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SAGA Literary Journal

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Foreword

In this, the third edition of *SAGA*, are the most excellent works of short fiction and poetry that the students of Long Beach City College have to offer.

This year our humble publication has received the most submissions to date. The selections in this volume celebrate the most imaginative, poignant, and moving works our student editing team has chosen to honor in this year's publication.

It is my sincerest hope that the contents of this volume delight you, the reader—our community and friends.

Edward Jones

Chief Editor and President, EMMC 2016-2018

The place between lost and love

by Chelsymae Benedicto

You smell of sleep, and of promises
Impassioned and unfinished

Sweetheart, I love you-
Your confession echoes, endlessly
 within the confines of my chest

My being in contest for you,
half remembering the way you harm
 the other half still healing

Your forehead rests between my shoulder blades
Your imperfections imprisoned in my heart.

Pedestrian Watching from the Bus on Rainy Morning

by Robert B. Shockley

As I board at Elm,
the grim-faced driver ignores
my customary greeting,
glaring straight ahead
into Long Beach coastal gloom.
At the next corner of Linden and Broadway,
a sleepily waking young husband
yawns a gaping yawn
that threatens to swallow downtown,
his wife punching his arm in mock disgust,
clutching his sweatshirted arm in shivers,
both in fashionable shorts and running shoes.
A homeless senior couple sits back
in their capacious outdoor living room,
drinking papercups of supermarket coffee,
wet clothes hanging off rolling luggage,
drying in the pressured pause between stormfronts.

A maroon-hooded skateboarder,
fuming cigarette in hand,
pumps his leg even with the bus,
the driver passing him by,
then, waiting at the Cherry Street stop,
the skater catches up again,
leaving tobacco vapor in his wake.
The beautiful, black-haired Latina painted
on the wall of the Cherry Beer and Wine store
in faded purples and greens,
the Queen of the neighborhood,
stares out majestically over soggy Bixby Park,
bereft today of disenfranchised campers.

I salute the so-serious driver,
as he pulls up to my morning writing stop,
"Thanks and enjoy your day,"
which moves him to unexpected speech,

"Thank you, sir, and you too."
Dodging puddles in the street,
crossing from Park Pantry
to Hot Java, I eye the dog-toting
patrons who sit chatting
in the momentary respite from the rain.
A big, beautifully groomed bowser,
the guardian of the door today,
smiles and cranes his neck to touch my hand,
as I enter in anticipation of
morning brew and words
flowing like the rain this month.

The Sweatshirt

by Meggan Rau

There were two things I knew to be true about Victor Black. The first was that his family raised chickens. I confirmed this one day during our math class, when the word problem I'd just solved involved calculating the mass of a hen, and I wanted to check my work.

"Hey Victor," I asked across our shared table. "How much does a chicken weigh?"

He furrowed his brows and looked up at me lifting his arms as if he were cradling a medium-sized fowl.

"Eh... 'bout ten pounds."

"Thanks." I'd gotten the answer right.

The second thing I knew to be true about Victor Black was that he was a bully. This fact needed no confirmation.

I was new to the school, I'd only been there for a month or so, and I was still struggling to navigate the strange and complex rules of social behavior in seventh grade at Harker Middle School. So far I was a mostly a loner, eating my ham and cheese sandwiches under the big oak tree alone outside the art building and then slipping into class unnoticed when the end-of-lunch-period bell rang.

One muggy Wednesday afternoon in home economics, as I took my seat near the door in Miss Koda's home economics class, I glanced to my right, and there was Victor again, loudly bragging to the boys around him that he'd spit in the batch of chocolate chip cookies his group had made in the previous class. The boys snickered loudly. In an effort to one-up Victor, one boy even claimed that he had put weed in his cookies but we all knew that was a lie. Victor, however, was telling the truth.

Victor the bully, the notorious tormentor of teachers and students alike, had the compact yet muscular frame of a boxer and a face that hinted of cruelty. He acted dumb so the teachers wouldn't expect anything of him but I knew he was not. And, as luck would have it, he was in every single one of my eight classes. We even rode the same bus.

I opened my corduroy Jan Sport backpack and slyly slid out a grey and white sweatshirt that I was supposed to do for the class

sewing project. I hated sewing. I was terrible at it, and had no desire to learn it, so I'd snuck the sweatshirt home and begged my mother to finish it for me, against the rules. Victor saw and grinned, he knew I was a fraud. . Last week, he'd asked for my help threading the needle on his sewing machine, and guffawed in my face when I couldn't do it.

"Hey Miss Koda!" he shouted at the teacher, who at that very moment had been reviewing how to properly finish a seam. My stomach turned to ice and shattered at my feet. He was telling on me and I was not a student who got in trouble, ever.

"Victor!" scolded the teacher. She was still young and soft, not yet worn down from years of students like Victor. "Please do not interrupt. What is it?"

"I, uh..." He paused, smiling over at my blood-drained face. "I need to use the bathroom."

"Fine, but be quick." She knew it was better to just let him do what he wanted.

As he passed by, he bumped into my desk, hard.

"I know what you did and I coulda told but I didn't," he whispered in a sing-songy voice and swaggered out the classroom door.

I did have one sort-of friend, a quiet girl named Amber with whom I shared a seat on the long bus ride home. This was an arrangement made more for protection than for companionship. I didn't know much about her other than that her family bred dogs, big huskies that she claimed possessed wolf blood. Her whereabouts during actual school hours remained unknown to me.

"Can I sit here?" I'd ask.

"Sure," she'd smile, moving to the side so that I could slip past to occupy the less desirable window seat. I didn't mind. We might chat for a bit but she'd soon take out a book or place headphones over her ears. That's how we'd spend the remainder of the trip, as partners in silence.

The hour-long bus ride home from school was the worst part of the day. Off we'd go in our big yellow chariot, the bus chugging lazily up the hill while the students inside passed through various stages of boredom-induced madness. The older girls sat in the front of the bus wearing tummy baring shirts and spent much of the trip flirting with the bus driver—a quiet middle-aged man who would sometimes buy Kool cigarettes before school for his favorite students.

In the back of the bus, true to the stereotype, were the bad kids and Victor was their king. They would amuse themselves by engaging in various forms of naughtiness like punching each other, and setting fire to scraps of paper so the bus driver would have to pull over on the side of the road and make empty threats. However, their favorite activity was simply walking up and down the long aisle of the bus and choosing someone to harass. In the middle of the bus sat everyone else, mostly just regular kids who wanted nothing more than to survive the long ride home unscathed. Amber and I sat in this group.

Amber was reading a book and I was staring out the window at the blurred green of the passing farmland. It had started to storm that afternoon, just after home economics. The wetness saturated the world a few shades darker and made the air thick and swampy. It seemed much later than it was.

My eyelids were getting heavy and I felt myself slipping into sleep, feeling safe nestled between Amber and the window.

“Hey, girl!”

I jolted into alertness. Oh god, was it one of the kids from the back? Were they talking to me? Shit.

Victor. He was sitting in the seat adjacent to ours, his hands firmly placed on the sides of our seat, caging us in. I steeled myself for confrontation.

“Your family still has those dogs, right?” But he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at Amber.

I felt relieved and then I felt a little guilty. Poor Amber.

“Yea, why?” Her voice was steady.

“Yea, why?” He mocked in that sing-songy voice again. “You just tell your father to keep your fuckin’ dogs off our property. Any more dead chickens and my father’ll beat your dad’s ass. You tell him that.”

Amber said nothing. She looked as if she might cry. Or faint.

“Ha, I’m just playing! I scared the shit outta you! Look at your face!” Victor laughed in cruel delight.

“Fuck off, Victor, I’m tired of your shit!”

“Fuck off, Victor!” Mocking, again. Victor began making small quick jabs with his fists in the air in front of Amber’s face, each one inching closer and closer daring her to react.

“I said fuck off!”

And then she kicked him hard in the shin. Almost simultaneously, his fist made contact with her flesh.

Amber screamed and put her hands to her face, as Victor retreated to the back of the bus.

“Don’t forget to tell your father what I said,” he shouted. “And you, new girl. Remember that I know about you.”

The next day, I was called into the office. I sat in a broken plastic chair across from Mr. Escobar, the school counselor. He smiled at me and coughed. I could smell his breath, rancid with stale coffee and cigarettes. My chair creaked under me as I shifted my weight.

“What happened on the bus yesterday afternoon?”

I studied the ripped cuticle on my pinky finger.

“Aren’t you friends with Amber?”

That was a good question. I looked at Mr. Escobar. Three thick, black nose hairs protruded from his left nostril and I wondered if he had no one at home to tell him to pluck them.

“Yes. I mean no, not really. We’re not friends but sometimes we sit together on the bus.”

Was that a lie? I wondered. Was she my friend? Was I her friend? What would a friend do in this situation?

