



SAGA

Literary Journal

Volume Six

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Volume Six

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## SAGA Literary Journal Volume Six

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Top Heavy</b> by Taryn Boyle .....	11
<b>The Emerging Spirit of You</b> by Brando Ordonez .....	12
<b>Sacrificial Delicacy</b> by Heidie Saenz .....	13
<b>Those Gates</b> by Jesus Ulloa .....	14
<b>Ax Handle Saturday</b> by Antonio Ruiz .....	18
<b>Old Fashioned</b> by Johnathon Henriquez .....	20
<b>Not Howling; Whisper; Don't Share Your Air</b> by Thomas A. E. Hesketh .....	24
<b>Summer Fling</b> by Liz Alana Rankin .....	26
<b>The Pearl White Mug</b> by Brando Ordonez .....	27
<b>Oracle of the Open Heart</b> by Joshua Peralta .....	28
<b>Disposable</b> by Vickie Wippel .....	30
<b>Lincoln's Diamonds</b> by Jesus Ulloa .....	32
<b>Summer Treat</b> by Nick Wright .....	35
<b>Dinner Guest</b> by Joshua Peralta .....	36
<b>Port Newark</b> by Christina Guillen .....	40
<b>The Professor Image</b> by Christina Guillen .....	46
<b>Elden's Spirit Animal</b> by Christina Guillen .....	48
<i>La Curandera de Mole</i> by Christina Guillen .....	58



## Foreword

As another academic year at Long Beach City College comes to an end, the English Majors and Minors Club is, once again, happy to present LBCC's student-run literary magazine, SAGA. This is our sixth volume to date of work produced by LBCC students.

This year the production of SAGA faced some unique challenges, with our editors working from home, sharing emails and .pdfs, rather than handwritten documents. But we stuck with it, despite the malaise the editing staff endured from over a year's worth of isolation and uncertainty; nevertheless, we came out on the other side with a volume I am proud of.

The works collected here are a brilliant display of the diversity, ability, and endless potential of the students at Long Beach City College. The opportunity to read and engage with the work of my fellow LBCC students has been the highlight of my academic career. Making that work accessible to a wider audience is something I, and everyone at SAGA, feel privileged to do. This issue also features the work of Professor Christina Guillen, a longtime pillar of the LBCC creative writing community who is retiring at the end of this year.

The publication of SAGA is possible thanks to our exceptional editorial team, and no one deserves more thanks than SAGA's managing editor, Bilen Rowland. Her hard work, patience, and persistence made this volume happen. I'd also like to thank Professors Jason Casem and Jeff Epley, the English Majors and Minors Club's faculty advisors, for guiding our team through the process. Most importantly, I'd like to thank the authors collected in this volume, and all writers who continue to support our literary journal's efforts.

Please enjoy SAGA Volume VI.

Matthew Jacobs

LBCC English Majors and Minors Club President, SAGA Chief Editor



**Top Heavy Heart**  
by Taryn Boyle

On the way back,  
he got angry at me again.

His dry knuckles gripping the steering wheel  
of the family Jeep,  
that he'd decided to remove the doors and roof of  
like he anticipated that he would be  
tossing and turning us on Aviation Blvd  
like carnival fish in a bag.

I could taste our lunch in my throat,  
while wet eyes bore into the little yellow markers ahead,  
like Dorothy's brick road, but  
leading me to his home, not mine.

Prosciutto on French loaf  
soured in the cracks of my braces  
and I tucked my tongue into the roof of my mouth,  
just in case,  
as I dug green painted nails into the seat belt,  
wind whipping my crossed ankles

and I was angry too,  
but quietly

because I could never  
get up the courage  
to just  
fall out.

**The Emerging Spirit of You**  
by Brando Ordenez

the memory of your whale shaped illness  
replays in waves of motion blurred by scrubs  
and boxes of tissues sponsored by families all  
entrapped by the circumference of decay before  
they fill out forms of hope  
I could not sign that evening

you had been laying  
in some ICU  
I could not see you in  
without notice

once I arrived  
we locked eyes  
for the last time with  
the glare of your iris  
shimmering against the dead weather of May

I wanted to sink  
beneath the bed once  
I felt the ceiling  
peeling its own skin

as I lay my head and wait  
once streams of silence  
left me to flee  
from your last droning heartbeats  
performing a slow march for your children

I row myself to a restroom  
search for a shade of white in my eye  
drain the snot and tears of the hour  
flooding the four walls left intact

the final glance of your body  
reckons with the past  
burning happily with you

- Sacrificial Delicacy-

by Heidie Saenz

I saw you there one summer day  
Hanging out by the raspberries  
It had been a while since I had  
The urge for something nice and sweet  
I brought you home and set you down  
By the frankincense and jasper  
I waited 3 days and 3 nights  
I sat and read crisp poetry  
Setting the mood comfy in bed  
I held you in my tired hands  
Admiring your bright roundness  
Rolling and squeezing and feeling  
I dug my nails into your flesh  
Under my breath light and airy  
A slight sigh of relief escaped  
Magic unveiled through thickened rind  
With precise joy methodically  
The piercing mist of oils and youth  
Released into the air with ease  
Effervescence of orange blood  
Spraying my face and invading  
The sourness of my old lungs  
You were energy pounding through  
One taste of you was all it took  
For these brown sullen eyes to wake  
From the slumber of the mundane  
Baked in the rapture of sugars  
Natural and pure in its state  
I loved the way your juices ran  
How my lonely fingertips spoke  
Of citrus sacs and lush membrane  
Dividing segments one by one  
Citric acid cascading down  
As I brought you close to bare lips  
Christening the beauties of death  
With each carpel a communion  
Each burst a reminder of life

## Those Gates

by Jesus Ulloa

**H**e told me to get him the screwdriver with the orange handle. I searched high and low through various compartments in his rusted work truck and found nothing. Going back empty-handed always guaranteed a good yelling.

"I couldn't find it," I said as I braced myself for the worst.

"Go back and fucking look for it right," he told me while he hammered away at wood frames for a kitchen remodeling job we were working on. The smell of the 2x4's seemed to magnify with every strike.

I walked out of the clients' house and headed to their driveway where his truck was leaking oil. I tried once again to find something that wasn't there, taking a little longer so that there was no doubt that I tried hard.

"I still can't find it," I said when I returned.

He looked at me like he wished I was a little older so that he could've punched me. He pulled his pants up, dusted off his beat-up polo shirt, walked to his truck and away from my sight. There was a good feeling building within. Satisfaction. I knew he wouldn't find it, he wouldn't apologize, or even acknowledge it, but he was wrong, and I was right. That was important.

"Is it really so fucking hard to look for something?" he asked as he held a screwdriver with a red handle.

"That's not orange! It's red!" I said.

"It's the same fucking color!" he told me while he went back to hammering wood.

I look across the detention center, filled with confusion. I stare at my father across a table, as he talks with my mother who sits next to me. We visit him every Saturday at the Lancaster County Detention Center. I'm confused as to why he's in jail. Even at 14, I have a feeling I'm too young to know.

I talk to him on the phone weekly. He always calls during soccer games and tells me to put the phone on the television screen, so he can hear. Although I wonder about the specific reason why he's in the slammer, I'm not at all surprised. He often told me stories of his fights and outrunning the police, although he always advised me not to try

it. "These days it's harder to get away. They have those helicopters that follow you now."

He is a man that is good at certain things. Fighting is at the very top of the list. Insulting people is second, since one usually follows the other. I've seen him fight more times than I've seen him kiss my mother. And third, he is an excellent storyteller, and those stories were always about his fights.

"Back in *México* guys always wanted to fight me because they heard I was a good fighter," he told me once while on our way to a job site, "word spreads quickly in small ranchos, so I was fighting every day."

He began to recreate the scene, putting up his hands like a boxer, using his knees to steer. "Some guy cut me in the head with a machete while I was at a dance with my girlfriend. He came from behind! My friend was selling sodas out of a cart. The glass bottle kind. I ran and grabbed one, threw it at the guy, and hit him in the fuckin' face. I threw another, and another, until there were no more."

"Were you bleeding?" I asked.

"Shut up and let me finish," he opened his hands for a second before closing them into fists again, "so I got on top of him, punching his face in. Yeah, I was bleeding all over the place. There was blood on my shirt, blood on his face, and blood on my mustache."

"Did you have to get stitches?"

"Stitches? For what? I had a friend pee on my head to cure the wound."

He lowered his head to show me a scar running along his bald spot. "I got this as a reminder from that night!"

That was the first time he told me about peeing on cuts to heal them. I don't know where he heard it from or why he was so sure, but he took that information and ran with it. My father, a man of violence and medical science.

It's no surprise that today he's telling my mother about a fight he was in with another inmate. He beat him up so badly that he earned the respect of his peers. He moves his tanned muscular arms around as he talks, muscular from a lifetime of swinging a hammer.

The first time we came I expected it to be like the movies. Talking through glass with a phone on each end. Instead, the room reminded me of my school cafeteria. The tables are wood but have a

foot-high divider running along the middle. That's all that separates us. The walls are gray. The inmates wear faded blue jumpsuits and slip-on shoes. Guards wear white shirts and black pants. They walk around with their beating sticks in hand and don't seem to be paying attention to us.

It's hot as it usually is in the summer, but it's hotter here than it is back home. A drop of sweat glides down his brown face as he continues to brag about his fighting. She disapproves of it all, shakes her head, and makes faces at him. He doesn't notice.

