun. The way to truth is a circle.
Truth is as green as the juniper leaves outlasting
spring. Truth knows you do not need to apologize
for yourself. You do not need to burn every house
you move into. You can choose to continue,
to continue showing up for your children while knowing
some days you still want to walk out of a convenience store
with a bottle of beer and a paper bag. Truth is a song
you sing at the park in the afternoon, drunk on hope.
Truth is your marrow, the window you left open,
a kaleidoscope of monuments, a flock of starlings
eaten by a single hawk, your quiet acceptance
of impermanence.

Natalie Marino is a poet and physician. Her work appears in *Atlas and Alice*, *Gigantic Sequins*, *Isele Magazine*, *Mom Egg Review*, *Plainsongs*, *Pleiades*, *Rust + Moth*, *West Trestle Review* and elsewhere. Her chapbook, *Under Memories of Stars*, is forthcoming from *Finishing Line Press* (June 2023). She lives in California.

City In The Desert
Erich von Hungen

This never should have been
carved walls, lathe turned spires,
jeweled fingertips reaching for the core of fire.

This never should have been
a dream without desire, without rest,
a glass with where there is no water, birds without a nest,
a place without roads, a going without going further.

This never should have been
daggers falling from a storm
into lakes of shadow cast by no shape or form,
ideas like a set of children's swings:
waiting, creaking, empty, forlorn.

This never should have been
echoes without a speaker,
speech without an end,
songs without melody, understanding,
love, hope or heart.
Beginnings but not a start.

This should never have been
pomegranate seeds slick against white teeth,
a smile, a promise.

This should never have been
striding naked where it's too dark, too deep,
marching toward a pain without relief.

This should never have been
thought before taking, walking upright,
struggling, trying, making.

This never should have been
fragile earth; fitful glorious misplaced city
These never should have been but are
like a mirage
just there, right there, not far.

Erich von Hungen is a writer from San Francisco, California. His writing has appeared in The Colorado Quarterly, The Write Launch, Versification, Green Ink Press, Sage Cigarettes, Brave Voices, The Hyacinth Review, and others. He is the author of four poetry collections, the most recent being "Bleeding Through: 72 Poems Of Man In Nature". Find him on twitter @PoetryForce.

On Becoming My 75-Year-Old Mother's Medical Marijuana Plug
Bob King

Maybe she suffered a spinal cord injury,
has glaucoma, ALS, Alzheimer's, cachexia,
cancer, chronic traumatic encephalopathy—
maybe she played line for the Steelers—
Crohn's, epilepsy or another seizure
disorder, fibromyalgia, hepatitis C,
Huntington's, inflammatory bowels,
MS, multiple diagnoses, pain that is
either chronic & severe or intractable—
when isn't pain chronic & severe or
intractable, emotional, emphatic,
or even sometimes never reaching
parasympathetic? My lack of telepathy
& her privacy settings making difficult
the multiple choice of apathy, empathy,
sympathy, or antipathy, so perhaps
a symphony of Parkinson's, HIV+,
sickle cell anemia, Spasticity or maybe
Tourette syndrome or a fall, a TBI,
or ulcerative colitis. Or maybe she's
been depressed for years, at least
since her hero-father-whose-care-she-
hospiced-herself passed in 2009. Or
maybe she has post-traumatic stress
disorder from something she's never
told us about, because telling your kids
everything about your life isn't part of
the job description, even if maybe
vulnerability would be a relief, but
even when you sacrifice part of your
life for the lives of others doesn't mean
others are all always entitled to more
sacrifice, answers, unearthing of secrets,
just as children always end up forever
shielding parts of their own lives from
even their very own mother, or a priest
in a mahogany ostentatious confessional,
god, the entire freaking universe. Maybe
she's got an eye toward becoming a 21st
Century trippy feminized Romantic poet
& plans on writing her own version of
"Kubla Kahn," her Xanadu pleasure dome
filled exactly with the exotics & Neil Diamond
timbrels she's so well-earned. Maybe even
she just adores *Dazed & Confused*, Cheetos—
Oooh-better-yet Andy Capp's Hot Fries
dipped in extra chocolatey milkshakes
with a Kit Kat & Snickers for dessert,
or maybe it's all about her love of Matthew
Alright-Alright-Alright McConaughey, Seth

Rogan, Snoop, Martha Freaking Stewart,
or that your kindly old neighbor you
never suspected would puff would
puff, & maybe maybe maybe maybe
maybe maybe maybe maybe, like most
healthcare decisions decidedly white
& old & *do-as-I-say-&-not-as-I-do*
male politicians make, it's none
of their goddamn business why.

Bob's an Associate Professor of English at Kent State University at Stark. His recent poetry has appeared in or is forthcoming from Olney Magazine, Crab Apple Literary, Words & Sports Quarterly, Erato Magazine, coalitionworks, Gone Lawn, Moss Puppy Magazine, The Daily Drunk, Don't Submit, Full House Literary, Curio Cabinet Magazine, Moot Point Magazine, The Gorko Gazette, Drunk Monkeys, JAKE, Paddler Press, Aôthen Magazine, The Purposeful Mayonnaise, Spare Parts Literary Magazine, The Viridian Door, Ink Sweat & Tears, & Bullshit Lit. He lives on the outskirts of Cleveland, Ohio, with his wife & daughters.