“Mmmm. Okay. Well, there was an incident on the bus yesterday involving Amber and another student. I need you to tell me what happened.”

I thought of Victor, and his implied threat.

“I didn’t ride the bus yesterday. My mom picked me up from school.”

I was not a friend.

“Okay,” said Mr. Escobar. “Well, Amber said you two were sitting next to each other when the incident occurred.”

“No, my mom picked me up yesterday. You can call her.”

Why was lying so easy? Why did adults always believe you if you were one of the good ones? I knew he would not call.

“Okay.” Mr. Escobar looked confused. “Well, that’s all then. You may return to class.”

I slowly walked down the musty hallway back to my math class. Two seventh grade girls I recognized but didn’t know by name were huddled near the drinking fountain. They whispered into each other’s ears and then dashed together into the girl’s bathroom. Their joyful shrieks echoed down the hall.

I was not a friend.

I didn't see Victor or Amber again for a week; they both had been suspended for fighting.

Back on the bus, I saw Amber. She had a faint blue crescent moon under her left eye.

"Can I sit here?" I asked.

She looked away.

I saw Victor in the back, his own face badly beaten. His father. We made eye contact and then he looked past me, as if I didn't exist.

I took an empty seat somewhere in the middle. The air was cold, so I put on my new sweatshirt, the one I made in home economics, the one I got an A on. The bus chugged up the hill and I sat alone, gazing out the window, in my grey and white sweatshirt.

Familiar

by Robert B. Shockley

My late-nightly curse.

Inky black silky shadow and gold yellow eyes --
all I can see in the dark.

Lying down upon my forehead, a fallen chunk
of midnight sky.

A feline compress purrs me to sleep,
nibbling my ear,
breathing out the damp grassy smell and blood
of conquered prey.
Whispering cat stories of nighttime ramblings,
we dream together
till the dawn of the dawn, when he hides yet again
beneath the house.

Once more to become a pair of peering eyes
through the dusty daytime grating,
omen of death to passersby,
my dream hunting companion, Mephisto.

Est. 1994
by Samantha Rivas

I am from loud Cholo oldies
about love
to Morrissey's
ballad
of a broken-heart.

From "Stop being so shy!"
to hiding
behind the wings of
social butterflies
that raised me.

I am from never-ending Quinceneras
from forced dances with my tia
from staring at myself
until I'm ugly.

I am from the curious taste of
warm beer forgotten by my tios
And from sipping
Sunday's menudo.

I am from Grandma's pores.
The pink cream with three faces
staring at me

until I drown myself
in floral.

I am from diary entries
about cute boys
who never spoke to me
but used my jacket's
hood as a trashcan.

And from discovering
a John Hughes' Romance
was better
than a real one.

Shades of Ivory
by Marcus Woolfolk

Here he,
they
go again
being
Black
and Angry
And,
I am

but tell me,
what
emotion
is supposed
to live
inside a people
who watch
their skin
being
ripped
from bone
and worn
like trends?

what color
should swirl
between
glass
stone
when I
am picking
my flesh
from
the teeth
of white
men?

Praying for Mud
by VV Shah

Placing a small spiral notepad into the breast pocket of his hospital scrubs, the young man studied the façade of the apartment complex before him. The multi-level dwelling in the East L.A. district of Boyle Heights was an unremarkable rectangular flat-roofed two-story structure with a rough-textured white stucco surface comprised of eight apartments, four facing the street behind him; the other units he assumed were accessed from somewhere in the back.

“Wow, what a dump,” he murmured under his breath.

Scoping out the surrounding neighborhood, it appeared working-class to his generally unbiased eye, with multiple aging mini-vans and SUVs clogging slender driveways in front of pastel-painted single-floor homes enclosed by waist-high chain link fencing.

And yet, there were elements to this slice of “urban suburbia” that he found to be clearly appealing. On the crest of a wafting breeze, his nose was tickled by the smell of spice-braised carne asada mixed with the pungent odor of laundry detergent, a fusion of colliding worlds that he found oddly enticing.

Punching the doorbell for Unit #3, a minute elapsed before the door opened a crack.

“God bless.”

The unsmiling elderly man standing before him exchanged salutations that lacked congeniality and warmth of any kind. A gold cardigan was stretched taut around his rotund physique, its buttons seemingly cocked and primed to burst off the sweater at any second. On first blush his round wire-frame glasses could almost pass him off as someone scholarly, a characteristic reinforced by the air of docility that seemed to emanate from his slightly conical bald head down to the sagging, hound-dog jowls. The visible areas of his skin were pasty white, pale as powdered-on chalk dust, a display of anatomy that was obviously seldom touched by the radioactive embrace of the sun. Janus Petrowski’s outfit was complete with faded blue corduroy Dockers and black socks inserted into worn out leather sandals covering his feet

“I’m Devon Weintraub with Life-Line Screening regarding the free ultrasounds that you authorized over the phone last week,” the young man explained, a dark carrying case leaning against his hip.

Janus gradually pulled the door open and the two quietly migrated their way through a shoebox of a living room. A single large reclining love seat, planted in front of a wall-mounted flat screen television with FOX News on, occupied virtually all of the navigable floor within this space. Hanging from its walls were numerous crosses, their monotony broken up in places by the occasional photograph. The largest picture in the room instantly caught his eye. Hanging adjacent to a doorway that served as a portal to the old man's bedroom, Devon studied the image as he walked past it. The large framed full-color photo featured a beaming Janus in a brilliant gold vestment flanked by two young Hispanic women wearing white polo-style knit shirts, short dark skirts and blank expressions, with the old man's arms draped around their shoulders.

Girl sandwich, he thought to himself, grinning. *Looks like fun.*

As the pair entered the windowless bedroom, the young man sighed as he reflected on the miniscule nature of the tiny workspace. A single twin-sized bed served companion to an aged and faded chest of drawers, the only pieces of furniture present in this room. Its only source for illumination was a coverless dual-socket light fixture with a chain switch high above the bed, beaming earthward with an unenthused radiance, hindered by a fried filament in one of its twin bulbs.

"That's all the light you got?" Devon asked, pointing at the fixture above the men.

"That won't be a problem, will it?"

"Nope. The less light, the better. Hope it doesn't die on me, though. I hate working in the dark."

Janus visually interrogated the lanky sonographer without his eyeglasses as he unbuttoned his cardigan, sizing up the long-haired tech's taller stature against his own. The young man's "hospital looking" light blue scrubs couldn't distract from the fact that he looked every bit the musician that he actually was, hair dyed black to cement the image. Little else about Devon could be inferred from a visual shakedown alone, even by the most astute of observers.

"Remove my underpants as well?" asked the old man as he pulled off his undershirt.

Devon shook his head as he pulled his GE Logiq i portable ultrasound machine from its carrying case, placing it on the edge of the bed as Janus removed his pants. Unfurling a corded rectangular

shaped probe from a small zippered bag, the sonographer attached the 9Mhz linear transducer's snaking cable to the device. The machine, thick as two meaty laptops fused together, powered up as the old man was making himself comfortable in bed clad only in boxers.

Pointing out to the old man that the venous Doppler ultrasound was to check for blood clots while the carotid would be done to assess its namesake arteries for stenosis, Devon concluded his explanation by informing Janus how the studies would end. "I'll let you know when I'm done, how they look and if you're gonna live. Sounds good?"

The sonographer kicked off the venous study by scanning Janus' right thigh groin. His first pictures included compressions of the common femoral vein before the machine began emitting a metallic wind-like sound which fluctuated with the old man's respiration. He worked his way down the right leg in silence as Janus lapsed into brief catnaps, punctuated by chainsaw snoring. Placing the probe behind the knee of the same extremity, he reflected on the thickness of the former priest's right femoral vein, marveling at the muscular caliber and spit-shine slickness of the old man's blood vessels. Activating the color Doppler indicated to Devon the direction of blood flow, and it was clearly obvious to him that the currents through these channels were uncompromisingly blue standing out defiant in sheer contrast to the rough grayscale background that surrounded the veins.

For a sloth-like creature that obviously lacked a good diet and daily walks the leg veins were a clue to Devon indicating the resilience of another force that seemed to be keeping Janus alive. He looked up at the old man to speak.

"Do you still take confession?"

Janus scratched his left man-boob as he stared up at the ceiling perplexed, pausing briefly before answering hesitantly. "I...haven't taken one for some years now."

Devon sighed as he augmented the right calf with a quick squeeze, causing jagged aberrations in the wavy spectral tracing on the machine. Taking a picture of the waveform, he sought to justify his request. "I mean, it's obvious you're a former priest so I hope it's appropriate."

"Well..." Janus replied, his words doused in caution. "What's your faith, my son?"

"I'm probably half-Jewish but I'm generally non-observant."