He hardly looks at me. I get the sense he doesn't care if I go visit him, but my mother insists. She reminds me all the time that she needs me. I've been feeling less her son and something more like an ally, except whenever I used to ask why he got arrested. She would avoid the question. Eventually, I stopped asking.

I go with my mother to visit family members we haven't seen in forever, so she can borrow money. It's always uncomfortable having to be around people I don't know that talk for hours about things I don't care about. She works long shifts because of the bills. She drops me off at school and I don't see her again until right before bed. Being the man of the house isn't fun when you're not done being a kid.

Every night I think about the situation we're in. I become angry. I know it's one person's fault more than anyone else. Decisions are a weird thing; they reach out wide and are permanent. I'm sure whatever it is my dad did he wasn't thinking about us when he did it.

He turns his attention to me which means we'll be leaving soon. My mom gets a strand of floss out of her pocket and puts it in her mouth to smuggle it to him with a kiss. He's really into flossing. It drives him crazy that the jail doesn't provide floss. It's against the rules to give anything to the inmates or to even have any physical contact. My mom does whatever he asks even if it'll cause problems for her.

"So how you doing *mijo*? I'll call you next week for the game, I made a bet with some guys, so we're all counting on you to play it for us." He tells me while looking around for guards, "You know I'm almost out of this place! They picked me up by mistake. I didn't do anything. The lawyer is making sure I get out soon." The same words come out of his mouth every week.

He can be the guiltiest man in the world and never admit it. Just like with the orange screwdriver he's always right no matter what.

My parents stand up at the same time and swap the contraband with a kiss. A kiss so forced it would be at home on a daytime soap opera.

"Hey! No touching!" a guard yells from a distance.

"It's okay! I was just kissing my wife goodbye!"

He doesn't sit back down. He says goodbye to my mother and reminds me I'm the man of the house. Every week he gets his strand of floss and leaves before visitation hours are over. We watch him walk away. He cracks jokes with other inmates. Punches their arms.

"Let's go. We get to beat the crowd again," she says. Other words I hear every week. We cross through many doors and finally a giant fence. Outside it's like a desert -- you can only see dirt, only feel heat rising from it. We get in our car and drive away from those tall fences with barbed wire that keep my father from us.

Next week it will be the same, and so will the week after that. My 15th birthday will be in three months, and I know he won't be home to celebrate it. No matter how much he will try to convince me that he will be. I'll be 15 years old and still be driving away from those gates. The more we come here the more I want those gates to keep him in there.

## Ax Handle Saturday

by Antonio Ruiz

*An AX HANDLE is also called a haft. It has five parts, the Eye, the Shoulder, the Belly, the Throat, and the Knob.*

All we wanted was to be served lunch. At the Whites-only lunch counter inside an F.W. Woolworth five-and-dime store. Jacksonville, Florida. An ax handle's throw from the Atlantic Ocean. Where white beachgoers baked themselves dark in the August 13, 1960 sun. Just another Saturday. Shoppers shop up and down Main Street. White people here. Black people there. Everyone knows their lane. No one crosses.

*The handle is STRONGEST when split from a stave; simply a narrow length of raw wood, rather than cut out of a board.*

Outside the Woolworth windows. Men and boys build their mob like they make their ax handles. Strong from raw wood. Their ax handles swinging. Pumping them. Up and down. Like the kid. The one with the bad case of pimples who eyed me first. Couldn't be more than, what? 15. 16. Pumping the air. I see him. We all see them.

*The ax handle's diameter. Should feel comfortable in your hand. With FULL CONTROL of your aim. As it comes up down and around.*

The white server with pink cat-eyeglasses. Smacking gum. Square pink kerchief pinned above her breast with a name plate. Her name is Sue. Loudly announcing. Colored people are not served at the Whites-only lunch counter. The beefy white manager with the white shirt skinny black tie white socks black shoes black pants. Get the hell to the back where you belong. His fat fingers jabbing at the colored-only lunch counter. Or maybe, you belong out there. Jabbing to the growing white mob outside.

*Hickory is your wood. TOUGHER than nails, versatile, strong and gives and takes abuse.*

200 white rioters armed with baseball bats and ax handles. Threatened, chased, and beat us. That Saturday on an August day. The one with the bad case of pimples was the first one S M A C K C R A C K B O O M D O O M. Swung that ax handle like it was his favorite baseball bat. Laughing. His pimples about to explode on his red-faced head with the blond

crew cut. His puckered mouth spilling spit down his red neck with words that pierced our souls as he S M A C K E D my back with an ax handle often called a haft. C R A C K E D my skull with an ax handle that has five parts, the Eye, the Shoulder, the Belly, the Throat, and the Knob. B O O M E D down on my body with an ax handle made of an extremely durable Hickory wood. D O O M E D me to a wheelchair for life with an ax handle that's tougher than nails, versatile, strong, gives and takes abuse. All the while feeling comfortable in his hands.

**Old Fashioned**  
by Johnathon Henriquez

**T**hey walk beside each other, down the third floor's hallway in the Willow River Apartment building. She laughs and he has his hands in his pockets. He stares at his shoes with a grand smile. And she can't wait until she gets to take off her black high-heels.

She opens her purse and rattles out her keys. The sound of the door lock clicking open rolls down the hall of the sleeping apartment building. With her black high heels, she kicks the door open. "Welcome to my palace," she says as she opens the door wide for her guest. "It was built in the 1800s. My butler is out on vacation, so it's just us," she says.

The man follows her in and looks around. "Wow, it's really beautiful this apartment – I mean palace," he says.

She laughs and replies, "Yeah, thank you, Frankie. I just moved the couch to that wall so I have enough room for dance parties."

She twirls in the middle of the small living room with her arms outstretched. With a smile the size of the entire apartment building, he hurries to the couch and applauds her.

"Amazing, Miss Aileen! Beautiful! How about another for the outro?" he says. She twirls again, blushes, and takes a bow.

"Magnificent! A performance etched in the history books," he says as his eyes are covered with the glaze of the drinks they had at the bar.

"Thank you! Thank you!" she says as her hands dip and swing like a ballerina's hands. "Now I must rest."

They both sit together on the couch, turning to each other. They smile, and he looks into her eyes and searches for her thoughts. He reads the sunflower that surrounds her pupils, and the green that fills her irises. He looks to her lips and sees the lipstick that has been sitting on her lips since the beginning of the night which has now washed away with the drinks at the bar. Her cheeks are pink, but it doesn't look like make-up. Her smile must be keeping her warm, he thinks. He wants to speak but can't find the words. This moment steals the buzz he had from the bar.

She suddenly jumps up off the couch and asks him, "Do you want a drink? I have an old whiskey bottle, though no bitters or top-

pings. I could make us a couple half-way Old Fashioneds with a little water.”

“Sure, that sounds great, Miss Aileen. With a little extra water in mine too, please. The couple drinks I had at the bar were a little stiff,” he says as he adjusts his tie under his collar.

“Extra water?” she says jokingly as she makes her way to the kitchen. “Sorry, Mister Frankie, but only a limited amount of water will be used tonight.”

He chuckles at the playfulness and replies. “Alright, just don’t overdo the whiskey, I’m trying to cut back a little.”

“You won’t need it, trust me,” Aileen says trying to soothe his worries. “I’ll make the best couple half-way Old Fashioneds in the world.”

\*\*\*

She returns to the couch and again they turn to each other. She hands him an Old Fashioned and in sync they drink from their short glasses.

She says, “I brought the whiskey bottle in case we want more.” She looks over to him and appreciates his shoulders and his strong jaw and how perfectly it meets his neck. He smiles and it warms her cheeks. He looks a little different here than at the bar. His eyebrows look stronger too, with a kink that then straightens into the wrinkles of his eyes as he smiles. The amber color of his eyes stop her from observing his presence any longer. He holds the glass to his lips and his eyes resemble the whiskey. Like honey that attracts the bee, she thinks, bourbon brown, smoky and rich. She wonders what lies behind those eyes.

“The stage is yours,” she says to him as she motions to the center of the living room. “Enchant me, please. You know what, answer me this question: Who are you? And get poetic,” she says, heartedly, as she waves her hand. “Turn into a poem I can touch.” She grabs her glass with both hands and looks to him with glossy and forgiving eyes.

He smiles at the invitation, and feels his cheeks get warmer by the moment. He drops his head and looks at his shoes. He thinks of the embarrassment that will surely come. But nonetheless, he stands up and walks to the center of the small living room and spins to the woman to meet her eyes. He quickly looks down to his shoes and takes a long sip of his half-way Old Fashioned. Shyly, he begins to say, “I can’t tell you who I am because I’m not sure you can understand.” He says it with his left hand in his pocket and swinging his Old Fash-

ioned with the other.

“Um, well, I’m the guy that looks at his shoes when he walks, when he feels uncomfortable, or when he feels out of place. I’m the guy that whispers to the waiter and can’t hold eye contact with the cashier.”

He chuckles at himself.

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t knock back some drinks and hammer down some beers.”

She laughs, and he raises his glass.

“Um, let’s see, I write poems and cliché love stories. And sometimes, after a few drinks and writing down poems that replay in my head, I start asking myself that exact same question you just asked me.”

She gazes with interest and can’t help but feel the heat of his cheeks. She tilts her head in intrigue and appreciates the moment a little more.