No More Constellations
Eric Chavoya

Gray and white streaks
design the hand that hangs
pieces of fraying string.

Each piece ties the tip of a cherry
to the whimsy of a blossom.

Keep a diary inches away to fill a full page
marking the death of someone's universe.

I can see the line drawn from deep north to the southern sky,
it zigs and dashes from the details drawn while laying head up,
eyes closed and seeing dreams that will never be remembered

because the eyes are slower than they need to be
and the sky is already overflown with data.

Eric Chavoya is a Mexican-American poet based in Los Angeles, CA. He received his M.A. in English/ Creative Writing from Loyola Marymount University where his poetry manuscript was awarded the Neda Loop Award for Best Creative Writing capstone.

Self Portrait as Chili Pepper Eating Contest
Melissa Nunez

Would-be warriors lined up and waiting, hands at the ready as if revving
Up to peel out, gripping traffic-light skin, burying oblong bodies
Between lips pulled thin, masticating with teeth bared as if open air
Will somehow help, as if this will prevent the blistering burn from steeping
Too deep the tongue, as if they have forgotten oxygen as fuel for fire
No thought to flavor or fullness of power only gulping pulpy pain
Down into the pockets of their guts, capsaicin clashing with acid
Churning for relief but this grief has taken hold from the inside, leaking
Out the eyes as they grip the flesh of the next contender for conquest
Hybrid giants packing pith within wrinkled walls, so disparate
From the pebble pequins my grandfather would request at mealtimes
And pop into his mouth, perfect size to sit between two teeth between
Each bite of food, no rush or rule just meditation on the medley of texture
And spice on the palate, and when I see some at the local grocer, I buy a handful
To test the allure and fall into my own kind of love with the crisp crunch and burn
That gently builds on all surfaces touched, remnant reminders that last just long
Enough until your mouth calls for the next one, as the size belies the punch
But does not overwhelm the flavor, and as my mom describes the joy my grand-
Father took in this plant my aunt tells me they grow like weeds wherever you drop
The seeds into the ground, wild roots grip soil, shoot and bloom, and you can have
Them all you want as many as you want, I will show you how they thrive, how wild
Birds will help you keep them alive and abundant in resplendent revelation

Melissa Nunez lives and creates in the caffeinated spaces between awake and dreaming. She makes her home in the Rio Grande Valley region of South Texas, where she enjoys observing, exploring, and photographing the local wild with her homeschooling family. She writes an anime column at The Daily Drunk Mag and is a prose reader for Moss Puppy Mag. She is also a staff writer for Alebrijes Review and Yellow Arrow Publishing. You can follow her on Twitter: @MelissaKNunez.

Names They Assigned Me
Yash Seyedbagheri

what will they think of me
the so-called real Americans
anointed by their leader
a real American with a splash of Teutonic and Celt in there
which he tries to brush aside with Kleenex

I'm the man with the funny name
who was born and grew up among them
they've called me a Russian, an Israeli, a Greek, an Italian
guessing under the guise
of innocence and curiosity
and starched smiles that were once halfway convincing
(for the record I'm a child of Middle West and Middle East)

but guises are no longer needed
their leader told them to strip off all niceties
and use their flag as a battering ram
and the country as a rowdy beer hall, circa 1923

tomorrow they'll just call me
the other, the swarthy man,
the brown peril
and while they raise their flag
they'll proclaim me
the camelfucker
their leader ordered it
while wiping away the Celt and Teuton with his dirty Kleenex

Yash Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA fiction program. His stories, "Soon," "How To Be A Good Episcopalian," "Tales From A Communion Line," and "Community Time," have been nominated for Pushcarts. Yash's work has been published in SmokeLong Quarterly, The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Write City Magazine, and Ariel Chart, among others.

coldest I've ever been.
Elana Walters

I was the coldest I've ever been.

Winter descended on the campus and the last of my warmth existed only in the darkest corners of a bar, in the alcohol coursing through my veins after midnight, and in the spark of a lighter before the flames took a pipe. I had lost full access to my heat—love, meaningless love—was something to be pocketed, protected, and prevented. It was not something to be kept on your sleeve. That is how these things catch fire, after all.

I was the coldest I've ever been. I was slow to thaw, eager to freeze. Callous and distant. Bitter. I was the height of my body when I was felt up at the age of seven. I was the length of a meaningless kiss at the age of eighteen. The time in between is what made my anger cold.

One by one, night after night, the boys came to me.

Their eyes, glassy like the drinks in their hands, found me across the dance floor. Bodies moving, twisting, under the strobe lights. Color dancing along my skin. Sweat shining on my brow. And my eyes, lined with black mascara, beckoning theirs in a sea of bodies.

I learned that eyes are easy to follow. They have a tendency to tie things down.

Quick glances at the dip in my shirt. Long stares following the curve of my collarbone. Hungry gazes on the cupid's bow of my lip—forgetting I have teeth hiding underneath—waiting to bite down on their affection and steal it into the night.

But still, I let them come.

I kissed them, held them. Ran my fingers through their hair and slid my hands down their cheeks. One by one, those kisses vanished from my skin, sometimes my memory.

And when they had been bestowed, I disappeared.

So, on those hungover mornings, after the boys stumbled home from the bars, woke up with the taste of alcohol still lingering on their tongues, and tried to sift through their

memories of the night before, only a hazy image of me would remain. In their memories, their eyes, I would be a picture. A moment. Something quick and sudden. A mystery.