Devon tore a paper towel off its roll and began wiping down the old man's right calf. "So am I somehow ineligible by your God to give confession 'cuz my Dad's a Heeb?"

The old man shook his head. "No, no. In the end we all come before the same Creator so your confession now could save you later as long as you live God's word from this point on." Janus scratched his face. "There is the issue of baptism but I'm willing to overlook it."

"Cool. Thanks. But, hey, really quick. Got a question for you. I'm sure you're aware of how The Los Angeles Times reviewed the religious orders' investigation files released by that law firm that took the L.A. archdiocese by the balls for \$740 million, am I correct?" Janus replied silently by turning beet red. "The payout was devastating for the Catholic Church, from what I hear..."

The working bulb attached to the light fixture above began fluctuating with variable intensity, causing flashing shadows to pound the walls with darkness at random intervals.

The words staggered out of Janus' mouth as he reached a hand to his lips. "You... know... who I am?"

Devon nodded as he began scanning the left leg. "Your name was plastered all over the newspapers. I was pretty young at the time but I still recall the local television networks engaged in a ratings war over dirty priests by broadcasting the most salacious stories they could dig up. Your misdeeds are legendary, Father Petrowski. The kind of stuff that journalists jack themselves off to sleep with when they lay in bed at night."

"But I was never charged with a crime!" he replied defiantly.

Devon continued scanning Janus unabated, never taking his eyes off the leg. "According to the files released by the Carmelites you spilled your guts to the former cardinal after he threatened to excommunicate you. I know all about your... *Hold on...*"

Placing the transducer down, Devon reached for a folded copy of The Los Angeles Times from the carrying case. "Says here you'd have the victims undress. Then you'd rub mud all over their bodies. I guess you sold it to 'em as a 'penitential rite within the Eucharist celebration.' Afterwards you'd stand on a stool without clothes and you'd put... you'd call it your 'spear of destiny' in the young girls'..." Devon shook his head, wincing in disgust. "You used to describe the experience as, in your own words, 'It was like meeting Christ at the Rapture.'"

The old man wiped the thickened, translucent sweat from his

sagging, oversized face. It was obvious that his bloated girth was an impediment to making a hasty egress from the confrontation and that he could only protest the situation with his words. Devon knew that the old man was unable to escape the judgement of neither man nor God in that moment.

"I showed them Christ and they showed me Christ as well!" Janus shouted. "Besides, I'm certain that it was the assistant D.A. that fed the girls those lies."

"Father Petrowski!" Devon forcefully interjected. "I'm not here to avenge your victims."

"You're not here to... kill me?"

The sonographer grinned. "Sounds like you've been waiting for the end for some time now, huh?" Devon set the transducer down to speak. "Father, I want to barter something here if you're willing. I want to put up on the block our mutual freedom."

Janus lay silent for a minute before responding. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well, you confess to me about what you did to all those chicas and I'll confess to you about something I need to get off my chest." Picking up the transducer again, he continued scanning the left calf. "Kind of like a grown-up version of 'I'll-show-you-mine-if-you-show-me-yours.' Except what we win for playing along is to go on with our lives until whoever's God takes us out. So what ya' say, Father Petrowski? Deal or no?"

Janus sighed, scratching his belly. "Fine." With much effort, he pulled himself up, leaning his back against the faded chestnut headboard fixed to the front of the small bed. His face was drained of color, glossy from excessive perspiration. The old man's breathing was slow-paced but deep, a demonstration of the exhaustion he was encumbered by. He glared at the sonographer through half-slit eyes.

"What do you want me to tell you, Devon?" he asked, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "I did it. All of it and probably worse. And I suffer in Purgatory every day for what happened." His tone gradually became standoffish. "Could I ask for the truth? Is someone paying you to hunt down more fodder for the 'lame stream' media? Because they're the only ones who still seem to be concerned of my situation after all these years."

"No one's recording anything except your blood flow with the ultrasound. And I'm not on anyone's payroll, least of all the newspapers. Sheesh, if anything they should pay me for as much time as I

waste watching CNN but whatever.” Janus frowned as he slid back down flat onto the mattress, the sweat visibly beading his forehead once more. The sonographer began scanning the right side of Janus’ frog-throated neck as he commenced the carotid study. “But what I want to personally know, Father, is did you enjoy it?”

“Enjoy what?”

“The power.”

Janus reached into his boxers and juggled his crotch before answering. “There were times when I hated the service to my faith, the times it forbade me from easing the pressure of temptation. What the Church will never understand is that desire is an element of the human condition that can’t be surgically removed.” A devious smirk emerged from the corner of his mouth. “But there were other times when I was also God Himself, sitting in a gilded chair aloft within the clouds of my kingdom... with a coterie of angels at my feet. And at those times, yes, I felt virtually divine.”

The sonographer grinned widely as he pointed at the former priest. “Hey, that confession works for me. That’s golden right there.” Devon slapped his knee. “Well, I guess it’s my turn, no? Should I just spill my guts?”

“Certainly.”

“Cool. First though, did I already mention to you that I killed a man once? It wasn’t, like, premeditated or anything. He was a... Nazi piece of trash that... I don’t know, I just had the opportunity to take out so I did.”

“How did he, uh, transgress you, my son?”

Devon sighed and cocked his head as he contemplated the former priest’s question. “Well, he didn’t do anything to me personally but I guess he killed a gay runaway up in San Francisco some years back. Some people might call what I did a revenge killing. In my mind I was just taking out the garbage.”

An awkward silence permeated between the two men as Devon attempted to divine meaning in the lines defining Janus’ face, which revealed nothing insidious to him. Finally, the old man snapped the silent divide between the two. “That’s a very serious confession, Devon. Murder.”

“That’s actually not the confession, Father,” the sonographer replied, wiping his cheek with the back of his gloved hand. “I’ve never felt bad about killing that guy because it probably made me someone’s hero. What I need to confess is...” Devon sighed. “What I wanted to

say is that I came here to kill you.”

Janus lay unmoved, his expression unchanged. He lingered in silence momentarily before querying the sonographer, concerned. “Why on Earth would you consider such a thing?”

“Let’s face it, Father, you were something of an easy target to pull this off on. I mean, you’re poor and you live by yourself in this dump...” Devon motioned the transducer in the direction of the nearest wall. “Truth is, Father Petrowski, if you disappeared tomorrow no one would notice except the people that already hate you.”

Janus cleared his throat as he shuffled uncomfortably in bed. “I know I’ve fallen prey to the Devil’s inexorable attempts at deception numerous times. But why might I ask did you choose me to carry out this plan, Devon?”

The sonographer paused to push back dark, greasy bangs falling over his eyes before he answered. “For me, personally, I thought killing you would be a way of doing God’s work without having to go to church or live a pure, sin-free life. I play rock n’ roll so I’m kinda jacked up on alcohol and girls. I need that stuff.” He tapped the ultrasound machine with a finger. “Understand that the God living in here isn’t the same one depicted in whatever kind of Bible it is you thump. It very well could be Satan himself, I really don’t know. But I sure as Hell can tell you that whatever my God is He exists outside the realm of dogma.” Putting the transducer down, Devon fixed eyes with Janus. “So are we straight now?”

The old man seemed lost in a daze, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. Devon shook his arm. “Hey, dude!”

“Yes, yes,” the old man answered. “If you’re seeking forgiveness or ‘freedom’ from me, whatever it is you call it, than, yes, you... you have mine.” Scratching a thick ham hock-shaped arm he lobbed another question at Devon. “May I ask, though, why you refrained from carrying out this task?”

The sonographer began bathing the old man’s deep-seated left carotid artery with multiple sweeps of high-frequency soundwaves as he contemplated the question. “For a second, the clarity of your sleek blood-polished vessel walls made me think that your soul truly had been cleansed.” He shook his head in mild disbelief. “It’s almost like the bad stuff that can occlude your veins washed away in a kind of crimson torrent along with all of your intractable sins.

“But then there’s this... uhmmmm...I don’t know, man, let’s call it... a ‘nagging sentience’ that coaxed me to look deeper using the

technology I got. I felt like I really had to flesh out any ambiguous motivations you might've buried under all the, you know, neck blubber, no offense. So I started this ultrasound just to see if your carotid arteries were as clean as your leg veins."

"I see." Janus nodded his head as he scratched his pale white tummy.

"All the while I'm thinking 'What kind of God gives protection to a man that's destroyed as many lives as this guy has?' and initially I was dead set on checking the 'none' box. But as I started scanning your neck, the significance of your immaculate arteries pointed out why I couldn't pull the trigger." Devon wiped the transducer down with a paper towel ripped off its roll. "I figured that for some perverted reason God kept you alive for as long as he did in order to punish your ass at a later time. I mean, jeez, seeing that your blood vessels were clear of the stuff in blood that gunks up the same piping in other people your age by no act of your own doing has gotta be God's will. That's just what I assumed, all things considered."