His eyes are glued to his shoes, but he continues, “and it gets pretty hard to answer, and that queues even more questions I can’t answer. You know, the heavy questions. And I guess that’s who I am: just a kid who doesn’t really know who he is. I could only get myself to think ‘more,’” he says as he rolls the hand that holds his Old Fashioned. He continues, “more confidence, more laughter and smiles, more decisiveness, just ‘more!’” He takes his hand out of his pocket and reaches out to his side.

“I want more emotion, more love, more beauty!” He sips at the glass in his hand, closes his eyes for a second and thinks of her sunflower eyes. “I want more whiskey, do you mind?”

She doesn’t speak but motions to the bottle. He continues, “I want more nights like this, where I can talk and joke and not be so scrambled.” He walks to the wall where three paintings hang, “I want more friends, ones that will tell me to write a book already. I want to read more books,” he says as he turns quickly to her. “I want more freedom, I want more music I could dance to, and more dance moves.”

He walks around the living room slightly spilling from his glass. She laughs at the idea of him dancing terribly. He walks to the opposing wall where a mirror hangs and continues, “and not all of that is realistic, so I get bummed out and feel hopeless.” He looks at himself in the mirror for a second and runs his hand through his hair. He then turns to her on the couch and her eyes gleam with the light of the lamp by the mirror. He looks down to his glass, then to his shoes

and continues, “And I get brought back to the night.” He extends his arms, “And my answer becomes drinking more.”

She sees the burning fires on his cheeks, and she starts to applaud. “That was beautiful! What a performance!” she says, with her bright red lips extended to their fullest. “You came off a little selfish but it was great!” She laughs and can’t let go of the genuine smile.

He feels comfortable here with her.

She waits for his reply. He finishes the rest in his glass and sits on the couch beside her.

He says, “Thank you, thank you. And for my next trick, I will sing! Any suggestions?”

“The talent gets to rest,” she says as the smile sits young on her lips. “I have some records I could play.”

“Alright,” he replies, through his smile. “I’ll make us each a half-way Old Fashioned, if you don’t mind.”

She walks to the corner where she has a bookshelf full of records, and a record player on one of the shelves. She skims through each shelf as if turning pages on a sacred book, carefully. She yells into the kitchen, “Duke Ellington, he was part of the Harlem Renaissance, he was a trumpet player and a composer. He’s amazing.”

“He sounds amazing. Let’s hear ‘em.”

She lays the record down and pulls the needle on the very edge of the record. The dust on the record is picked up on the speaker and suddenly the trumpets start, and the music fills the apartment. It’s suddenly a party in the 1940s. The bass and drums give the night a pulse. The piano and alto sax gives them the urge to dance.

She says, “I hope you have your dancing shoes on.”

“Dancing shoes? I should be asking you, will you put your heels back on or keep ‘em off?”

She grabs the drinks from his hands and sets them down on the counter. Her hands lead his to the center of the small living room. She says, “This is the only time I’ll strictly enforce no looking down at your shoes, you just need to dance, Frankie!”

He laughs at the invitation. With a burning smile, he replies, “Haha, well, Miss Aileen, I agree.”

He unties his shoes and leaves them by the couch. He dances with Miss Aileen in the center of the living room. The two Old Fashioneds on the counter touch. The apartment warms, and finally, the amber turns to ember.

# Not Howling: Whisper; Don't Share Your Air.

by Thomas A. E. Hesketh

I set me my COVID -19 blues aside  
the other day, unsure, knowing not  
what weather would bless us  
near the Golden Gate and San Francisco Bay

Would the fog breathe fresh salt-tinged whispers of relief  
against the unseasonable heat wave, at last  
easing our acedia-tainted languor, another insidious  
gift of the raging, heartless, spreading pandemic plague

Would the sea breeze be drawn over the Farallon Islands  
pulled as day's heat excites rising air in the Central Valley to the East passing  
the lair of gulls, great white sharks, landmark for gray whales  
urging the eternal tides against the mortal sands of Ocean Beach

Renewing a pattern older than any relic, remains, or trace of humanity  
companion to Luna's teasing, piling sands tracing roots to the Sierra  
along this coast formed by tectonic plates slipping, civilized by Sequoias --  
Islands, waters home to tons of discarded radioactive waste

## II.

I have become nocturnal in orientation, spiders in ceiling corners  
with the unsought aid of "shelter-in-place" laws,  
seldom leaving a book-populated room, stacks, shadows high  
navigating the hours immersed in distractions, without compass

The outside world reduced to postage stamp sized rectangles  
Zoom-beams from other continents, time zone zombies, bombers  
brought to life by inner instincts, as social animals run amuck, circling  
yet, scarcely different from Tenderloin denizens, of any cave

Save the seals; seal the saved, in their cave of self-righteousness; cross that Bridge as it comes  
wired to RadioGarden, Beethoven, Brahms, and a thousand cowboy melodies,  
lost loves, runaway dogs, and hope left at the sand bar of tomorrow, green dots on  
unseen horizon over relief map, matching isolation with easy access.

Dictionaries in languages I did not know, grammars open at random, glossaries of gloom  
Work a lost art, opening pages at intervals, note cards marking place, in turn abandoned  
at the sight of parenthetical thoughts; essays at alphabetization, redone, again  
stabbing echoes, looking for zero, plus or minus, abstract numbers

## III.

Unsleeve the tourniquet of thought choking choice in such moments; abandon the matrix, dare to  
utter the words unsaid; if there is air to spare there, then listen to the hum in human.  
humus in one; hubris in, too; non-sense may be real, chaos an ordered code,  
margins unbounded; what whether, indeed; tippy-toad, up, down the road

Lest there be under/standing, wright shipshape shop tools, rhyme in thyme, is thine, or else-knot,  
seldom scene in re-runs, for the initial – commercial – time; the unraveling is revealing  
itself, as a blister peeling, a bell pealing, a banana slipping from green to black;  
the inexorable yelling for the ineffable to stop the chitter-chatter, monkey-

brain, leaps of pretend, do not violate the known, except . . . fill in the ranks of doomed ones,  
celebrate the glacial pace of global warming, the melting of the curvature of the Earth; ill  
in illusion, illustrating the reciprocal value of fractions turned on their pointy  
heads; The Odious Orange One changes hair color - Fool's Gold to Ghost

White, suitable for unmarked refrigeration trucks, holding the unburied dead until a prayer is said  
on a golf course, where no mulligans survive, and Groundhog's Day measures a new  
Trail of Tears; may innocents be laid to rest in his golf courses and luxury hotels,  
a New Age of Infamy, a blot on the bosom of the Statue of Liberty

Shame will feed on the shadows of his name and their complicity, cowards of conscience

**Summer Fling**  
by Liz Alana Rankin

I remember falling so hard for her it left my peach skin bruised

My bones set on fire

And I burned

I still wear the charred remains of a romance that was one-sided

I talk about her like she is still mine

But She *never* belonged to anyone

I remember fireworks in July

When “I love you” did not sound like an apology

I miss painting strawberry daiquiri kisses across her waistline

And tracing the silhouette of her hips

I starve for those sleepless summer nights

My heart aches for her touch

The blood in my veins whispers her name

Begging her to come back to me

I am so empty since she left

**The Pearl White Mug**  
by Brando Ordóñez

surrenders itself to the scorch of a drink  
branched from the labor of the underpaid  
as such a taste depletes  
anyone with a sour grin

and the need to  
untwine from the  
overwhelming chaos  
nestling outside the cup's rim

holding itself together  
more than the waiter who fills  
the temporary gap of  
your loneliness

they must need a sip themselves of  
what you call  
good morning America  
as if a country could drink itself in  
the love affair of acidity and bitterness

for the fullness  
each cup drains of you  
traces your own need for self-reflection

is it time for the second cup  
or to catch a ride downtown towards  
the other potion tended by tired souls

## Oracle of the Open Heart

by Joshua Peralta

O what lovelies we spoke  
glozing odic over not going home  
or swooning for a young woman  
a poet from school I know  
who composed a poem  
of one lone oval O  
She called it Love Letter

And so it was so  
Sole and solemn  
she seemed to know

But lo how foolish in our cups we grow  
opining on stools about souls  
about how thoroughly ours are shot  
with lost lots and longing  
that knocks and crowds and hopes  
for another oneiric O of our own  
another bold voweled vow of love  
another fond promise not to soften  
or become as the oath of youth  
overgrown by doubt and old  
but to go on hot and unbroken  
as vapor from mouths in the cold

And so it is so  
afloat on booze another night flowed  
onward for hours until we head home alone  
our pockets hollow our eyes low  
poking holes in the truths of love we told  
As if mortals could ever wholly know

For none knows more  
than the Oracle of the Open Heart  
She it is who discloses truth from the core  
She it is who knows  
our best and loveliest Os come so seldom

no words can totally unfold  
just how voluptuously they flow  
forthcoming like froth in honey  
mountain sweet and moving slow

And She it is who honoring exposes  
the heart of God and Love  
how both lie bound in the same swollen symbol  
of one absolute extraordinary letter O

## Disposable

by Vickie Wippel

I shaved my legs. I kept the water on—a luxury, of course, but that morning, I tolerated little; drought, or otherwise. Let Eliot measure his life in coffee spoons. I measured mine in pink, disposable razors. Twenty-four. Two per month since Mom died. Not quite heirloom quality, but neither was the gold. Having also inherited her thriftiness, I grabbed the bonus pack just before the realtor and stagers dismantled her memories with every rented pillow they poofed up on the couch. They would have just thrown the razors away. “No personal touches,” they kept reminding me. But to me, it was all personal.