Like peering through ice, I would be blurred.

Perhaps, a touch of longing still clung to those memories' edges. Perhaps, they could still remember my skin beneath their hands. Perhaps they'd look for me again at that bar the next time they went. It would not matter.

Girls were not meant to be held onto, because we of all people should know...

Even ice can burn when it's been held for too long.

Elana Walters is a junior at the University of Iowa studying English and creative writing on the publishing track with a minor in gender, women, and sexuality studies. She has been published in Ink Lit, Wilder Things, and Zenith magazine. When she isn't writing, you can find her in New York with her family and their two cats. You can also find her on Instagram @elanawalters5

Violent and clean
Aya Burton

Like a deft play on football Sunday
or a wet knife exiting a birthday cake.

When we argue, there is no aftermath.
A cut so sharp it leaves
no scar, the skin sealed over

as how the earth fissures, mends
in the years following a quake. We wake
and watch as new growth creeps

along the torched threshold. Green
against a wooden grain—everything
is trying. We wake

like babies and nurse each other
back into beings
capable of love (for each other,

for the nth time.) The collapsible
distance folds between
opposing teams—the hand and

mouth, the invisible point where wave
flattens into coastline. When we curl
into each other at night, our bones

can sense their disparity. Everything is trying,
failing. A foot off-sides, afoot in forests
flecked with stinging embers. Still I am

trying to trace the circumference
of a fading bruise, the applied
meaning of *encroachment*—failing

to see how water does away with grain
and carves canyons in its wake.

Aya Burton writes poems, letters, and lists. She is an incoming MFA candidate at the University of Pittsburgh.

Proof
Dawn Colclasure

First comes the smile
then the eyes doing a brief
summary, measuring sizes and
picturing the body nude.
Body language is essential,
the markings of social awareness
and societal cues. Acting like
no cares are such a burden
and putting on a show of faith,
he turns with a “You live around here?” inquiry.
She looks away, eyes nervously darting
as she tries to recall what it felt like
to have that ring on her finger.
She mumbles something about
an oven she forgot to turn off
then hurries away, acting like she never
wanted to be here in the first place.
And all of this is only proof that
she isn’t over him yet.

Dawn Colclasure is a writer in Oregon, USA. Her poetry has appeared in The Desert Woman, PANIC! Poetry & Arts, Happy Insomniac and EOTU E-Zine of Fiction, Art and Poetry, among others. She has authored many books of poetry, including the autobiographical collection, Touched by Fire. She was poetry editor for American Bard, a magazine of poetry and art as well as a literary magazine. In addition to poetry, she also writes various nonfiction books, novels, and story collections. She is also a freelance writer, ghostwriter and book reviewer. Her Web site is at <https://dawnsbooks.com> and <https://www.dmcwriter.com> Her Twitter: @dawncolclasure

Gray Pudding
Kim Ha-ri

I entered just before the last train of Narita Express closed. By the time I found my seat number and calmed down, the train had passed Chiba Prefecture. It was just past 10:00 at night. I tried to catch the local radio over wi-fi but failed.

The interior of the train was bright. It was so bright that I could see the pores on my face when I looked in the mirror. The dark car windows reflected the inside of the train instead of the outside. While the train was running towards the center of Tokyo, I suddenly wanted to see the scenery outside. However, the lighting inside was too bright and stark that it was impossible to see outside.

The man sitting in front of me also seemed to want to look out the window. He put his face and shoulders close to the window and made a cave with both hands. And he pushed his face into the cave and began to savor the scenery outside. I, too, was taught his behavior and pushed my face into a hand-made cave with the blades of both hands on the spear. Tokyo's signature neon sign left a mark on my retina. The colorful Pachinco operation branch appeared. I have a Korean-Japanese nephew. There is no way of knowing what he is doing now. Is he related to pachinko? As I let go of my delusion and AEON-Mall, the empty field was revealed. As I pushed my face deeper, the man in the front seat spoke to me.

"それは見えますか□ "

When I answered that I couldn't speak Japanese, he asked in poor English.

"CAN YOU SEE?"

I buried my face in my hand again. I couldn't see anything.

"あなたは韓国 人です。"

he said in Japanese. Hearing his words, my eyebrows twitched involuntarily. He turned around and said softly.

“If you were Korean, you would look better than me.”

I swallowed my swearing and turned my face into the window again. At that time, a lump appeared between the empty fields. The mass that appeared in the dark was grayish and somewhat transparent. The shape that moved with the wind was like a pudding. Gray pudding was scattered all over the field. Occasionally, the Japanese who strolled through the fields seemed completely unaware of the existence of gray pudding.

The gray mass gave me a strange sense of vertigo. It was a concrete spherical object that had been spat out by the inner world of colonized Koreans during the Japanese occupation, which lasted from the 1910s to 1945. I had never lived through those years, but I felt a strange sense of nostalgia and anger at the same time.

My palms were sweaty. I pressed my hand to the spear and found a damp fingerprint.

An unnameable emotion.

I asked the Japanese man sitting in the seat in front of me.

“Can you see it too? Do you dare?”

He shook his head saying no. “Can you see it too?”

He shook his head saying no.