"So there's nothing wrong with me, Devon?"

Pausing to tear the last paper towel off its roll, he continued as he began wiping down the old man's neck. "Not really, no. Nothing visibly pathological in your legs or neck as far as I can tell." Holding up the naked cardboard roll he shook it in his hand. "Gotta go grab some more paper towels from my car. I'll be back."

Turning around to leave, the sonographer exited into the tiny living room. Patting both of his hip pockets, he quickly realized that his key fob was still in the machine's carrying case. Aw, snap! Devon thought to himself. Keep forgetting my keys are still in the bag. Pulling a one-eighty in order to retrieve them, he froze in his tracks as he turned to see Janus.

The old man was standing adjacent to the bed, his back to the sonographer. Stooped over slightly, he cradled something unseen in his hands. Devon's will was suddenly irradiated through human wattage powered by unchained fury, cut in the shape of his aura in a black light glow. Walking up with a furious stride he grabbed Janus by the shoulder and spun him around. Grabbing the phone from his hand, he tossed it against the wall with a swift throw, its internal components exploding into a jagged shower of plastic and integrated circuitry.

Janus cowered from Devon. "It was nothing!"

"You were calling the cops, weren't you?" Devon grabbed the

old man tightly by the shoulders, shaking him aggressively. "We had a deal, Father Petrowski! We traded confessions for our freedom, remember?"

"No! I mean yes! No, it wasn't the cops. It was the... the..."

The flickering bulb above the men began cutting out with breakneck regularity now, becoming a makeshift strobe light in the process. Detaching the transducer cable with one hand, Devon wrapped the cord around the neck of the old man in slow-motion as isolated frames of Janus' death were highlighted for God to witness in a fleeting portrait of true crime unfolding. The lightbulb above, with its transient reliability, finally died with a pop as the former priest slumped to the floor alongside his bed, eyes half-open staring out into total darkness.

Minutes later, Devon slammed his car door shut, having left the tiny apartment in a calculated hurry. His heart pounded with a jackhammer cadence as he drove off, Boyle Heights quickly fading away in his rearview mirror. Peeling off his powder blue nitrile gloves, he watched them flutter out the open window of his car as he hit freeway speeds.

Driving past the ocean near Santa Monica before heading home, he sought traces of wisdom in the dusky sky above the strip of beach that was visible from a road that hugged the coastline. The sonographer could see the rays of a waterlogged sun being gingerly dampened by the loving caress of Nyx's velvet hand, a sight which gave him the volition to reflect on the events that had transpired earlier.

He would come to know perfectly well who Janus had been trying to call in the final seconds of his life. *Looks like he used his last quarter to dial up God but the call got disconnected*, Devon thought to himself. *Guess the operator couldn't patch Father Petrowski into his maker's switchboard to send him 'a cable from above' like in the Golden Earring song. Too bad.*

Driving to the sounds of waves crashing onto the beach below him, the sonographer gripped the steering wheel tightly as he recalled to himself how he had always believed that ultrasound technology coupled with his sense of faith could see through a man's flaws by flaying open the heart to reveal the truth that lay within. It troubled him that the machine missed the disease that had sickened Janus Petrowski through generating flawless sonograms. *I know the machine didn't betray me*, he reasoned silently, holding steadfast.

Yet he couldn't help but shake his head, feeling mildly distraught. *He had 350 lbs. in reasons why he was totally unhealthy but he still managed to spoof the box. How the hell did that happen?!*

Watching the sun dip below the surface of the Pacific, he sought to justify his endgame as a breeze lifted off the ocean's surface filled his car with a raging current of cool, salty air, gently shaking his ride. *Don't beat yourself up, dude, the machine thinks in black and white. I guess the soundwaves simply couldn't see in color Doppler the dishonesty that had metastasized throughout his soul like a cancer.* Internally resolved at its finality, Devon brought the confrontation to closure with a shrug and a sigh. *Stick a fork in me, man. Time to call it a day.*

As the light disappeared from this part of the planet so too did the young man into the night, lost in the encroaching darkness of another world that he would forever be a part of.

Trash Angel

by Julia F.Z. Kowey

A stench fouler than
sour milk
or spoiled potatoes

My nose leads me to your half rotten body,
lounging in the corner of my vegetable garden.
I can still make out your sleep-like position
even when all your bones and fur are
no longer bound by flesh.

Squirming maggots dance in frenzy as I
suddenly disrupt their festering feast
shoveling your bones, skull first,
whiskers still aquiver.

I discern both jaws,
sweet little paws,
and various vertebrae

Prying your skeleton free from the ground
disrupts the robust miasma of death,
amplifying your abominable aroma

Now lying in a new grave
I cover your remains with bougainvillea leaves
Delivering you to an empyrean
found in our garbage.

The Woe of the Bro Achilles

by Colin Wolters

The author wrote this poem after having glimpsed the cover of The Song Of Achilles by Madeline Miller. It's probably a wonderful book.

This is the song of Achilles:
Agamemnon got me in the feelies
when he took my Briseis,
for whom Trojans I slayeth—
5 *I* stole that ho!
Oh, the woe!
So I sing the song of Achilles.

This is the complaint of Achilles, the killer:
I at least need decent conditioner.
10 The sand and the mud,
combined with the blood,
are hell on my hair and my mirror.

This is the lay of Achilles, the wronged:
Can I get sandals with softer thongs?
15 The chafing of my toes
surpasses the woes
of the Trojans I gut on the prong
of my spear.

This is the plea of Achilles, the mighty:
Can someone hook me up with Aphrodite?
20 I'm totally awesome,
and I've even got some
slave girls to trade in hopes to get laid
by that blonde foaming broad of the sea.

25 Heed the advice of Achilles, the wise:
Always cover your thighs!
You may not know it,
but an arrow just right,

30 or a spear if they throw it,
can hit the right spot
and you'll die because
you didn't cover your thighs.

Stained Blue

by Samantha Rivas

you are
a denim skeleton
in my closet

your holes and invisible
fingerprint stains
don't deserve
to be on anyone

if i wear you again
will you
make me feel
Beautiful

if i wear you again
he will wear me
again.

he took you
not thinking
of me

if i wear you again
you will make me
Ugly

Romp on the Dock

by Robert B. Shockley

Everyone in Lotus Harbour, Saltworthy Island, B.C. knew that thirty-seven-year-old game programmer Conrad Jimson had stopped taking his medication by the time the Kris Kringle Romp rolled around, when he showed up as the DJ, dressed in an oversized, bright red fur coat, French Poulaine shoes with long exaggerated, curled toes decorated with bells, and an aluminum foil pyramid hat atop his blond, crew-cut skull. Conrad was a party DJ, a keyboardist in the only rock band in the town of Lotus Harbour, as well as a functional schizophrenic, provided he stayed on his Risperidone.

Whenever Conrad felt especially normal, he stopped taking his meds. He claimed they suppressed his creative impulses like a bucket over his head. Then he went about dressing all in red, from which he had gotten his moniker, "The Crimson Crepuscule," and engaged in increasingly odd behaviors. Finally, his mother would gently remind him of his oddities, compelling him to resume his medication regime, and he would return within a week or so to comparative normalcy and the only day job Conrad had been able to get after his last hospitalization, as an online C# programming consultant for Microsoft.

Usually, Conrad would go "red" during the height of summer. His scrawny frame, bulked out with the red fur encasement, could be seen at all hours, gliding up and down the short main street of the town in the loony Père Noël outfit in the ninety-degree weather of August, like a hulking scarlet Yeti with a silver crown. But not this year. Advent delivered summer temperatures, as a result of global climate change. The humidity and heat brought on his mother's stifling stroke, leaving her mute in a Vancouver hospital, and pushed Conrad right over the edge into the red, off season.

"So let's get this party going. Santa's Christmas Trawler is going to be docking any minute now, loaded with gifts and we don't want to disappoint all these grimy little gnomes," Conrad told the mayor, who was busy looking at the small crowd of local families gathered on the dock—anywhere but directly at Conrad, probably for fear of escalating his behaviour any further.

"Yep, yep. You're absolutely right, 'Rad. Play us some tunes like only The Crimson Crepuscule can," Mayor Meredith Steppson intoned with a quavering voice.

Conrad eyed the mayor suspiciously, seeming to pick up on his nervous vibe. "Don't you think this outfit is appropriate for a Christmas party, Meredith? Nobody ever seems to appreciate it in summer, but for meeting Santa, it seems entirely apropos. Quite festive actually." Conrad adjusted his aluminum pyramid, perhaps for better protection against incoming alien microwaves.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," the mayor mumbled. "Let's just get on with it. Okay?"