I shut the water off. The bathroom air hung hot and heavy from running the shower too long. It felt like Florida; we spent a week there when I was ten, and I always remembered the wet, suffocating air. One year ago today, Mom died. And, just like that humid coastal air that clung to me like a soaked shirt, the act of breathing—in, out, in, out—provided no relief. Mom! Please don’t go! Please don’t leave me! I love you! Please don’t go! A puddle of tears left on a cold hospital floor. If she heard me, Mom would have been embarrassed by my wet, wailed goodbyes.

A year ago today, everyone held me too long, clutching too tightly to something that might break.

The hot shower water drowned—no, it burned—it burned through memories of throw-away words delivered to the grieving like funeral wreathes. Life is so fragile, everyone said. And, of course, people were just so sorry.

A year ago today, I kissed my mother’s cooling lips while a patient one room over scrapped the last bites of apple cobbler that came with his lunch. A janitor tiptoed in to change the trash but didn’t bother to knock. Just yesterday, stopped at a red light, I watched Animal Control shovel a raccoon off a busy street. The officer flipped it into the back of the truck like a burger on a grill. How many cars drove over the body? Somebody should have stopped. Tire tracks and indifference made the lifeless body look

like a rigid piece of particle board—not fragile at all. There was no ceremony—the worker didn’t even wear gloves.

And, today. Today, those same people who hugged too tightly will go to Starbucks, check the weather, walk the dog. Maybe they will

garden or match a basket of socks. Somebody should stop. Things should stop. Spheres off their axis should not spin. The cat I adopted in my fever of grief slept on top of clothes I had laid out on the bed; her white paws, comically big, looked like snow mittens covering her face. Work clothes now covered in fur. Indeed, there would be no ceremony.

The cat woke and went to my lap as I put on shoes, checking the time, hurrying. When I was a little girl, Mom was always last to pick up at preschool. Her banker's heels made a distinct click-clack on the commercial-grade linoleum as she raced in before closing. Her walk sounded like a cook chopping carrots, with each step echoing through the quiet that filled an otherwise empty classroom. Sometimes, I was fooled by teachers' aides slamming kid-sized chairs onto the tops of tiny tables. But not often. And, each time she walked through the doorway, stopping at the clipboard to sign her name in a squiggle while I fumbled with backpack straps, relief would flow through me. I was not forgotten, and we could go home. Like a church ritual, she'd grab my hand, take my backpack, and say, smiling, "There's my girl!" I'd skip ahead to our beat-up, wood-paneled station wagon, and, if I was lucky, we'd have spaghetti for dinner. Mom died wearing hospital socks. Soft, slouchy, slip proof. The clack of her heels a shuffle across the sheets.

Still sitting on the bed, I cried with the memory. The cat lazed away. Mom should still be here using her own goddamn razors, I thought, using the back of my hand to dry my face. But I was late for work. The world had moved on. Grabbing my things, I put fresh water in the cat bowl and closed and locked the door. The click of my heels echoed down the hall to the elevator.

## Lincoln's Diamonds

by Jesus Ulloa

I look at a picture of my wife and son as I sit in my car waiting for my shift at UPS to begin. Sometimes I feel guilty looking at her, guilty because she's not the one I wanted to marry. She's great in many ways, and it's not her fault that I harbor these feelings that she doesn't know about. Still, I can't help but look at my family as a reflection of my failure in life, how I didn't achieve what I wanted and settled instead. As these thoughts inevitably unravel in my head, so do the memories of the single worst day in my life.

It was the summer of 1997, I had just graduated from high school and began to talk to the girl of my dreams, Fili Zuno. It took me nearly four years to build up the nerve to talk to her and when I finally did, it was like being released from a self-imposed prison of doubt. I had always dreamed of a life with her in it. I'd fantasize about us having kids and growing old, even having trivial arguments which would be resolved with me apologizing even though I felt I was right.

We exchanged numbers and began to talk on the telephone for hours, sometimes all night until the early morning. For her to demonstrate genuine interest and kindness made me feel like I won the lottery. It was easily the best time in my life, maybe even better than the birth of my son.

Fili had agreed to go watch *Men in Black* with me at the AMC theatre downtown. That's where I would go for our first kiss. Everything needed to be in perfect order, I had my clothes all picked out and asked my mom to take me to my usual barber. But she told my dad to take me instead. Anytime my father was involved with anything there was always a certain amount of unpredictability and volatility. He was a brute with a missing right thumb due to it getting bitten

off in a fight. He constantly found himself in disputes and always settled them with brutality.

I sat and watched my dad get his haircut before me, a condition he proposed for taking me. Lincoln, the barber, always had frosty, nearly frozen, root beers for his clientele. I'd sip on that syrupy slush at just the right amount to not get brain freeze, although I wasn't always successful. Mack 10's newly released "Backyard Boogie" was thumping through the radio speakers, as it had been in my dad's blue

Ford Taurus on the ride to Lincoln's Barbershop. We were the only people there.

"This isn't what I asked for," my dad said while looking into a mirror.

"You said you wanted short sides and a little off the top," Lincoln told him.

"You cut too much off the sideburns," my father told Lincoln with a rising voice.

"What can I do to fix it?" Lincoln replied.

I knew where that was heading. I put down my root beer on a coffee table that had old Playboy magazines on it. Mack 10 was still on the radio. I watched on as my dad stood up from the barber's chair with the black cape still buttoned around his neck.

My father punched Lincoln in the mouth, he stumbled back into a counter and knocked over a glass container of Barbicide that shattered instantly upon hitting the floor. I lunged at them, I don't know what I was planning to do, but I felt the need to get in there and try to stop it from getting worse. The floor was swimming with shards of glass that glistened like diamonds in a sea of blue disinfectant. There was a crunch under the soles of my shoes with every step that I took.

I got to my dad and told him, "Stop! Let's go," but he wasn't a man of reason. He pushed me away using the hand that had the nub for a thumb. Lincoln regained his composure and had blood on his bottom lip. He had a look on his face that I had never seen on him before, the primal look of a man whose state of mind is focused solely on survival.

"What is wrong with you?!" Lincoln said, somewhere between a cry and a yell. He was breathing like he could cry at any moment, his chest puffing up and deflating like the bellows of a Mexican accordion. He began to walk into the back of his shop. "I'm calling the cops!" he yelled.

My father went back there with him. I ran after him trying to hold him back. I pulled on the barber's cape and only managed to unbutton it. Black and gray hair flew off of it and landed on me. I felt it on my neck. Lincoln saw him coming and swung but missed. My father backed away, and Lincoln pressed forward, determined to get a good hit on him. Lincoln swung time after time, wildly, like an adult swinging a baseball bat at a fastball for the first time. One of those wild haymakers got me right in the eye and then another on the nose.

There was a jolt then a bright flash. Mack 10 was still on the radio.

I waited for Fili outside the theatre, my face a landscape of welts and a collage of bruises. I had a nose that looked like it was trying to crawl away from my face. I saw her pull up to the curb and get out of her older brother's Volkswagen bug. She had on overalls, as was the style at the time, and a yellow shirt. She smelled of something floral and sophisticated. She looked at me and I could see her desire to be there disappear like a soul escaping a newly deceased body.

Inside we sat next to each other, but it felt like we watched the same movie in two separate theaters. I reached over for some popcorn, and she handed it to me. "I don't want any more," she said, loudly enough so she wouldn't have to whisper it in my ear. I watched on as Will Smith used a memory-erasing device that flashed a bright light and wished that it would work on me to forget all about that day.

I never talked to her again. Not from a lack of trying. I did however see her at a market once, some 9 years later. She had a child with her and was looking at the nutritional facts listed on the back of a bag of dried cranberries. I walked out of there immediately.

I reevaluated my life plans after that day. I decided to hold off on college and experience life a little. I also found a new barber. A year after that my son was born, and I got married. Shortly after I got this job at UPS and never went to college. And here I am, in the parking lot wishing that day would've gone a little differently. I can't watch any movie with Will Smith or listen to "Backyard Boogie" without cursing the day I was born. I put these thoughts out of my head, for now, run my hands through my hair, and head inside to start my shift.

**Summer Treat**  
by Nick Wright

You were something sweet to eat on a hot summer day;  
Refreshing, bright.

Nectarine juice that dribbles down the chin and fingertips and pools  
in the webbing.

Places where your tongue can't reach.

Sweet, until it dries sticky, and collects bits of lint in it—

Dark blue fuzz

encased in a fructose glaze that was ugly and uncomfortable,  
but never really given a chance.

You were also the cool breeze that  
disturbed the tablecloth, which I was trying desperately to smooth  
and flatten with my one clean hand,  
while the other still held the wet pit (all I had left of that beautiful  
fruit)

like a shark egg or turkey heart,

unsure what to do with it.

You are now the fibrous strand still stuck between two molars,  
embedded in the pink gum of a distant coil

along the backside of my brain—

Something you forget about until you remember until you forget  
about until you

remember until you forget about until you remember when all you  
really need

is a long piece of floss.

But I'm in my car driving, or some other situation  
where that fine line isn't readily accessible,

so I'll just pick at it like it's a knee scab  
with a fingernail that needed trimming days ago  
and look out the window,

remembering the tasty gem to which that little fucker once belonged.