Kim Ha-ri (She/Her) is a factory worker living in South Korea. Her cat's name is Lola.
twitter/Instagram: @crazykslim

Perfectly Pieced
Jessica N. Arzola-Grissom

The table looked like a jigsaw puzzle only it was covered with fabric swatches. There were triangles, squares, and diamonds all precisely cut to form a pattern. Some of the girls were having fun, but I was feeling unsettled by the visible chaos and the teacher's instructions.

Rachel glanced in my direction and asked if I was alright. I shook my head yes, but I was replaying the conversation over in my mind. I knew I wasn't meant to fit in here. I loved my friends, but I felt like an outsider in the sewing circle.

Most of the girls wore head coverings and kept their hair long because they believed it was a sign of respect to God and their fathers. Although my hair had grown down to my knees, I decided to cut it and donate it to a place that made wigs. I was sixteen and it was time for a change. My Mom often referred to herself as "the heathen woman who wears blue jeans and makeup." She got some concerned looks from the women, but since she refrained from hugging anyone of the opposite sex, the church members kept the comments to themselves.

We seam ripped an entire section of the quilt and started over because the corners were not lined precisely. Every little stitch made me want to start over with new swatches, but the teacher was insistent that we learn how to start over without creating something new.

I loved piecing together fabrics to make pillows. It was enjoyable to make curtains, but traditional quilting left me internally screaming. However, it was my only outside activity for the week, and I relished a day away from the monotony of the dishes, laundry and what seemed like constant crying. My Mom assured me it wasn't constant, that babies just cry.

When you have a baby every two years for ten years and babysit four kids for extra money...well, someone is always crying. Including me.

One of the girls was going off to college and she said her father was not happy with her decision because she did not need extra education. She was destined to be married, but the parents of the arrangement found another girl at church more “suitable”. Despite her father’s wishes, she was going to college in a little town about four hours away from home. I admired her paving the way.

Susan asked, “Why would you want to waste money on college if you are just going to get married and have children?”

It was not something that transpired as “if” but assumed as “when”. The other girls shook their heads in agreement. I said, “Well, I think it’s wonderful and I plan on doing the same thing because I want to make money and be able to take care of myself.”

Their shocked expressions turned towards me in horror. One girl muttered, “Money is the root of evil. Do you remember, the Bible verse in 1 Timothy 6:10?”

“It’s the ‘love’ of money. I don’t see anything wrong with wanting and having my own money. Every one of my aunts have been abandoned by their husbands. Besides, what if you decide you don’t want to get married or have children?”

The horror and shock on their faces was as if I’d taken the quilt and ripped it to shreds. The room got quiet.

The next seconds were spent dutifully ripping the section of fabric.

The next day, I wrote in my journal about my resolve to be different.

The next week, I started talking to a “different friend” at church.

The next month, I got a job.

The next year, I started looking at colleges.

Every year that passed caused me to rip apart the seams.

Jessica N. Arzola-Grissom lives in a small Texas town with her husband and son. Her writing has appeared in various print and online publications including The Image, Logo Sophia, Valiant Scribe, Reedsy, and Latine Lit. In 2022, her poem *Adventura*, won 2nd place in the Irene Emmerson Poetry competition. *The Rainbow* recently appeared in the anthology titled *Scars*.

**Critical Commentary on Carol Johnson's Article "Sexual Minorities and Sexual
Citizenship"**
Marie Hennemann

Sexual citizenship is a concept that aims to grant every person the same rights, regardless of their sex, gender identity or sexual identity. This critical comment will argue that sexual citizenship is only emulating heterosexual relationships and therefore does not provide equal rights to all, as it still excludes certain marginalised groups, like intersex or transgender people. Firstly, Carol Johnson's argument on sexual citizenship will be explained. Then, its strengths and weaknesses will be pointed out, followed by an evaluation of how convincing the argument is overall. In the end, a link will be drawn with heteronormative scripts in female same-sex relationships and how staying within the boundaries of our existing structures keeps us from making real change. Ideas and research tied in with same-sex marriage will be addressed here as well to further illustrate this point.

To begin with, sexual citizenship as described by Johnson could be used by governments to grant the same rights and entitlements to all citizens alike, involving the three constitutive elements of "sexual practice", "rights of self-definition", and "rights gained via social and political institutions" (2015, 728). In theory, this concept would help acknowledge everyone's rights in relation to their sexuality. This would prove to be a revolutionary change if it included everyone's protection, including transgender and intersex people. However, as Johnson herself reveals, sexual citizenship would firstly only involve same-sex relationships, still excluding other minority groups. Although I understand her argument that the alternative would be to "leave sexual citizenship as heteronormative citizenship" (732), I would argue that a more profound change is needed that should include the protection of everyone's rights. While little change is sometimes better than no change, in this case I would strongly argue for more revolutionary change, even if this might seem ideological. What I mean by

this will be explained in the next section, with particular reference to same-sex marriage and relationships.