Stepping up to the sound equipment, Conrad began reading the usual Kris Kringle Romp preamble, playing Grieg's "Hall of the Mountain King" softly in the background on an electronic keyboard. The thrumming cadence appeared to lull him into a trance, as he rocked rhythmically back and forth. The children chattered with each other in rapt anticipation of Santa's Boat's arrival, and the distribution of gifts -- mostly cheap variety store games from Vancouver. But some advance release CDs of Conrad's newest, murderously mayhemic game were mixed in. This was why the kids had really come. It was the only real excitement that occurred on the isolated Gulf Island each year. The only other entertainment was the Halloween Scramjam, when the teens jacked everyone's car, always trustingly left unlocked in traditional Canadian naïveté, keys ready in the ignition, down to the ferry landing, as a break from the endless repetition every weekend of whatever months-old adventure movie was still playing at the only theatre on the island.

In the distance, Santa's Trawler could be seen approaching, festooned with blinking colored lights, causing the gathered teens and children to press right up to the lip of the designated slip, over decorated to the max. Their parents stood next to them, younger children secured by a parental hand.

At the music console, Conrad was also becoming ever more agitated with each passing moment. He was now playing high-tech 1980s New Wave music. He hopped about madly, removing his humongous layer of red fur to reveal a form-hugging, red Spiderman outfit underneath so tight that his family endowment was silhouetted in all its generous glory, much to the obvious distress of the parents. The horrified mayor kept trying to redrape the bouncing Conrad in the fur. The children and teens were intensely focused on one thing -- the approaching boat. The local marine variant of Santa was at the prow, dressed in red fisherman's overalls, topped with a traditional pointy Santa hat, white cotton ball at its tip, a bulging red bag on deck next to him.

As the boat docked, Conrad loaded up "Stand" by REM. The Athens, Georgia singer's mild voice bounced around the harbour at full volume. Conrad began acting out the lyrics: standing, then facing West, standing, then facing North, as he simultaneously peeled off his Spiderman jumpsuit. He leapt aboard the boat in just his birthday suit, painted red, his aluminum foil headwear flashing the bright sunlight at the crowd and the bells on his pointy Poulaine shoes jingling like Santa's sleigh itself.

Conrad wailed the REM lyrics at the top of his voice, climbing up in the guy wires of the communication rigging of the boat, as the crowd below gasped and muttered. But then his fancy French shoes got all tangled up in the rigging, until he flipped upside down, hanging from just the curled toe of his left shoe. A woman in the crowd screamed and fainted, falling to the weatherworn boards of the dock with a thud. Dangling topsy-turvy, Conrad just kept on yelling, mixing together titles from different songs high up in the air above everyone, "Stand. Get up, Stand up. Won't be fooled again. Turn the Beat Around. Revolution Number 9."

The fishermen aboard Santa's Trawler, even Santa, climbed up to rescue Conrad, covered his nakedness with a woolen army blanket, and brought him back to sea level, where they held him down on the dock until the Outer Islands Gulf Detachment of the RCMP arrived by speedboat, and took The Crimson Crepuscule away for a commitment hearing. Conrad Jimson came back home six months later, so heavily medicated he could barely speak. He never again appeared on the streets in his red fur coat. Soon he was simply known as Crazy Conrad, who never talked, drooled a little, but wouldn't hurt a fly.

Fly's Folly

by Darren Phair

The smell of nectar fills the air
An urgency without compare
Wings abuzz in the morning light
They come to savor this great delight

In the small shadow, the spider waits

A bounty not caught but found
These flies come to take this prize.
Though greed captures many
Most take to the skies
Except one firmly bound

In the growing shadow, the spider stirs

Carapace glittering gold
And wings gilded silver
His grace was not to him sold
But from other's endeavor.

In the looming shadow, the spider spins its web

In the budding twilight
The dark caused not a fright.
His avarice unabated
As his spectator waited to be sated

In the great shadow, the spider descends

Aware of the entrenched gloom, the fly felt its doom
Springing for the air, it saw only despair
The web was woven tight, not to overcome with might
Buzzing for home, it could not leave the silky dome

In the final shadow, the spider feeds

It did not see its true peril, amidst the skittering carol
Into a gaping maw, went the gold and silver flaw
Then Judgement left calmly, awaiting other's folly

In the waning shadow, the spider slumbers

Ode to Tom Hanks

by Jessica Parker Outhyse

Since the day I first saw you on *Bosom Buddies*, you had my heart.
Who cares if I was only 5?

When you rescued that mermaid in *Splash*, I knew I'd love you
forever.

That time you played the piano with your feet on *Big*?
I took up lessons the next week for you.

Those bees who stung you so painfully in *The 'Burbs*
had me buying Calamine by the gallon in case it happened again.

You know you got too fat for *A League of Their Own* and too thin for
Castaway.
Doesn't matter to me though, I love every size of Tom Hanks.

Apollo 13? I'd fly to the moon with you. Listen, that's saying a lot,
I once got sea sick on an escalator.

I watch *You've Got Mail* at least once a week. You, that briefcase,
that trenchcoat, and that swagger? One word, Tom: swoon.

Then came *The Da Vinci Code*. Mr. Hanks, you broke the code
to that cryptex and found your way deep down to my very soul.

Remember that terrible accent you had in *The Terminal*? Me too. Let's
not talk about it.

I nearly forgot about *Sleepless in Seattle*. Quintessential Tom.
Criminal in the hands of any other but you, sweet fella.

But my favorite Tom? *That Thing You Do!* Tom.
Tom from another time Tom. Simplicity of the 60's Tom.
Patent leather shoes Tom. Take me away from all of this, Tom.

Magic, Black and White

by Samuel Pflugrath

9.

The Witch came in through the door into their secret workshop, and shut it tight behind them. To the left there were shelves stocked with old books in Greek and in Latin, in Hebrew and in Arabic, and a few slim volumes in German and in English; while to the right there stood a wooden coat rack with two robes—one black, one white—hanging from it. The Witch slipped on the black cloak and pulled the hood down over their head, as though afraid of somehow being recognized in the seclusion of their lair.

Before the Witch there stood a wooden work bench, upon which sat a small reflecting pool and an antique metal cup, as well as an assortment of small, featureless wax dolls, some in the shapes of animals and some in the shapes of human beings. One little doll in particular was placed at center, seated atop a red pincushion. A single iron needle protruded from the cushion, and there were already several small needle-marks on the doll's arms and legs.

The Witch took the doll and the needle in their boil-covered hands, and then held the latter in the flame of an oil lamp that hung above the table. Once the needle was hot enough, the Witch removed it and stared down at the doll. In an intense whisper, the Witch recited three times: "Mary Blindermann, you shall now give up your youth and life to me!" And, on the final word of the final repetition, the Witch plunged the heated needle deep into the doll's breast.

Upon removing it, a stream of warm, red blood began to gush out of the doll, which the Witch then collected into the cup. After less than a minute, the doll ceased to give blood anymore, and then crumbled away in the Witch's deathly, carbunched grip.

Giggling, the Witch now turned to the divinatory pool: there they saw a vision of a man alone in a tiny cell, weeping over some bit of wretched news that someone must have just brought him. This sight made the Witch's swollen face contort into a cruel smile. "To the power of Love," they said, raising the cup in a mocking, solitary toast; "and to the power of Hate."

And then the Witch drank the blood in a single gulp.

The End.

*

I.

On the morning before the murders, Uriah Blindermann of Adlerburg, Pennsylvania, awoke from a dream about his late mother. In it he was still a child, and she sat him down on her knee to tell him a story about his grandfather. He'd remembered her telling it to him many times before, and in truth it was a fairly common folk narrative she attributed to their ancestor.

"When *Opa* was still a young man," his mother narrated, "and long before he had taken up the life and work of a powwow healer, he tried his hand at farming. But, hard as he worked, his crops always failed and his animals always fell ill and died. He and his family lived in poverty: their house was always in disrepair, and they could only afford the coarsest of garments.

"His neighbor, however, always seemed to do far less work, and yet was prosperous beyond all possibility. Though he never tended to them, his fields were as rich as Eden, and his animals huge and healthy. His house was no less than a palace—his clothing clean and new and white.

"So one day *Opa* went and asked him what his secret might be, and the neighbor told him to go out to a certain crossroads in the forest before dawn and wait for the sun to rise—and then everything would be easy from that day on, he said.

"Well, *Opa* did as he was told; and sure enough, just as the sun began to peak out over the trees, a man in a white suit with skin black as coal came walking out of the woods to greet him. But, as he drew nearer, *Opa* Blindermann could see, clear as day, that the man also had horns on his head, and hooves on his feet, with a pitchfork in one hand and a great old book in the other.

"Once he saw what was about to happen, your *Opa* turned and ran and never looked back. And from that day forth until his final breath, he took it upon himself to learn and practice the art of *Braucherei*—of healing through magic in the name of God—that he might protect others from the forces his neighbor so clearly served."