**Dinner Guest**  
by Joshua Peralta

From the kitchen  
the smell of good things cooking

in the oven  
a pizza almost done

the fragrance of homemade pesto

From another room  
Your voice calls to me  
clear and bright  
Dinner's on the table

Out of habit I almost answer

Sitting down to eat  
I find your chair empty  
the table bare

I am alone in a strange house



# Featured Faculty Author

Over the last 30 years, it has been an honor to teach in the Creative Writing Program at Long Beach City College. In that time, I have had the pleasure of working with students in our introductory course and fiction workshop. Ranging in age from 16 to 86 and from diverse backgrounds, all my students seemed to be drawn to creative writing by what Anaïs Nin once said about its appeal: “We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.”

During my career, I worked with the English Department, the Creative Writing Committee, and the LBCC Foundation to establish the Miriam Sims Baughn Literary Center, a dramatic arts classroom restored in 2009 and dedicated for creative writing courses, the Writers’ Reading Series, and open mics. A direct line can be drawn from my mentors on the committee, Frank Gaspar and David Lipton, to my colleagues Natalie Burgess, longstanding Chair of the Creative Writing Committee, and Jason Casem, my former student and current faculty advisor of the English Majors and Minors Club that publishes *Saga*. Years of planning came to fruition in 2016 with the club’s launch of *Saga*’s first volume in the MSB Literary Center. As a faculty fiction editor for this volume, I was thrilled to introduce the students who read from their newly published work.

To be included in Volume Six of *Saga* as a featured author is the ultimate honor as I retire from LBCC to continue doing what I love—writing fiction and poetry. Finding the time and energy to write while teaching four classes has been exasperating at times, but I do hope one day to publish my short story collection about a fictional town in Pennsylvania and work toward compiling a book of poetry. I will look back on my days teaching in the literary center as some of the best of my career, but not just for the joy of nurturing fellow writers. These writers, in turn, have inspired me to think beyond the perceived limits of my imagination, to journal in the middle of the night when sleep eluded me, and to write uninhibited when my small-town instincts told me otherwise. Thanks to my students and the LBCC writing community, I am now better at embracing Allen Ginsberg’s enduring advice to writers: “Follow your inner moonlight; don’t hide the madness. You say what you want to say when you don’t care who’s listening.”

- Christina Guillen

**Port Newark**  
by Christina Guillen

**A**ndy Perucci normally didn't take risks like this, but he had to know if the rumor was true. So there he was with a cheap pair of binoculars scanning Port Newark for Regina Snelling. He had parked his rental car in the shadow of an outbuilding, about 20 feet from the chain link fence bordering Red Hook Terminal. Through the eyepieces, he could see crane operators unloading steel containers from the docked ships.

At Andy's tenth high school reunion a few years ago, gossip circulated that Regina Snelling had become a longshoreman in New Jersey. He and his classmates were stunned. She had been the drum majorette and class valedictorian. She'd majored in comparative literature at Penn State. It was like hearing that Ruth Bader Ginsburg had given up the Supreme Court to work in a coalmine.

The source of the rumor was dubious. Jimmy Lemanski's uncle's cousin allegedly saw her on the job in Newark. But ever since Andy's miserable divorce last year, the rumor started to pique his curiosity whenever he'd see a Jersey plate on the Pennsylvania Turnpike or a crane operator wearing a hard hat. He'd shake his head and try to imagine Regina Snelling as a dockworker in Brick City, the complete opposite of Millburg, their tiny home town.

Andy would recall how Regina looked in her gold majorette uniform that day when she humiliated him in front of the band bus. All tanned long legs and swinging epaulets, she pointed her oversized baton at his trombone case and said, "Are you kidding me? You're a band freak."

Just entertaining the thought of the longshoreman rumor was mental payback. Regina had flirted with Andy the whole trip back to Millburg from Scranton's Battle of the Bands. And to think he listened to her drone on about *Orlando* and the captain of the wrestling team she'd just dumped.

"Don't you think Virginia Woolf changed everything?" she said. "Everything we know about sex?"

"Yes, everything," Andy said, though he'd only skimmed the *Cliff's Notes* for the test.

"Craig never got that book." She inhaled through her Woolf-like nose and sighed. "I just couldn't take his stupidity anymore. I

mean, really.”

“Yeah, really.”

“Ugh! Listen to me. Woolf nailed it. ‘As long as she thinks of men, nobody objects to a woman thinking.’”

How stupid was Andy to think he could ask Regina out after they had exited the bus together a few hours later. In front of all those kids, she rejected him, then pivoted on her boot heels and strode toward the band room, snickering audibly. His pimped cheeks burned.

Ha! If Regina could see him now, presenting a paper at the North Eastern Band Director’s Conference in Newark. The district was reimbursing all his expenses, including three nights at the Ramada, not far from the port. *Band freak?* You got that right, sister.

Andy raided the mini-bar the first night at the hotel and then Googled Regina Snelling on his phone. Nothing, nothing, nothing, but then, he found a union newsletter linked to the Port Newark website. There was her name—her maiden name—and her terminal designation listed in the caption beneath a grainy photo. “Aha!” he said, enlarging the image with his fingertips. Scanning the group of burly guys, he found four women in the back row. And there she was in profile, her face framed by wavy hair. He enlarged the image once more to verify her long, sloping nose, the Snelling nose, renowned for sniffing out undesirables in her midst.

After three mini-bottles of bourbon, Andy watched a porno on the hotel TV. He stroked himself, imagining Regina in her majorette uniform as she rode him, her breasts bouncing underneath the embroidered lapel unbuttoned to her narrow waist. He fought to switch the position in his mind, with him on top, but came before he could make the image materialize. His temples pounded from the effort.

He took a shower and decided to buy some Tylenol at the hotel gift shop. Gripping a traveler’s packet of the pain killer, he headed for the check-out. The surveillance idea came to him when he spotted the *See New Jersey!* binoculars in the same aisle. He peered through the eyepieces and panned the sprawling lobby abuzz with band directors scurrying to the next session. Through the double doors of the grand ballroom, he could spy a vendor in the far corner hawking shiny trombone mutes.

“For your kids?” the saleswoman asked when she rang up the binoculars.

“Nah,” he said, swiping his credit card. “Don’t have any.” And

in that instant, he remembered his ex-wife, Janice, with her bulging navel and nipples the size of castanets as she sobbed in the bathtub and told him the baby wasn't his.

The next day Andy leaned out of his rental car window for close to an hour in the November wind. Plumes of diesel exhaust wafted by with the gusts, making his cheeks tingle then go numb. Ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk sounds vibrated right through his car seat. Occasionally seagulls swooped down to pick through fast food wrappers clinging to the chain link fence. He couldn't get closer without being even more suspicious. What a shitload of trouble he'd be in if he were caught surveilling a port. He imagined the glaring interrogation room and sweaty counter-terrorist guys screaming in his pitch-perfect ears. But even this thought didn't stop him. Keeping an eye out for security, he caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview. With the full beard, he looked like a grad assistant, his acne scars obscured by dark whiskers. He winked at himself and grinned.

The sun dipped behind a terminal, casting the dock in shadow, but as he scanned the yellow hardhats moving from cranes to containers, he spotted a pair of long legs outpacing the other workers'. He fiddled with the binoculars' flimsy dial and zoomed in. Could it be Regina? The hips were wider, but they swung like a majorette's. Holding a clipboard, the Regina lookalike marched over to another hardhat, a short guy--no, wait. A woman? When she handed this shorter woman the clipboard, the Regina lookalike grabbed her ass, nuzzled her ear, and then kissed her on the mouth.

Andy lowered the binoculars and rested them on his numb cheekbones. "Ah-ha! That's why she . . .," his voice decrescendoing on the pronoun. He rubbed his crossed eyes, feeling the weight of comprehension like a Sousaphone dropped onto his shoulders. When he opened his eyes, a shrieking seagull careened over the windshield and discharged a milky stream. As he watched the slurry ooze toward the wipers, he heard boots crunching gravel and the sliding click of a semi-automatic. A security guard's hip slammed against his side mirror. "Hands up now!" she said. He obeyed and the binoculars plummeted to his groin, a direct hit.

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In the security office, Andy awaited his fate on a plastic chair positioned right next to a glowing space heater. The warmth radiated up his legs and stung his fingertips. It was dark now. Slivers of black glass shone through dusty venetian blinds. He could smell burnt coffee

and something oniony rotting in a nearby trashcan.

The guard who had frisked and restrained him with a riot cuff swung open the office door. Another woman in a tan coat followed. He squinted, wondering if it was the same woman he'd seen through his binoculars. "You know this guy?" the guard said over her shoulder as she approached him. "Says he knows you."

Andy studied the taller woman's face, plumper than he recalled, but that sloping nose was unmistakable. It *was* Regina. Anxiety rippled through his chest. "Remember me?" he said and scooted the chair closer to her. He felt the seam of his pants tighten around his groin where the binoculars had nailed him. "Andy Perucci. Millburg High School."

"Millburg?" Regina said and tucked a loose wave behind one ear studded with three diamonds.

"Yeah. We were in band. Remember? Well, you were the drum majorette and I played—"

"Drum majorette?" The security guard pursed her lips and snorted.

"Real funny, Ynez," Regina said and craned her neck to study Andy's face. "You played—wait don't tell me—the trumpet, no the tuba?" she said, her accent shifting from Pennsylvania to Jersey over the course of ten syllables.

"Trombone, actually," he said.