As Johnson points out, “conceptions of the citizen were first being developed in the eighteenth century” with “the citizen as a male head of household with female members of the family being constructed in a subordinate position” (2015, 728). This can be applied to the concept of marriage which similarly portrays the male as the active and dominant figure, whereas the woman is given a passive and minor role in the private sphere. This perception of masculinity and femininity also permeates and influences the behaviour of people in same-sex relationships. Sanger’s and Lynch’s study on heteronormative scripts and intimate partner violence in women’s same-sex relationships finds that the “participants’ talk was resourced by four gendered scripts, largely aligning with conventional binary notions of normative heterosexual masculinity and femininity” (2018, 206). Societal norms and structures like marriage and heteronormativity reproduce binary distinctions of sex and gender, which find their expression in same-sex relationships. Concepts like these press people in boxes, however, the expression of sexualities and genders is diverse and multiple, not binary. While three of the identified scripts of Sanger’s and Lynch’s research stem from our societal programming and directly reflect typical assumptions about heterosexual relationships, which are masculine dominance, feminine subservience, and provider love, the last script depicts the idea that “Relationships are 50-50” (210). This perception supports a view on relationships in which each partner is equal and takes on a role of mutual care and support.

Rather than emulating heterosexual relationships, the focus should be on widening our view on sexuality and provide more inclusivity by breaking out of the binary frame of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Transgender, non-binary and gender diverse persons often do not fit into pre-existing categories, and thus, are not addressed in research or likewise did not profit from the 2015 marriage referendum in Ireland. While it is crucial to raise awareness for

these minorities, and the referendum broadened “the definition of marriage in the constitution [...] to introduce marriage equality” (Elkink et. al., 2017, 361), there is still a long way to go until every citizen can enjoy the same rights regarding living a life free from discrimination that is not attached to their gender identity or sexuality in any form. One point that Elkink, Farrell, Reidy and Suiter emphasise in their research is that the referendum campaigns on both sides were active and engaging, which rather than influencing how someone voted, took shape in voter turnout. Therefore, active participation and seeking contact with voters seems to be crucial in making people use their right to vote. This also reflects on the importance of education and making people aware of their power in using their voice. Precise and open communication with voters can lead to significant changes in legislation. Overall, the study also points to a shift in values from being deeply traditional to being more open-minded and accepting of forms of living together that seem unusual at first, for example same-sex couples getting married and receiving the same amount of respect as heterosexual couples.

To conclude, this critical summary has argued that same-sex marriage as well as sexual citizenship do not solve our problem of discrimination at the root. Both concepts create other groups of minorities and represent exclusivity. We have seen that despite welcoming changes in perception and legislation, there is still a long way to go in equalising same-sex relationships and other forms of relationships with heterosexual relationships. One issue that needs to be addressed here are the heteronormative scripts which permeate society and do not only restrict heterosexual couples themselves, but also transfer to same-sex couples and influence their behaviour. In order to escape our narrow perceptions of how relationships are supposed to be and between whom, we need more research on those people who are described as minorities in our culture and often face discrimination, such as same-sex couples, non-binary, transgender, intersex, or polyamorous relationships. Crucially, we also need more and better education teaching children that there is a multiplicity of genders

and sexual orientations which are all equal and worth expressing. We need to profoundly reform the way we look at sexuality and relationships in general by broadening our view and allowing more diversity and happiness into everyone's lives.

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Looking at Period-Stigma Through the Lens of Erving Goffman's 'Stigma-Theory' **Marie Hennemann**

Erving Goffman's work on stigma has been influential in that its focus lies on everyday social life and interactions. His work on human interactions specifically looks at how individuals encounter each other in a dramaturgical approach, meaning humans are all actors on a stage. Goffman uses metaphors like the 'audience', 'scripts' and 'performance' to explain how individuals behave on the back stage, meaning when you are just by yourself, versus human behaviour on the front stage, when humans interact with each other in society. This essay will focus on Goffman's work on stigma and apply his theoretical framework to the contemporary example of period-stigma, particularly looking at how women are being shamed by society and how they carry internalised stigma themselves. Firstly, I will explain Goffman's take on stigma-theories and then, apply this knowledge to how menstruation has been stigmatised in contemporary society. Here, I will analyse various studies that have looked at how period-stigma presents in different contexts and what impact it has on individuals and their behaviour. In the end, the implications of stigma will be summarised, and possible solutions will be proposed to how period-stigma might be addressed and diminished.

Firstly, Goffman's work on stigma will be presented to lay the groundwork of this essay. For Goffman, stigma is a social process. Stigma only comes forward in social interactions, in forms of social expectations, norms and assumptions. When a person is not what they are expected to be, there is a discrepancy between expectation and reality, resulting in a perceived 'failing' or 'shortcoming'. Therefore, the person's identity is stigmatised or seen as 'spoiled'. Goffman argues that stigma is a perspective. When people do not fit in, they are 'othered' or even dehumanised. He describes stigma-theories as a set of ideas which are being used to degrade the stigmatised person. In his own words, stigma-theories are "an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents" (1963, p. 5).

Because stigma-theories are described as social constructions and derive from people's ideologies and inherent belief systems, the role of emotions is important here as well. Stigma often presents as strong emotional reactions towards people who are different and depart from 'the norm'.

To begin with, period-stigma can be traced back to long-existing systems of structure, power, and control. Women's bodies have already been stigmatised by the Ancient Greeks, who used the word ὕστερα (hustéra, "womb"), from which the English word 'hysteria' developed, with its original meaning being "a (supposed) physical disorder of women attributed to displacement or dysfunction of the uterus" (Oxford English Dictionary). Even the word origin points to women and their reproductive organs being seen as 'hysterical' and prone to mental illnesses. For centuries, female bodies have been stigmatised, and patriarchy has tried to suppress them. Tyler and Slater support this argument by writing that "stigma functions as a form of power" (2018, p. 721). Another link that can be drawn here is that women were to a great extent being placed in mental institutions because they were seen as mad and hysterical. Menstruation was stigmatised to the same extent as mental health was. When women's behaviour diverged from social norms and expectations, they were being stigmatised and locked away in asylums, using the belief that being a woman made them more receptive to mental illnesses.