Then Uriah's mother leaned in close, as if to whisper a secret. "They say that his neighbor," she said with a knowing smirk, "was a Weiss."

2.

Although neither the largest nor the oldest family in Adlerburg, the Weisses were certainly the most powerful. Mayor David Weiss was only the latest in a long line of Weiss civic leaders stretching back to the town's founding, such that "Mayor Weiss" may

as well have been an inherited title. Mothers dreamed of their daughters marrying Weiss men to claim a little of that social magic, and some people even went as far as to drop their own last names and adopt the Weiss one instead, sometimes in spite of lacking any *Deitsch* blood themselves.

As such, it was understandable that some envious folk might circulate rumors attributing the Weiss family's success to dark and otherworldly forces. Fortunately for the Mayor and his relations, his constituents were far less openly superstitious than they had been in the past. Only fifty years earlier there had been well over a dozen different powwow healers living and working both in and around Adlerburg; by 1920 (and not counting the relative newcomer Lady de Lourdes), there were only two left.

One, of course, was Uriah Blindermann himself. As per tradition, he had learned the craft from his mother, and she from her father. Though only thirty-two at the time of the murders, Uriah was the most trusted healer in the whole county among those who still believed in such practices. Even some who wrote him and his ilk off as charlatans could still tell stories of the sick relative that only Uriah could heal or the lost heirloom that only Uriah could find.

The other remaining powwow was a far more mysterious figure, known only by the moniker of Herr Schwartz. Where he lived and what family he came from, nobody knew. There were any number of abandoned shacks in the woods that people claimed to be his house, and if a family had any member that people considered "odd," you could be sure they were secretly him.

Likewise, no one seemed sure just how old he was: grandparents told stories of being healed by him as children, leading some to suspect that he was nothing more than a myth, or that "Herr Schwartz" was only a title passed down through the generations. After the murders, the authorities were so certain that he was either an alibi or a delusion that they never even bothered trying to track him down for questioning; and he was never seen again afterwards.

3.

Upon awakening, Uriah and his wife Lillian (Lil for short) said their morning prayers and then got dressed: him in a cheap gray suit with a red protective ribbon tied around his wrist, and her in a plain brown housedress. Without needing to say a word to one another, they left their small, Spartan bedroom like a pair of pallbearers to check on their youngest child, Mary.

Much like their bedroom, the children's was small, unadorned, and dimly lit. It held two little beds—only one of which was occupied, as they had sent their six-year-old son off to live with Lil's relatives in Philadelphia after Mary first fell ill.

The little girl lay in her bed all white and weak, her breaths slow and evidently painful. Her sheets were soaked through from night sweats, and her father wiped her forehead with a soft, clean cloth to bring her some comfort. There were rings around her brown little eyes from lack of sleep, and she didn't even have the strength to lift her arms to show Uriah the lesions thereon.

For as far back as anyone could remember, the farmers outside of Adlerburg proper always seemed to lose an inordinate number of their crops and livestock to disease; but it was only after Lady de Lourdes, the self-proclaimed Hoodoo practitioner from Louisiana, moved to town that the consumptive sickness began spreading to townfolk as well. Aside from paleness and general wasting, the only observable symptoms were small puncture wounds that appeared on the extremities, as though the sufferer had been pierced in their sleep by a great needle. Death was always accompanied by one final such mark on the chest over the heart.

Uriah leaned in over his daughter, imagining his own mother doing the same for him. "Mary," he breathed with as much composure as he could muster, "Please, try to remember: have you accepted any presents from anyone, or have you given any presents to anyone, at all lately?"

"The mayor," she replied weakly; "I gave him a flower I grew in the garden when he told me I was pretty." She ran out of breath before she could finish the last word, and her father softly shushed her, brushing the long, brown hair out of her face.

He rose up, the merest hint of a tear in his eye. "What about Lady de Lourdes?" he asked, audibly choking down more emotion. "Have you been seeing her, in your sleep or at your window or anywhere?" His daughter closed her eyes and slowly shook her head "No." He exhaled out his nose—a frustrated, drawn-out snort—and then left the room.

Lil remained a moment: she too knelt down beside their child and took her tiny hand in hers. "You will get better," she said, locking eyes. "Your father will save you. And, if he can't, then..." She trailed off, then pulled the blankets up around the now-shivering girl's neck and said "Good-bye," before leaving the room as well.

Uriah stood in the hallway, his eyes closed and his head pressed against the bare wooden wall. When he heard Lil approach he turned to her and "Every charm and spell and prayer I've tried has failed to stop this *hex*: what else is left for me to do? Perhaps if I could get the heart of one of the cattle she's killed—I could use that to destroy her! With just three coffin nails—"

"How do you know this witch is a woman?" Lil asked earnestly, interrupting. Her husband stared blankly at her for a moment, a scowl forming on his pale, stubbly face; before replying:

"You're right, dear. I don't know who they are. Not for certain, at least. And besides," he continued, "Mayor Weiss has had all of the diseased cattle destroyed, so I couldn't kill her—*them*, that way if I tried."

The two of them went downstairs. Uriah threw on a gray overcoat with a newsy and a pair of black rain galoshes before bidding his wife farewell. They kissed for one final time and then he set out for work. Lil stood in the doorway waving to him, and he even turned around to wave as well as he made his way down the muddy road. But once her *braucher* husband was far enough away, Lil closed the door and turned her gaze upon the family's brand-new telephone instead.

4-

Though *Speilwerk*—that is, Spell-work—was the Blindermann family trade, as local superstitions waned it did less and less to pay the bills every year. So, by day, Uriah worked as a filing clerk at the Mayor's office. It was only about a thirty minute walk from his house to the town hall, and Uriah generally relished the chance to be alone with both his thoughts and his God.

It had rained the previous night, and the unpaved streets were muddy and pockmarked by deep, brown puddles. The sky was almost entirely white, with only scattered splotches of black that looked dangerous but in all likelihood weren't. Horse coaches and motorcars shared the road uneasily, as Uriah nervously made his way among them on foot.

He had just come to a street corner within sight of the town hall when he heard muddy footsteps come running up behind him. "Hey, Mister Blindermann!" exclaimed a voice that made him start and spin around. Sure enough, it was Lady de Lourdes.

She was a tall, powerfully-built woman with dark black skin, her course dark-brownish hair wrapped up in a feathered red headscarf. She wore a very large, very loud dress in shades of orange

and black and purple, the hem of which she held up to keep from getting muddy, with galoshes and stockings underneath. Her large eyes were light brown, very much like Uriah's.

"Hello, miss," Uriah replied curtly, keeping his distance. Nonetheless, she came closer.

"How're you an' yours doin'?" she asked, cheerily attempting to start a conversation. Her Cajun accent betrayed her out-of-state origins, and made Uriah feel vaguely uncomfortable.

"Fine," he said. "Just what're you doin' out and about, miss?"

Truthfully, it was odd to see a black woman like her making themselves so publicly visible. The recently revived Ku Klux Klan was known to be active in the area—some even suspected Mayor Weiss of secretly being the local Grand Wizard, even if he didn't seem like the sort to wear silly robes (in public, at least). They had already driven the local spectacle-maker, Mr. Coppola, out of town for being a Catholic and an immigrant; and most of the town's other "ethnic" residents tended to keep a low profile as a result.

That said, even as popular faith in magic was dying out, there were still enough people who whispered "*Hexerei!*"—that is, "Witchery," "Witchcraft"—whenever de Lourdes was mentioned that even the Klan seemed afraid of her. There was a rumor that one night some men left a burning cross in front of her home: the next morning, they awoke to find themselves covered in painful, disgusting boils, which only healed after they had all gone and apologized to her in person. Whether or not this story was true, it shows something of the level of superstitious fear she was capable of inspiring in some—much to the chagrin of that arch-rationalist, Mayor Weiss.

"Oh, me?" de Lourdes replied almost coquettishly to Uriah's query, her mouth in a cloying little smile as she spoke: "I'm headed out for the woods to gather some fresh materials—you know, herbs an' flowers an' roots an' such. I just scheduled an emergency consultation tonight—a lotta folks 'round here are sick, but I'm sure you know that as well as I."

"Aye, I do," Uriah said slowly through gritted teeth.

"How's your daughter?" she asked. Uriah's eyes flashed.

"She's... fine," came his suspicious response.

"Uh-huh," said de Lourdes, an immaculate eyebrow raised.

She could see that he was getting anxious, so she replied, "Well, guess I'll be seein' you then. Good-bye!" She turned and walked away, peeking over her shoulder to see if Uriah was still looking at her. He wasn't—he merely turned and continued walking.

As a *braucher*, Uriah was one to see divinatory messages from Providence wherever he looked; and now, as he approached the town hall, his mind returned to his dream from earlier. He remembered the devil: a smiling, black-skinned creature in his mind's eye, who in the past had sought to corrupt and ruin the Blindermann family. Perhaps the fiend had now returned to finish the job—or, perhaps, he had dispatched a lackey to do it for him. At last Uriah could see, clear as day, that his dream had in fact been a warning.