"Yes, that's it." Her pale green eyes narrowed. "So, Andy, what're you doing here in Newark? At the port of all places?"

He sat up straighter in the chair. "Band director's conference, not far from here. I'm at the Ramada."

"Ynez said you were spying on me with these." She unzipped her coat, reached into an interior pocket, and withdrew the *See New Jersey!* binoculars.

With the coat now opened across her mid-section, Andy stared at her pregnant belly stretching a long-underwear shirt to its limits. "Uh, not spying, just curious. I wanted to see you again."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Thought we could catch up. It's been, whoa, years now? How long? So much has changed. I'm—" he bit down on his lower lip, bereft of an answer.

"You're . . . what?" Regina asked.

"Well--" he said, cocking his head, "--not the same."

“Really, Andy?” she said.

Ynez retrieved a cellphone out of her back pocket and chuckled. “Port Authority cleared him, but I thought you should get a crack at this guy.”

And with the word *crack*, Andy winced, recalling the Port Authority strip search.

“I guess I should be flattered,” Regina said, “but part of me is creeped out right now.” She turned to Ynez. “Wait till Ramon hears about this. I should call him over. I bet he’d like to meet Andy from Millburg.”

“Yeah. I bet he would.” Ynez said and shook her head. “That dude just got a red belt in Jiu-Jitsu.” She glowered at Andy and rubbed her tongue over a clear retainer as if it were a prize-fighter’s mouthguard.

Andy lowered his chin and raised his hands, prayer-like, the plastic loop of the riot cuff digging into his wrists. “No harm done. I’m sorry, really.” He scooted back on the chair and felt his bruised testicles twist. Through slit eyes, he saw a flash of Regina’s wedding band topped with a fat diamond as she handed the binoculars to Ynez. So Regina was married after all--to Ramon, the Jiu-Jitsu red belt. And she was pregnant, too, like his ex-wife right before she left him. But didn’t he just see Regina kissing another woman through his binoculars? Andy shuffled through these images in his mind, trying to sort them out, but they blurred like spin art.

Regina’s eyes followed his gaze down to her left hand and the ring perched on her finger. “Are you stalking me, Andy?”

“Pfff! Me? I’m a band director. I teach kids for god’s sake. Tomorrow, I’m presenting a paper on embrasures.”

“On what?” Ynez asked.

“You know, the mouthpiece, the way it . . . ,” Andy said, lifting his cuffed hands to mime blowing into a trombone.

Regina sneered. “Teaching. I did that gig for a few years.”

“You did?” Andy lowered his hands.

“Seventh grade English. Now I make twice as much at the port.”

“Thrilling story,” Ynez said and tapped her cellphone screen. “Look, my shift’s been o-ver for thirteen minutes. What d’ya want to do, Regina? Get a restraining order?” She took two steps and pressed her hip against the left side of Andy’s chair. He leaned forward, wary of Ynez and her

skill at man-handling him.

Regina flanked Andy on the right side of the chair and loomed over his shoulder. He could see the folds of skin under her chin and look directly up into her cavernous nose, where black particulates clung to the nostril hairs. This view made him remember her as an awkward prepubescent when kids teased her relentlessly about that nose and Snelling, her unfortunate last name. He remembered, too, how he had taunted her along with the others. On a dare in seventh grade, he ripped out a picture of a proboscis monkey from *National Geographic* and attempted to slip it into her locker. Just when he thought he'd pulled off the prank, she seized his wrist and dug her nails into his flesh. Fast forward to senior year when Regina, buxom and empowered, demeaned him in front of the band bus and cast him aside. Now here he was, an accused stalker, firmly in her grasp again. He could see his small acts of cruelty as karmic, playing out as a theme with variations, his own pathetic sonata.

Andy opened his mouth to plead against the restraining order and the need to call in Ramon-the-red-belt, but the words froze in his throat when Regina unclipped a pocketknife from her cargo pants and slowly peeled back the longest blade.

He gasped. Did she want revenge? He curled into himself, afraid to look at her. He felt her reaching down to his cuffed wrists, sliding the blade between them. "Just let him go," she said and snapped the plastic loop in two.

## The Professor Image by Christina Guillen

The carrier lugs them in her leather bag.  
She unhinges the jaw of my mailbox and  
feeds them into the arched mouth—

Catalogues, catalogues, and  
more god-damn catalogues  
that I toss into my recycling bin.

I can un-subscribe from them all,  
threaten sales reps with loss of limb,  
but they come back to me in multitudes.

They breed with other useless catalogues  
and gestate in a marketing womb—only  
to be delivered to my address again.

Truth is, I want to design my own catalogue  
for those mid-career academics who need  
a product line-up like this:

### **Opaque Sports-Bottle Flask**

Just fill and go to class,  
with discreet mint dispenser mounted on the lid.

### **Remote-Controlled Briefcase**

Hands-free hovercraft technology goes where you go;  
never lift that burden again.

### **UV Student-Paper Sanitizing Wand**

Simply wave and kill 99% of microorganisms;  
save your sick leave for Vegas.

### **Recordable Mantra Therapy System**

Record your favorite mantras like this one:  
“Grading is *not* the bane of my existence.”

### **Focused Beam Plagiarism Detector**

Ultraviolet beam highlights plagiarized material and sears the page; bust offenders instantly.

### **Shiatsu Ego Massager**

Designed for professors who write creatively; features two Shiatsu modes, soothing and invigorating.

### **College Administrator Bobble Head**

Just send us a digital photo; we'll create a personalized likeness to thrash in the privacy of your home.

### **Zero Gravity Grading Hammock**

Grade while floating in suspended motion, equipped with intravenous Bloody Mary bag.

### **Infrared Vibrating Gloves**

Soothe grader hands; never *again* feel like “a pair of ragged claws, scuttling across the floors of silent seas.”

### **Bluetooth Retirement Speaker**

Counts the years, months, and days you have served your sentence and await release from grading prison.

And for the cover of The Professor Image catalogue?

### **Lid-Lock Eye Opener**

Inspired by *A Clockwork Orange*; stay focused while reading student-generated text, complete with automatic eye-drop dispenser.

## Elden's Spirit Animal

by Christina Guillen

**I**t seemed no one wanted the job driving the handicapped van after Frank Zoltowski quit only two weeks into the school year, but Ruth LaTeer thought about applying.

Frank came to the Beaver Creek Tavern to share his stories with anyone who would listen and Ruth, who waitressed there, listened hard. "Yesterday one kid bit me with filed down teeth that were red, red like Kool-Aid," Frank said, rolling back his T-shirt sleeve to show her the tooth marks on his tricep. "That was it. I'd be better off shoveling coal at the foundry than getting tetanus."

For Ruth, driving the van would mean shorter hours at the tavern and less time on her feet. They still felt like frostbitten stubs almost a year after her last infusion, the neuropathy having set in from her arches to her toes. Although the chemo had left her bony from the waist up, her hips and thighs were still thick and rounded like a butternut squash. At the tavern, she wobbled about and sat on a stool whenever business was slow, like now. Doug, the owner, and the customers never complained. They knew why her face had thinned to resemble a barn owl's. Ruth actually joked about her condition, saying her neck was now like an Indian cliff dwelling and took bets on when she would finally toss her chemo beanie into the creek.

"Well, Frank," Ruth said, sliding onto a stool next to his, "you haven't got kids."

"Don't matter," Frank said, taking a swig from his Rolling Rock then glaring at her with squinty blue eyes. "Believe me. These kids are different, not like your boy."

Ruth thought of her own son, Whittier, who had dyslexia and quit school back in the eleventh grade after she started the infusions. She hadn't heard from him in three weeks, not since he took the job as a swamper in Lycoming County, where the fracking operation had relocated. She knew cell phone reception was spotty in the foothills and rationalized that was why he hadn't returned her calls or texts. But Ruth still woke up in the middle of the night, despite the Lorazepam, turning their argument over again in her head. No son of hers would work in fracking, period. As if in a video loop, she watched him hop into his truck and barrel down the driveway to Ridge Road, his tires spitting gravel and kicking up a dust cloud over their house.

Ruth believed driving the van would focus her attention on something else. Besides, anyone could do a better job than Frank. He had been a few years behind her in school, the jock-disappointed-with-real-life type, now infamous for renegeing on his ex-wife's alimony. When Ruth called Brent the van contractor, who was still desperate for a replacement, he'd said, "Just come over to the garage Saturday. I'll get you ready." Once she got her commercial license and completed the district office's paperwork, she was on the road.

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On the third afternoon of driving the van from the Independence Academy back to Millburg, warm rain misted the windshield and dampened Ruth's arm through the half-open window. It was humid, 82 degrees, and she desperately wanted air conditioning, but she remembered what Frank had said about the smell if the windows were up; a combination of dried mucous, Doritos, and "badly wiped ass."

The pick-up at the school had been the smoothest so far. She was developing a routine with these middle-schoolers. Percy and Daniella were safely in their power chairs, talking. At first, Ruth thought they were talking to each other, but then she realized that they were carrying on to themselves in garbled voices. Caleb, the oldest kid, who walked with braces and whipped his blond curly head side to side when asked a question, could now follow most directions when she repeated them slowly.

Elden was the youngest one. He walked well on his own; actually, he would run like a fawn as soon as Ruth slid open the van's side door. Now strapped into his seat next to Caleb and right behind hers, she heard him grunt like "I want out." His sneakers pressed into the back of the driver's seat as she steered the van over two-lane roads splitting harvested cornfields.