As Rogers points out, Goffman "has focused on an Anglo, middle-class, masculine world" (1977, p. 91), making the application and extension of his work in other areas even more essential. Similar to Tyler's argument whose research encompasses racial stigma looking at the Civil Rights Movement (2018), I want to apply this approach to the feminist movement. The example that this essay will focus on is period-stigma, which is a topic that has been stigmatised for centuries and is also closely linked with discussions around feminism and gender equality. Still to this day, menstruating women are associated with

“disgust” (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020, p. 2) and perceived as ‘dirty’ and ‘spoiled’, resulting in bullying, shame, or a feeling of guilt. Their findings show that “13% of girls report that they have ever experienced period teasing, 87% fear being teased because of menstrual odor, and 80% fear being teased because of leaking” (p. 6). Even though the percentage of girls actually being teased is not shockingly high, a high number of girls fears being teased and has internalised shame and stigma around their menstruation.

Benshaul-Tolonen et al.’s study on adolescent boys and girls in Northern Tanzania (2020) also underlines that menstruating women are being excluded from society. They found that women are not allowed certain chores in the household, especially cooking, while being on their period: “66% of boys reported that menstruating women and girls in their homes are restricted from daily activities, most commonly cooking” (p. 11), therefore resulting in stigma being passed on to the next generation that internalises it and brings it into school. This is reflected in the fact that “boys who report restrictions on menstruation in their homes are more likely to engage in period teasing” (p. 13). Pescosolido’s arguments supports this, saying that “stigma can only be enacted in social interaction and is typified by exclusion from key participation in society.” (2015, p. 280). Women are disqualified from cooking and excluded from being a full member of the household as their period is regarded shameful and dirty. Interestingly, despite common assumptions period-stigma and teasing does not stem from boys’ lack in knowledge about the menstrual cycle but rather finds its root in familial interactions and stigma that is being passed through generations, as boys perform relatively decently on the menstrual knowledge score index in the study (Table 1, p. 7). Overall, there is a correlation between boys experiencing restrictions on menstruating women in the home and them engaging in period teasing themselves at school.

Another recent example has been Karlsson’s study on period-trackers, which particularly underlines how women want to conceal their menstrual status from others.

Women have internalised shame for having their period and often want to hide this from co-workers: participants “felt the necessity to hide and cover up signs of their own – or others’ – menstruation” (Karlsson, 2019, p. 118). This connects to Goffman’s argument that “the stigmatized individual may find that he feels unsure of how we normals will identify him and receive him.” (1963, p. 13). Despite the fact that ‘he’ in this context must be ‘she’ and ‘we normals’ creates a superiority over and distance from the stigmatised person, the core of this statement is true, for women feel like they must conceal their menstruation because they are not sure of how people will react. Again, period trackers also follow the example of serving capitalism because these apps capitalise “not on the female body but rather on the societal and cultural stigma *associated* with the female body, offering women an opportunity to escape the stigma created by society.” (Karlsson, 2019, p. 119). The apps provide a virtual and anonymous platform on which women feel safe from stigma and are not socially judged, even though their data is being collected. This virtual space allows for a seemingly safe experience, in which nobody will be stigmatised, in contrast to real-life situations. Many studies have proven that menstruation in the workplace leads to exclusion and avoidance: “when the woman dropped a tampon, she was evaluated as being less competent and the participants avoided sitting next to her” (Roberts et al., 2002, cited in Karlsson, 2019, p. 112). When talking about shame, Brown analyses that “shame can only survive in the dark; if we talk about shame it disappears” (2015, cited in Karlsson, 2019, p. 115). Therefore, it is crucial to illuminate that period-stigma exists in order to alleviate and eradicate the shame and guilt that is placed upon women.

To conclude, stigma can only exist in social interactions as we have seen in the examples discussed. Even though Goffman’s work on stigma-theories has originally not focused on period-stigma, it has provided a useful framework to explain the underlying conditions that produce stigma in the first place. Since there is a long historical background

on which period-stigma is placed, the process of changing how menstruation is seen and judged is not an easy one. The simple solution of teaching more biological knowledge to young people will not be enough in addressing deeper lying stigma that is rooted in families and in a society marked by patriarchy and a long struggle for women to achieve gender equality. For centuries, their bodies have been capitalised, objectified, and stigmatised, therefore needing a revolutionary change in societal thinking. Only more openness towards talking about menstruation and bringing the topic to the forefront of societal discourse will diminish the shame and fear that so many women feel around it.

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Marie Hennemann (she/her) is based on the West Coast of Ireland. She is about to finish her undergraduate degree in English and Sociology&Politics this summer and will go on to study the MA in English at University of Galway. During her internship with Wingless Dreamer, she published her first poetry collection as an editor. She enjoys engaging with literature because language makes us reflect on who we are and encourages us to open doors to other worlds. When she is not reading, she enjoys going for beach walks and watching sunsets.