5.

Mayor David Weiss was seated at his desk and sniffing a small, wilting white flower when Uriah came into his office. No sooner had he stepped inside, however, than the Mayor put it down and rose to his feet to greet him. "Blindermann!" he said, "Good to see you!" His voice was deep, with a noticeable Mid-Atlantic accent somewhat unusual for rural Pennsylvania.

"Thank you, sir," the always-deferential Uriah replied.

The Mayor was taller than Uriah, moderately portly, and dressed all in white with a red necktie. His age was uncertain, at least from his appearance—perhaps a wizened forty, perhaps a well-preserved sixty. His thinning hair was almost as white as his suit, while his small, piercing eyes were like icy sapphires.

"It's almost eerie, Blindermann, but I was just thinking about you and your family."

"You know I'm not one to believe in blind coincidence," Uriah replied with a nervous chuckle. While he wasn't necessarily a fan or a supporter of Mayor Weiss, he still respected him and his authority—both as the mayor and as a Weiss. As such, Uriah was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt over some of the more unsavory allegations against him and his family.

"Of course you're not. So tell me," the Mayor asked with audible concern, "has your daughter's condition improved at all, Blindermann?"

"No, sir. Nothing I've tried's done anything."

"Hmm. Well, what *have* you tried?"

"Why, *everything*, sir! But not even the *Long Lost Friend's* been any help."

The Mayor rolled his eyes and sighed in disappointment. “Oh, leave Hohman on the bookshelf where he belongs. The year is 1920, Blindermann, not 1820; and such primitive beliefs are far beneath a civilized race such as ours.”

“If you say so, sir, but not even the doctor—the medical doctor—’s found anything wrong with her physically. And if he can’t figure it out, then, well, what else is there for us to do?”

“I wish I had a solution for you, Blindermann, but if I did it probably wouldn’t be ‘Consult your local witchdoctor.’ Not that that option’s even especially viable anymore,” the Mayor added, “since the only powwows left in the county, I believe, are you and, uh, that other fellow. You know, the one the old timers talk about?”

With that the name burst into Uriah’s head like a flash of blinding white light. “Herr Schwartz?” he asked in reply.

“Yes, that’s him! But you’ve probably already consulted *him*, *right?*”

“No, actually, I haven’t. But now, maybe...”

Again the Mayor sighed at his subordinate. “Look, you know how much I care about you and your family,” said David to Uriah, “But you really should abandon these ridiculous superstitions. Mark my words: your beliefs are going to get someone you care about killed.”

“But sir,” Uriah replied desperately, “Who else is there for me to turn to now, if not him?”

“Perhaps,” the Mayor said after a pause, “you need some rest, Blindermann: I suggest you take the remainder of the day off, so as to better consider your options.” Weiss approached him and put a smooth, white hand on his shoulder. “Do it for your daughter,” he said looking down on Uriah, and then dismissed him.

6.

In the woods about an hour’s walk from town there was a clearing by the river bend, where an old dirt crossroads had been left by the town’s first European settlers. It was here and only here, the superstitious believed, that one might consult with Herr Schwartz by night. All one had to do was show up between sundown and sunrise, and the old wizard would be sure to appear.

Uriah did not go home after his dismissal. Knowing now what he had to do, he went straight from the town hall into the woods, and made the trek out to the crossroads. It was late in the autumn, and though the clouds had parted the sun was already past the tree line.

Though he knew roughly where to go, Uriah had to grope his way blindly through the cold, dark forest; and on a few occasions he even tripped over tree roots and fell, muddying up his clothes. Once he reached his destination, he sat down on a rotted log and waited for the mysterious powwow to arrive.

And sure enough, just as the full moon began to peak out over the trees, there came a man from out of the darkness of the forest who could only be Herr Schwartz.

He was tall, a little paunchy, and slightly bent over which put him at about eye-level with Uriah. Apart from a long red scarf wrapped around his neck and the lower half of his face, he was dressed entirely in black—dress shoes, trousers, and a large, loose bridge coat. Thick coke-bottle glasses gleamed in the moonlight from beneath the shadow of his wide-brimmed hat.

Only the skin of his hands, smooth and white like an embalmed corpse, were truly visible. For a moment when he first appeared, Uriah felt the urge to turn and run; but then he saw the whiteness of the stranger’s skin, and it comforted him enough to make him stay.

“*Guder daag*,” Herr Schwartz said with an audible smile. Though muffled, his deep voice sounded friendly—his grandfatherly *Deutsch* accent far thicker than anyone’s that Uriah still knew. It brought back memories of his own *Opa*’s speech, further casting a spell of comfort over him.

“Herr Schwartz,” Uriah pleaded, “I beg you: can you reveal to me the name of the witch who has *verhexed* my youngest child?”

“*Ja*, but there is no need for me to do so,” the Herr replied. “You already know their name.”

“Lady de Lourdes?” Uriah replied unhesitatingly, and the stranger nodded. Uriah closed his eyes and let out a sigh from deep within himself. “Then tell me how I can defeat her. Nothing I’ve attempted has worked.”

“It will take a very special, very powerful spell to destroy her,” the Herr said. “Hers is a primitive, foreign sort of *hexerei*, such as our people have never seen before. But it is indeed possible to counter. I have been waiting for you, my boy, for I have already formulated your solution. Hold out your hand.”

The Herr reached into his coat pocket and stepped forward, groping at the air as though he had trouble seeing through his own glasses. Uriah held out his hand, and the Herr placed something small

and metal in his open palm.

I cast this bullet myself from a coffin nail,” he said, and Uriah shrank back fearfully as he spoke. For a moment he thought he could see the eyes behind those thick lenses: icy blue, and widened as with madness. “*Ja, mit* a human hair *und* a human bone, on Christmas Night at this very crossroads. No matter your aim, dear boy, it will hit all its intended targets.”

Uriah felt doubt overtaking him as he looked down at the cold, metal projectile pressing itself into his hand. To destroy a witch remotely and impersonally through magic was one thing, both just and unquestionable—but what the Herr now prescribed seemed faithless and barbaric. He began to back away, while Herr Schwartz stood in place like one of the trees.

“Why do you hesitate?” the Herr asked him. “You do know what must be done, *ja?* Or do you lack the courage *und* selflessness needed to do what is right in the face of blackest evil? You know what you will come home to find if you should cast that bullet into the mud.”

Just then a vision crept into Uriah’s head—of Mary lying cold and lifeless in her little cot, and of de Lourdes cackling in her lair at the misfortunes she so clearly had caused; and with that, all hesitation departed him. “Thank you, kind sir,” Uriah said softly, clutching the bullet into the core of his fist. “I know what to do now. For Mary,” he added.

“*Ja*, do it for Mary,” the Herr replied, stepping back into the shadows.

“What shall I pay you?” Uriah asked.

“Do not worry: you already have,” came the reply. Herr Schwartz raised up his hand as if to give a toast. “To the power of Love,” he said, and then disappeared before Uriah’s eyes into the blackness of the forest night.

7.

Uriah kept his grandfather’s pistol on top of the highest bookshelf in the parlor, right beside his heirloom copy of the *Long Lost Friend*—and the moment he returned home that night, Uriah loaded it with Herr Schwartz’s magic bullet.

Exhausted and hoping Lil was already asleep, he went upstairs to go to bed. His clothes were still wet and filthy from his adventure, and he tracked black mud everywhere he went without seeming to realize it.

But just as he stepped into the unlighted bedroom hallway, Uriah heard a voice from within their daughter’s room: a voice that made him approach the cracked-open door with quiet caution.

“Not to worry, child,” came that all-too-familiar Cajun accent, “This spell’s from Albertus Magnus’s Egyptian Secrets, and if he’s a good enough source for your boy Hohman then he’s a good enough source for me. ‘Long as her and I are both alive, that witch’s whole body’s just gonna be one big oozin’ mass of boils, and that sure oughta make ‘em easy to spot in public.”

“Thank you Lady de Lourdes,” came Lil’s soft reply. “And again, thank you for coming out to consult on such short notice. You know I don’t want to hurt Uriah, but I’m starting to worry that this *hex* might be more than he’s capable of dealing with.”

“Oh nonsense, honey! From all I’ve seen an’ heard ‘round here, his magic’s at least as good as mine, so long as you point him in the right direction. Maybe tomorrow I’ll even talk to him ‘bout the two of us workin’ together—finally give that damn witch what’s comin’ to ‘em!”

“Once he sees how much better you’ve made her, he’ll be sure to listen to you,” Lil said hopefully. “What do I owe you?”