In the oversized rearview mirror, Ruth saw how Elden clenched his jaw, as if he were resisting the urge to bite her. When he licked his lips, she caught a glimpse of his red, pointed incisors, the teeth that had pierced Frank's tricep.

Ruth played the CD Brent recommended, a medley of soothing classical pieces that soothed her, too. She often had to fight off drowsiness. She was dying to turn on K-RAT and rock out with a band like AC/DC. But when she looked back at Percy and Daniella, they appeared to be swaying to the cellos. Or was it the van rocking them? Caleb and Elden, unfazed by the music, began chattering.

"Nuh-uh. My dad says there's no trapping allowed on that

land,” Caleb said.

“Out there,” Elden said, tapping the window in the direction of an alfalfa field. “My dad knows. He’s seen traps down by the creek.”

“Nuh-uh. You’re making it up.” Caleb thrashed his head side to side.

“Am not. You never believe me,” Elden said and pushed his shoulder into Caleb’s, knocking the older boy off balance, making his braces clang against each other.

Ruth pivoted to her right. “Boys, come on. Caleb, are you all-”

“Spirit animal!” Elden shouted, straining against his shoulder belt. “Don’t hit it!”

Ruth whipped her head back and slammed on the brake. The van fishtailed on the wet asphalt and skidded onto the right shoulder so she could avoid hitting a beaver. The power chair restraints squeaked as the van pitched to a stop in the gravel. Ruth sucked in a lungful of burnt rubber. All that for a rodent! She could have rolled the van. “Holy, god. Y’all okay?” she asked, searching the kids’ stunned faces through the rearview.

“Spirit animal! I’m coming to get you,” Elden said as Ruth struggled to put the gearshift in park. Behind her, she heard the click of his seat belt fastener and the rustling of clothes. As she undid her belt, she turned to see that Elden’s T-shirt was off. He was pushing his shorts and underwear down over his hi-tops.

“Elden, what in god’s name?” Ruth said, opening her door and lunging out of the van. Just as she reached the slider and lifted the handle, Elden bounded over Caleb’s braced legs, flung the door to his right, and leaped out. He was naked except for the sleeves of his T-shirt tied around his waist like a loincloth. He took off running, chasing the animal that had cut a thin path through the field.

“Elden, wait!” Ruth called. She could see his sinewy buttocks pumping just below the tied sleeves.

“Spirit animal!”

Ruth peered inside the van. Percy twisted in his wheelchair and snorted, sucking mucus down his throat, then shook until a laugh escaped. “Go, Elden,” he said. Daniella craned her neck to watch Elden’s escape and convulsed, her curled hand waving against the window. “Just wait here. Stay in the van.” She glared at Caleb. “You’re in charge. You understand?”

Caleb shook his head.

“You watch these two. Don’t go anywhere, don’t touch anything, okay? Just wait for me.”

He nodded.

Ruth walked as fast as she could, the stiff orthotics in her shoes making each step unwieldy. She yelled for Elden again, but he kept zig-zagging across the field in pursuit of his spirit animal. His T-shirt snagged on an alfalfa stem, loosening the tie and sending it lower onto his hips. When he made a sudden U-turn, the shirt slipped under his buttocks. Ruth propelled herself forward, one heavy thigh at a time, plodding waist-high into the stalks. At the edge of the field, she watched Elden accelerate into a sprint. The makeshift loincloth flew off. Now his genitals swung, as if in slow motion, like a slingshot on a short band.

“This is god-damn crazy,” Ruth said as she stopped to catch a breath. In her jeans pocket, she pulled out her cell and dialed Brent, but the call went directly to voicemail. “Shit, Brent.” Once his long greeting was over, she said, “Brent, we gotta a situation here. I stopped to avoid hitting some beaver, and now Elden’s running naked through a field chasing it. My cell’s on. Please call back!”

“Elden?” Ruth cried out again, but now she could no longer see him beyond a thicket of red sumac. When she looked back at the van, Caleb was playing with the wheelchair lift control buttons. “Caleb, back in the van!” When he didn’t stop, she repeated her command two more times until he returned to his seat.

Who could she call? Not her ex-husband, Lowell, who was god-knows-where inspecting dairy barns—and dairyman’s wives, surely. Not Whittier who was refusing to answer his phone. Frank? By now Frank’s ass was warming bar stool number three, his favorite one directly in front of the flat screen tuned to ESPN.

“What *did* I tell you about this job?” he said when she called the tavern.

“Forget what you told me. Can you come out here? I’m down by the Keller place, not far from the bridge.”

“Just call 9-1-1.”

“I got a naked kid running, three disabled kids unsupervised. Brent’s not answering. How you think that’s gonna look to the authorities?”

“Jesus H. Christ, Ruth.” He belched. “All right.”

After she hung up, she kept calling out to Elden, while trying to keep an eye on the van and the kids. The wind picked up and bent

the alfalfa stalks in the direction of the woods. She tried to remember what she had done when Whittier was just a boy running away from her. Stay put for a while. Let him come to you.

It had worked when he was eleven. He had run out of the house to go trapping, despite the fact that an ice storm had coated everything outside the night before, forcing animals to hide in their burrows. "So?" he said, running out onto the slick driveway without a coat, his traps and bait clutched in bare hands. She watched him leave, but waited for his cold body to skid back up the driveway a few minutes later. She knew her son or thought she did.

She'd warned him about the fracking job with Penn-Gas. Although there was no hard evidence, she was convinced that the chemicals blasted into the shale had caused her ovarian cancer. Her ex-husband, Lowell, had sold the rights along the ridgeline of their property to the same company that Whittier now worked for. The crew that drilled on their land for over a month couldn't extract one puff of natural gas. Water from their sink faucets turned cloudy and then a foul yellow. Whittier called it pee-water and invited friends over to ignite it with a fireplace lighter. She was diagnosed a year later, suspecting the water, even though Penn-Gas had given them plastic gallon jugs to drink. But they couldn't bathe in *Virgin Springs*, wash dishes in it, or run a load of clothes with it. She could imagine the chemicals from the tap water permeating her skin and swimming between her legs whenever she took a bath. Ruth felt betrayed by her ex-husband and now by her own son. But mostly she worried about how long it would be before Whittier got sick too.

As Ruth searched the field, now worrying about another boy, she instinctively felt for the scar on her right earlobe, the place where Whittier had clipped her when she asked him to shave off what remained of her hair.

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Frank came over the bridge in his old Camaro and did a U-turn before parking behind the van. On her way to him, she found Elden's trampled shirt and draped it over her shoulder. When she reached the road, Frank looked bedraggled in the humidity, the remaining patches of red hair squirming away from his oily scalp. She asked him to drive the kids home while she looked for Elden.

"Don't make no sense," Frank said as he inspected the van's back tires. "Why don't I go get the naked biter and you finish the route?"

“I don’t think he’ll trust you,” Ruth said.

Frank peered over his shoulder. “And he trusts you?”

“I don’t have teeth marks—at least, not yet. Just drop off the kids. Call Elden’s dad. Tell him what happened and get him down here.”

Frank belched. Beer vapor pervaded the space between them. “Hell, you didn’t mention all that on the phone.” He kicked gravel with his running shoe and sighed. “Look, I’ll try to get the dad out here, but I’d be in big-ass trouble if I got behind that wheel. The school took my van license.”

Ruth lifted her palms. “It’s an emergency,” she said, then rethought the prospect of Frank driving the van half-blitzed.

“No can do,” Frank said and titled his chin down onto his chest.

“Fine. Get these kids settled for me. I’ll go get Elden.”

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Ruth found him lying on the creek bank and, at first, thought he was dead. Curled onto his side, his back to her, he didn’t move. Had he fallen into the water and pulled himself on shore? She pushed brambles out of her way and climbed over felled saplings, calling out his name. When he raised his left arm and whispered, “Over here,” Ruth exhaled and quickened her noisy steps over the stones to get closer.

“Shh,” Elden said. “You’ll scare her.”

She stopped abruptly and teetered over him when she realized what she was seeing. There was Elden petting a beaver as it gnawed the heel of his sneaker. The jaws of a jump trap were clamped onto his rubber sole.

“Oh no. Let me help you,” she said and kneeled beside him.

“No, she’s got it,” Elden said and waved her off. “It don’t hurt.”

Ruth studied the beaver as it worked its reddish-orange teeth through the white rubber underneath the trap. “What the hell? So the beaver knows to, uh, do this?”

Elden nodded. She couldn’t help but stare at this naked boy. His brown hair hung in sweaty spikes over his forehead. His skin glowed pink with spots of prickly heat. She was thankful that puberty hadn’t set in yet. He was hairless, smooth.

Ruth averted her eyes and then pointed at the beaver. “So he-“  
“She.”

“You got her, this wild animal, to help you?”

“She’s not wild, not like you think. She’s my spirit animal.”

“Like the Indians believe?”

“Dad told me. He says I got Indian blood. One sixteenth mixed in.”

Ruth rolled off her knees onto her left hip. “Really, I can get the trap off. I’ve sprung one before. My son used to set traps in our woods.”

“Look,” Elden said, directing his gaze toward the sneaker.

Ruth inspected the beaver’s work. The ridge of the shoe’s sole was almost gone. Then snap! The iron claws retracted and bounced in the opposite direction. Ruth swayed backward in awe.

With his foot released, Elden sat up and coaxed the beaver closer to him. “Good job, Mom.”