The Boy With One Hand
(after Drew Kiser)
Cosima Smith

He asked for my hand, didn't add any details; he just *asked for my hand*. Of course, I gave it to him. I don't know why he couldn't ask me before he left, we could have saved an arm on shipping. Nevertheless, I sent him the disembodied hand after going to _____. I thought it would be painful. I still don't understand how they manage to disconnect the hand so well they can reattach it, but I didn't feel a thing after the initial anesthetic. All it took was two tiny needle pricks, directly into the wrist, and 10 minutes to disconnect the hand. Only another 15 to attach all of the wires needed to upload the sensory files to the computer once he was home.

I thought it would be odd not having a hand, but the prosthetic they attached in his absence and my loss fit perfectly. They even managed to get the skin tone correct, a feat beyond impressive. Not to mention the new hands ability to work with my brain—it could do things that ran only through my subconscious. I could focus on other work while the hand scribbled notes and sent emails independently. It almost made up for how much I missed him. But I wanted to experience the world he was giving me to feel, firsthand. I wanted to use the hand I'd given him to hold him, to wrap my fingers around his own; I wanted to feel his hands around my own still-connected flesh.

I knew he would keep the hand close, careful to show it everything. He thought that the most important imprints would be the things I'd never touched before. I knew the moments I'd love the most were the ones in which my hand lie motionless between his palms. I wondered what he'd have me feel, if he noticed the way I traced my fingers across anything near my

path. I wondered if he that's what he was doing. My only certainty was that he washed the hand several times more in a day than I ever would have the patience to.

When he came home, I made him give me a run-down of all of the things we touched together. I didn't want any surprises.

He traced my fingers along the Brooklyn Bridge. He held the hand over the side, acted as if he would drop it, and tried to see if he could make the fingers tense. I didn't blame him, I was curious as well. I told him that I never felt afraid, as if the hand could transmit that fear back to my brain from so many hundreds of miles away. He told me the fingers never tensed.

I told him I trusted him too much; he agreed.

He traced the index finger along the surface of a bar on Christopher Street before allowing three fingers to graze another's body as they danced; he told me the fingers danced playfully on the stranger's arm. He said the two of them only danced, five hands on gyrating hips holding tightly to whatever was grabable.

The seats at the Broadway theatre felt too cold to enjoy the cool woodwind high notes, and the air conditioner never let up. Throughout the show, my hand was freezing; he told me I had had goosebumps. He had gotten them too, I felt him warm his arms in turn with my open palm. Once the music ended, he rushed to the stage and caressed the gowns he could reach with two fingers, he knew that I would love the soft satin on my fingertips as I loved his satiny skin.

I felt warm as the hand found the curve of his chin. Without the weight of an arm to hold it back, his heart bounced the hand softly into the air before his chest greeted the fingers once

more. The palm warmed as it made its way to his calf before cooling towards his toes. After it finished exploring his body, the hand found rest enveloped in his warmth and the blankets; during the night, it found itself tangled in the sheets.

In the morning, he untangled the fingers. He let the hand rest on his shoulder as it shook, toothbrush whirring white paint through his mouth. The fingers found his waistband as his outfit was assembled, and then the spot between his undershirt and his sweater as he locked the door behind him. And there it stayed the whole journey back.

Masala
Cosima Smith

Lodi garden is full of people
And i am covered in mud and paint
But holy is that skin which
The sun kisses and turns into *masala*—
Spiced, salty and fragrant.

The park up the way from D-911
Keeps only a handful of lights
Under the soft shine of the moon.
The circles paced make skins into *masala*—
Seasoning for what's to come.

The bushes hold men,
Many men at times,
Who hold one another
Away from the light.
There is fear and excitement
Flavoring the air.
Dirt and tree bark
Staining hands and knees.
I wonder to myself
How long it's been so dark.

In the morning I take a tuktuk
From NFC to Khan Market.
The sun shines, kurta cooling my body
Though I still am becoming *masala*
Walking under the morning sun to

Lodi gardens, full of people.
These in unstained clothes.
The sun does not reach into the bathroom
But a man's hand makes me into *masala*—
Spiced. Salty. And fragrant.

Cosima Smith (his/hers) is the Editorial Manager for Think In Ink, a Poetry Reader for Chestnut Review, and a Yoga Facilitator based in Farmville, Virginia. Smith has found homes in 6 countries in the past 10 years, craving the nature of transitory living before the world shut down. Now, Smith is most often found searching for peace hiking Virginia's trails, doing yoga, reading, or (from time to time) writing. For a simpler way to connect, Smith is on instagram @simareading with reading/writing adventures or @cronesima, which features yoga content and day-to-day affairs.

If a Girl Falls Through Cracked Ice, Will Anybody Save Her?
Sara Dobbie

I don't thrash at first, frozen in shock, a bubble of distorted sound. When terror grips, I grasp fistfuls of nothingness. I punch and kick and think I'm going to die now, all because of a dare. I hear my friend's muffled scream, then all at once I'm yanked up like a ragdoll, jagged edges cut scratches that I won't feel until later. It's you, dragging me to shore, forehead lined in fear. Tiny freckles on your cheeks, breath escaping your lips as steam.

I know you from school, but your crowd is different; older boys who have cars, who smoke and drink. Still, you ride with me in the ambulance like we're two scared kids alone against the violent world.

Days pass with glances in hallways and phone calls late at night. I like you; I think about you. I wonder if we are in love.

Now we're in a strange bedroom at a party, you kiss me and it's nice. Your hands roam over me and it's okay. You're reaching under the red shirt I wore because it makes me look older and I think fine, but only this far. You fumble with my zipper, and I pull away. Your fingertips brush the thin scratches on my face, unhealed, and you ask me what's wrong, tell me you're so glad you saved me.

If a boy rescues a girl from drowning, what exactly does she owe him? Loud music pounds the walls, laughter and jeering from downstairs. I want to go home and scald myself clean, bathe in burning water. You move me to the bed and put my hand where you want it, and I know there's only one person who can save me now.

Sara Dobbie is a Canadian writer from Southern Ontario. Her stories have appeared in Full House Literary, Milk Candy Review, Fictive Dream, JMWW, Sage Cigarettes, New World Writing, Bending Genres, Ghost Parachute, Ruminant Online, Trampset, Ellipsis Zine, and elsewhere. Her chapbook "Static Disruption" is available from Alien Buddha Press. Her collection "Flight Instinct" is available from ELJ Editions. Follow her on Twitter @sbdobbie, and on Instagram at @sbdobwrites.

Little Manila, Queens
Alex Romero

1.

Welcome to Little Manila, where our mothers are passionately overprotective and our aunts are nosy and discreet. At potlucks, the children move as if they are excited-state atoms leaping on sofas and chairs, sprinting laps in and out of the kitchen, bouncing up and down the stairs. After our fathers and uncles chug three or four beers, watch as their faces turn the color of longganisa sausages... Beware! This is when they plot the most pranks. They select their targets with a drunken finger and one eye closed. When light spreads to dusk, our siblings leave the house to live the lives we know nothing about. Where do you go? Who are you with? What do you even do? We won't tell—we swear!

2.

In Little Manila, our house is the one with flip-flops on the porch steps. The one with a broom leaned up against the brick wall and red paint smeared over the cracks. You can't miss it—can you see those soggy, floral print bras dangling on the rails? Those are our grandma's, she leaves them out to dry after washing them. She claims one of her bras got stolen, but that makes no sense, because why would anyone steal an old lady's bra? We think the wind blew it away. Whatever happened, she's been praying for the return of that bra all week. Anyway, once you come in, don't forget to take off your shoes and greet our grandma. Slam the door shut, hear the click behind you. There are extra flip-flops in the closet. Choose any pair you like.

3.

In Little Manila, when the trains come and leave, we make-believe the earth below will crumble. Outside, a row of birds sits along the power lines like notes on a piece of sheet music. We hear the laughter of schoolchildren, buses and taxis honking, church bells ringing

in the distance. The open sky invites the eyes. It expands like an ever-growing American Dream.

4.

In Little Manila, our mothers and aunties can be found cooking at any of the following times: 6:30 AM, 10:00 AM, 2:00 PM, 5:00 PM, 9:00 PM, midnight. We wake to the smell of garlic rice, adobo, fried fish, and pork chops swirling into our nostrils, but we still settle for dollar slices and McDonalds after school. We know there is food at home, but outside these doors, we can't help but turn into Americans—a Slurpee in one hand, a bacon, egg n' cheese in the other.

5.

In Little Manila, we are like a dollhouse cramped with seven dolls, dolls that are brown, short, and well-fed. We are built small, maybe for the better. This way, we can all fit in the same house. We share rooms, flip-flops, last names. Our skin is the color of lumpia and lechon. Of soft prairie grass rustling through the hot summer breeze. Of the cardboard boxes we mail overseas, packed with presents for people we know and people we don't. We all have dark-cocoa eyes and crow black hair that shine like the Sunday shoes we wear—us and the grownups. The grownups are like a whole other species that might as well come from another world. They aren't like us. We aren't like them. If we speak in their language, our tongues knot like shoelaces. If they speak in ours, their accents turn the syllables thick like peanut butter.

6.

In Little Manila, the grownups are really out of their minds sometimes. We know how hard they worked to come here, but now, we can never complain when it comes to certain things. It's hot in here, we ask, can we turn on the air conditioner? No, they tell us, this is nothing

compared to *back home*—if you get hot, open the window. That’s what we mean. Don’t mind the expiration date on the milk, they tell us, it’s still good. We know that if we throw it away, then they will call us wasteful, and we’ll hear another rant about life *back home*. Even though we are home.

7.

In Little Manila, we never want the grownups to regret leaving behind the world they knew before. Where pineapples and mangoes are in season all year round. Where the sky wears the sun like a polished medallion. Where they trudged through marshes and rice fields just to get to school. Where they were happy. We must remind them that their coming here was not a waste, and nobody can say they are out of their minds for that.

Alex Romero is an American from Queens, New York. After earning his BA at Sarah Lawrence College, he taught English in a fishing village in the northwest of France. He is a proud 2023 Lambda Literary Emerging LGBTQ Voices Fellow. In 2022, he was the recipient of the Matt Leone Fellowship at Colgate University. He has been featured or is forthcoming in Maudlin House, Michigan Quarterly Review, The Coachella Review, Literary Hub, and others. He is completing his MFA in fiction at Columbia University, where he was awarded a Chair's Fellowship. He is at work on a story collection.