“Whoa,” Ruth said and stood. She surveyed the creek, the woods, and the field behind her, wondering if some prankster was videotaping this scene for a wacky video show. Maybe Frank had set up the whole thing, an elaborate practical joke like he used to play in high school? Once he painted the Floyds’ mailbox pink and put a tape player inside with a continuous loop of “Run Like Hell.”

Ruth craned her neck, looking for clues farther along the creek bed, and spotted a beaver lodge downstream, where the water rose over the banks and flooded into the woods. It was making sense why traps had been set here. “So you just asked the beaver to get you out of the trap?” she asked.

“Uh, huh,” Elden said.

“And she, um, listened to you? She can understand?”

“Yep. Dad says my mom’s spirit’s in her.”

“Your mom?” Ruth asked.

“She came down here to protect me.”

“Came down here for you? From heaven?”

Nodding, Elden picked up the beaver by the front paws and nuzzled his face in its chestnut fur. The leathery tail flapped on the pebbles. She looked askance at this seemingly tame creature but winced all the same at the thought of it biting him. Her motherly instinct kicked in, and she shuddered, recalling what Frank had told her about Elden’s mother, yet another cancer death in Millburg a few years ago.

As she observed Elden and his spirit animal, she considered if it were a toy equipped with a motor, like a teddy bear Whittier had as

a toddler. She wondered if the reddish-orange front teeth protruding over the beaver's front lip were even real. Pivoting her gaze to Elden, she said, "So tell me about your mouth. Do you want teeth like this beaver? Like your mom?"

He smiled, stretching his top lip high above his gum line, exposing his red-stained teeth and filed incisors.

"What you got in there? Food dye?"

Elden shut his lips and shook his head. "Don't worry. I won't bite *you*."

"Okay," Ruth said leaning closer to the beaver's head, inspecting the spikey fur. "So you can communicate with this animal?"

Elden wrinkled his forehead and squinted. "So can you. Go ahead."

Okay, now this pushed the limits of all reason. Here she was with a naked boy who was asking her to talk to a beaver, the spirit of his dead mother. "I think you should put this on," she said, handing him the T-shirt that she had been carrying. "We better head home before your dad and everyone else gets worried sick."

"Dad don't worry."

"Oh, I'd be worried if I was him."

"He's busy building stuff."

Ruth did know of the boy's dad, Clare. He had a cabinetry business and painted nature scenes on old barn boards. She last saw him at the county fair in a sagging tent with no buyers for his rustic landscapes. When she stopped by the house to pick up Elden, the man never came outside with his son like the other parents did.

"Your dad would be worried. I sent Frank to fetch him."

"That guy?" Elden said and bared his teeth.

"No, it's okay. He just wants to help."

Elden went back to petting the beaver behind the diminutive ears. "You haven't asked her anything."

"Asked her what?"

"Whatever you want."

"Elden, it's time to get going. The other kids're still in the van."

"You don't believe me. Just like them."

"I do, but it's getting late and look," she said pointing to the patch of sky above the alder trees that reminded her of an abdominal X-ray. "Storm clouds."

Elden dropped his chin and made muffled squeaking sounds.

"It's okay. Let's get you home now," she said.

When he raised his head, tears dropped down over his flushed cheeks.

Ruth touched his shoulder. "Come on now, I believe you."

He took her hand and stroked the beaver's fur with her fingers. "Talk nice to her."

"Kind of soft."

"Something else. Like you mean it."

Like she meant it? Good lord, anything to get Elden moving. "You're a good beaver? A real good beaver. And a good mom."

The animal kept its eyes focused on Elden's hollow chest. He continued to sob.

"I'm a mom, too. I have a son, older than Elden, just turned nineteen."

Elden moved closer to the beaver's jaw as if listening to the animal. "His name's Whittier," he said with his eyes closed, nodding at Ruth.

Ruth lifted her hand from Elden's grasp. "How'd you know that?" She'd never told him her son's name.

Elden rested his left ear on the animal's mouth. "Says Whittier's downstream digging up the land. Poisoning the creek. Trapping beavers that get in the way."

"Did your dad tell you that?" Gossip in Millburg could be fierce, but how would Elden know this much?

Elden wiped his cheeks and grinned. "She says Whittier's sorry for running away. And sorry for the dust cloud over your house. He wants you to come get him. He doesn't want to get sick like you."

Ruth pulled back her shoulders and breathed in the dank smells of the creek, the mossy alder bark, and the distant alfalfa ready to become hay. Thunder rolled beneath the X-ray cloud cover.

"All right, this has gone too far!" Ruth stood and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Okay, Frank. Come out, you son of a bitch. Frank!" The K-sound echoed off the sandstone cliff rising above the creek bed.

Elden raised his head. "Gotta go." The beaver ambled down to the creek's edge and slid into the water, first the spikey fur and then the flat, leathery tail disappearing under the current. Elden followed. His thin body sliced into the water.

"No! Elden!" Ruth called, but he was already submerged, except for his sneakers that thrashed on the surface.

Ruth kicked off her walking shoes. The orthotics flew out of

them and landed near the trap that had ensnared Elden. She stepped closer to the edge and could actually feel the stones poking her ligaments, her tendons, her nerves. She plunged into the creek, making a belly-flop splash, then flailed her arms in a spastic breaststroke. She dove under and felt her chemo beanie swirl off her scalp. Enveloped in the cool, gurgling space below, Ruth was surprised by how well she could see in this sepia-toned world--the rounded stones and fallen branches slick with moss, the soft mud bottom, where silky eddies spun upward from being disturbed. A few feet ahead she could see Elden and the beaver suspended and treading, waiting for her to join them. Elden waved and beckoned her on this journey downstream. As she kicked harder, she didn't know how any of it made any sense, but she needed to believe they would find Whittier and bring him home.

*La Curandera de Mole*  
by Christina Guillen

For Hortencia Guillen

She once said *mole* from scratch  
had 26 ingredients that together  
were magical, that together could heal.

She said *mole* was the only dish worthy of  
the wedding, the baptism,  
the funeral of one you love.

For her, it was all about the chiles:  
*poblanos, anchos, pasillas,*  
their skins seared on the *comal*  
and peeled off like singed undergarments.  
Only the gringos eat the skins, she said,  
one eyebrow raised like an *eñe*.

Toss cinnamon sticks and cloves,  
peanuts and almonds, the seeds of  
coriander, pumpkin and sesame—  
all into the *molcajete*, she said.  
Grind them into a thick paste  
eager for the gurgling *caldo de pollo*.

Only then it's time, she said,  
time for the chocolate. *Ibarra, no otra*.  
Bang the disks with a hammer  
if you have to, make them splinter,  
let the dust fill your nose. Slide the pieces  
into the *olla*, stir and simmer.

But the last time, *La Curandera de Mole* said,  
life's short, *Mija*—  
so she popped the lid on the *Doña Maria*  
and spooned the sludge from the jar  
into the waiting broth  
while I whacked the *Ibarra* into shards.

Now I know how to make *mole*  
*muy rápido*, how to doctor it up,  
how to stew her sweet-hot magic that heals.

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Thomas A. E. Hesketh** was born in Toronto, Canada, on a cusp, last millennium; none of it his fault. Most of what has happened to him has happened to others, too. He enjoys poetry because of its verbal range, except the caesuras, and chess, which is non-verbal, except the regicide.

**Antonio Ruiz** “I am a 72-year old ex-junkie and alcoholic from the South Bronx via Washinton, D.C., Hartford, CT, Hollywood, and Long Beach, CA. I have found refuge in school and writing from a controversial and exciting life. I'm scheduled to graduate from LBCC in June 2021 to try my hand at Creative Writing in the fall at CSULB.”

**Taryn Boyle** After relocating from Florida, she has spent the last decade living in LA County, earning her bachelor's degree in creative writing, trying to remember to text her friends back, and getting overly invested in k-pop. Currently, she is looking forward to transferring to CSULB and returning to attending class in person and on campus. After graduating, She intends to teach English in Korea as well as continue utilizing her love of complaining, oversharing, and deep-seated daddy issues towards writing poetry for anyone who will listen.

**Nick Garnham Wright** is a creative living in Long Beach, working as a film editor by day and writing any time in between. A writer of screenplays, long-form fiction, and poetry, this is his first printed publication.

**Joshua Peralta** is a writer and teacher living in Oakland, CA. These two poems come from his first book, 3rd & Orange, which is set in and around Long Beach and will be available soon through ZQ-287, a small Long Beach-based press.

**Heidie Saenz** “Poetry is one of those mysterious forces that has always been there for me. Whether it's busy building me up or tearing me to pieces; it's a love that will never die.”

**Brando Ordenez** “I am Brando Ordenez, a writer and student at Long Beach City College. I enjoy watching pictures and being away from home.”

**Liz Alana Rankin** “My name is Liz Alana Rankin and I’m currently a nursing student. I am passionate about equality and poetry is my safe place.”

**Vickie Wippel** is a Long Beach-based writer and storyteller. She loves laughing and finding joy in moments big and small. Her favorite place to be is with her sweet guys- Dave, Nate, and Owen.

**Jesus Ulloa** is a Mexican-American Fiction writer who was born in Long Beach, California to immigrant parents.

**Jonathan Henriquez** “I’m an English Major attending LBCC who dreams of becoming a writer. Though I have plenty of ways to go, I’m excited to be featured in this Volume of the SAGA Literary Journal. I just hope this won’t be the last time!”