“Ah, this is all on the house, dear. That witch may hurt some of us more than others, but in the end they hurt us all. Some folks don’t see it like that, but I say so long as they’re out there, we’re all in this fight together. See?”

So, after saying one final good-bye, Lady de Lourdes confidently stepped out into the dark hallway where the shadow-cloaked Uriah shot her point-blank through the forehead. Hearing Mary scream, he stepped over the twitching body and into the dim light of her room—his blank white face now soaked in blood, and the hand that still held the smoking pistol hanging limp beside him.

Lil lay dead on the floor by their daughter’s bed: through some miracle of ballistics, after exiting de Lourdes’ skull the bullet had ricocheted and ultimately found its way into hers as well. Not that her husband seemed to notice, as his foggy white eyes directed themselves only upon their terrified child, now backing herself up against the wall behind her bed.

“I just saved you,” he said slowly and emphatically; “I’ve stopped the ones who were trying to hurt you. Mary, you’re gonna live.” A calm, beatific smile formed on his otherwise expressionless

face, and his eyes seemed to stare ahead without actually seeing anything.

8.

Unlike the later Rehmeyer and Shinsky killings, the Blindermann murders never attracted too much outside attention; however, the town of Adlerburg itself would feel a long-lasting impact. The death of de Lourdes hit especially hard in the town's small but tightly-knit African-American community, many of whose members decided to leave for elsewhere in the aftermath. It would be almost a century before Adlerburg would see another person of color moving in.

Furthermore, Blindermann's crimes effectively ended the now-tainted institution of *Braucherei* in Adlerburg. In the weeks following, powwowing would be publically decried both from newspapers as a threat to progress and from pulpits as a threat to salvation. In that environment, no one dared profess any belief in magic anymore, publicly or privately; and the entire centuries-long tradition was practically shamed out of existence overnight—much to the approval of that arch-rationalist, Mayor Weiss.

The day after it all happened, the Mayor gave a statement to the town newspaper. He had to speak via telephone from his bedside, however, as he was much too ill to leave his home—though he also told them that he expected to be back on his feet shortly.

“It pains me greatly to learn that someone I placed so much faith in could go on to commit such a horrific crime, and against his own wife at that,” he dictated, ignoring de Lourdes entirely. “It is truly incredible what a devotion to primitive and barbaric beliefs can inspire disturbed individuals to do. May what has happened here serve as a warning to us all.

“And, off the record,” he continued, “if his lawyer has any sense, he'll convince the boy to plead insanity, if only to keep him out of the electric chair.”

After putting down the telephone, the half-dressed Mayor looked up and happened to catch sight of himself in a mirror on the opposite wall. He startled himself, before glaring down angrily at his own body for a moment. The sight of all his exposed white skin now covered in swollen, festering boils displeased him greatly: “*Black bitch*,” he growled under his breath.

Then he rose and went into his parlor, and approached a small bookshelf. Pushing it aside, he revealed a hidden passage into the

cellar. The Mayor went out through the door into his secret workshop, and shut it tight behind him.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Chelsymae Benedicto is a student of Long Beach City College and is the current Vice President of the English Majors and Minors club at the LAC campus. She enjoys spending her days engaging in all things creative, from writing stories, to composing songs and creating works of art. She aspires to one day reach a wide audience through various mediums of art

Robert B. Shockley is a continuing writer in LBCC's challenging and unparalleled writing workshops, even though he is officially a senior at CSULB in Creative Writing. Robert, currently working on a poetry/fiction crossover novel as well as short fiction and poetry, plans to pursue an MFA program following graduation. "I will always be a Viking writer at heart, where writing was and is about true freedom of expression."

Meggan Rau was born in Southern California and grew up on the Big Island of Hawaii. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Hawaii at Hilo and she enjoys driving aimlessly around Los Angeles looking for her next great culinary experience.

Samantha Rivas has a love for anything from the past. Most of her poems are nostalgia driven with a hint of a 23 year old Xicana's mind. Her favorite author is Haruki Murakami. In the fall, she will be attending CSULB for a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing.

Marcus Woolfolk is a twenty-two year old admirer of poetry. Marcus was originally born in an overlooked town in Northern California and he currently resides in Long Beach. He has dreams of traveling the world and creating pieces of literature that have beauty and meaning to someone, and ultimately wants to live a quiet and happy life.

Samuel Pflugrath is 25 years old, graduated from Long Beach Poly in 2011, and has been worming his way through LBCC (focusing on English and creative writing and theoretically hoping to eventually transfer) ever since. He has been writing on and off since (Washington) Middle School—whether his work has improved at all since then is up for debate. There is a safety pin affixed to the front of his well-worn hoodie.

Darren Phair is a fifth semester participant in LBCC's Creative Writing program, having experience with the short fiction, poetry and novel workshops. He will be transferring to either CSULB or Columbia University, if he can overcome his irrational terror of NYC. If that happened, the vibrant Long Beach writer's community would be sorely missed. Robert is honored to have his fiction and poetry featured in the first and second volume of LBCC's exciting literary journal, *Saga*. He is currently at work on a collection of linked short stories.

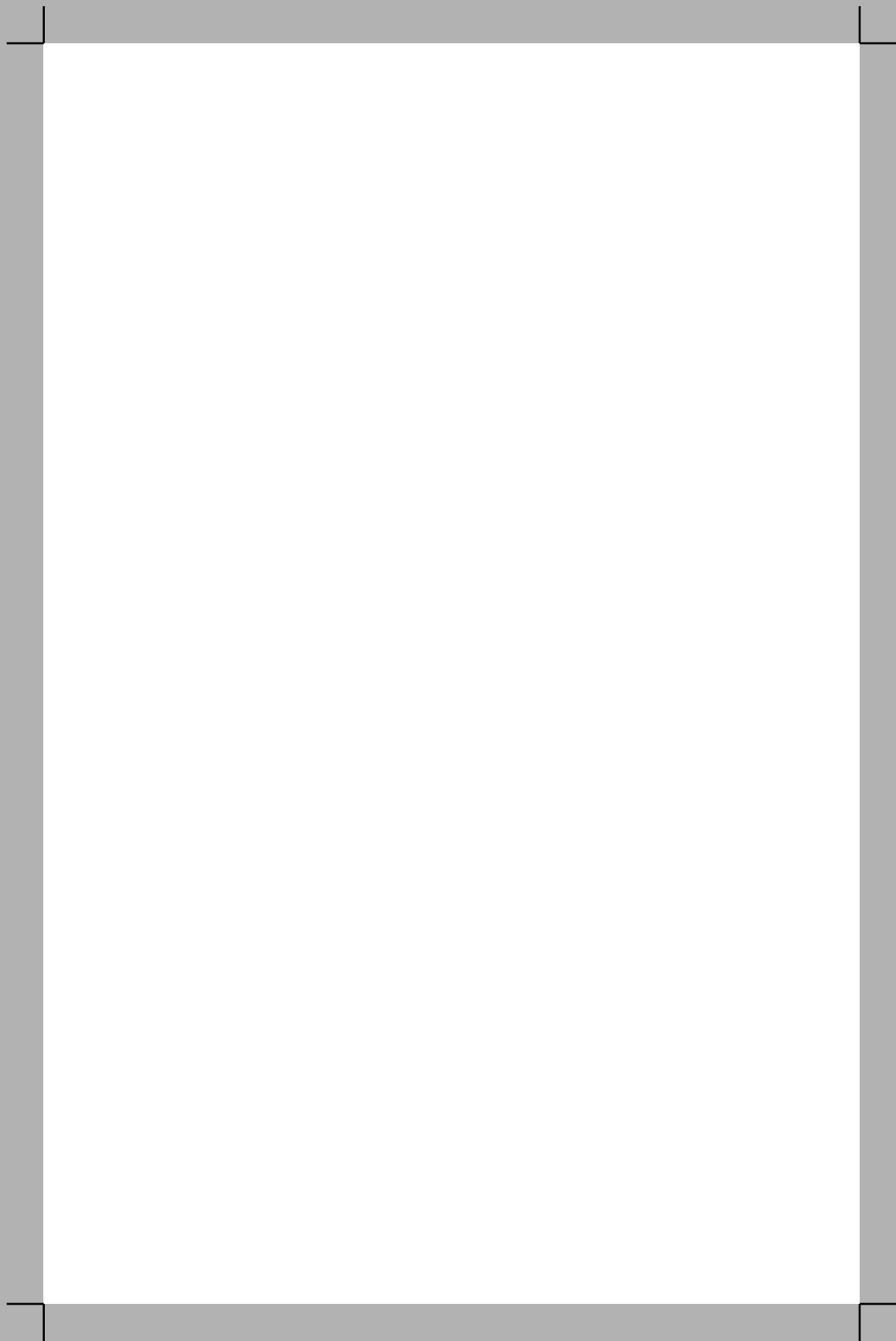
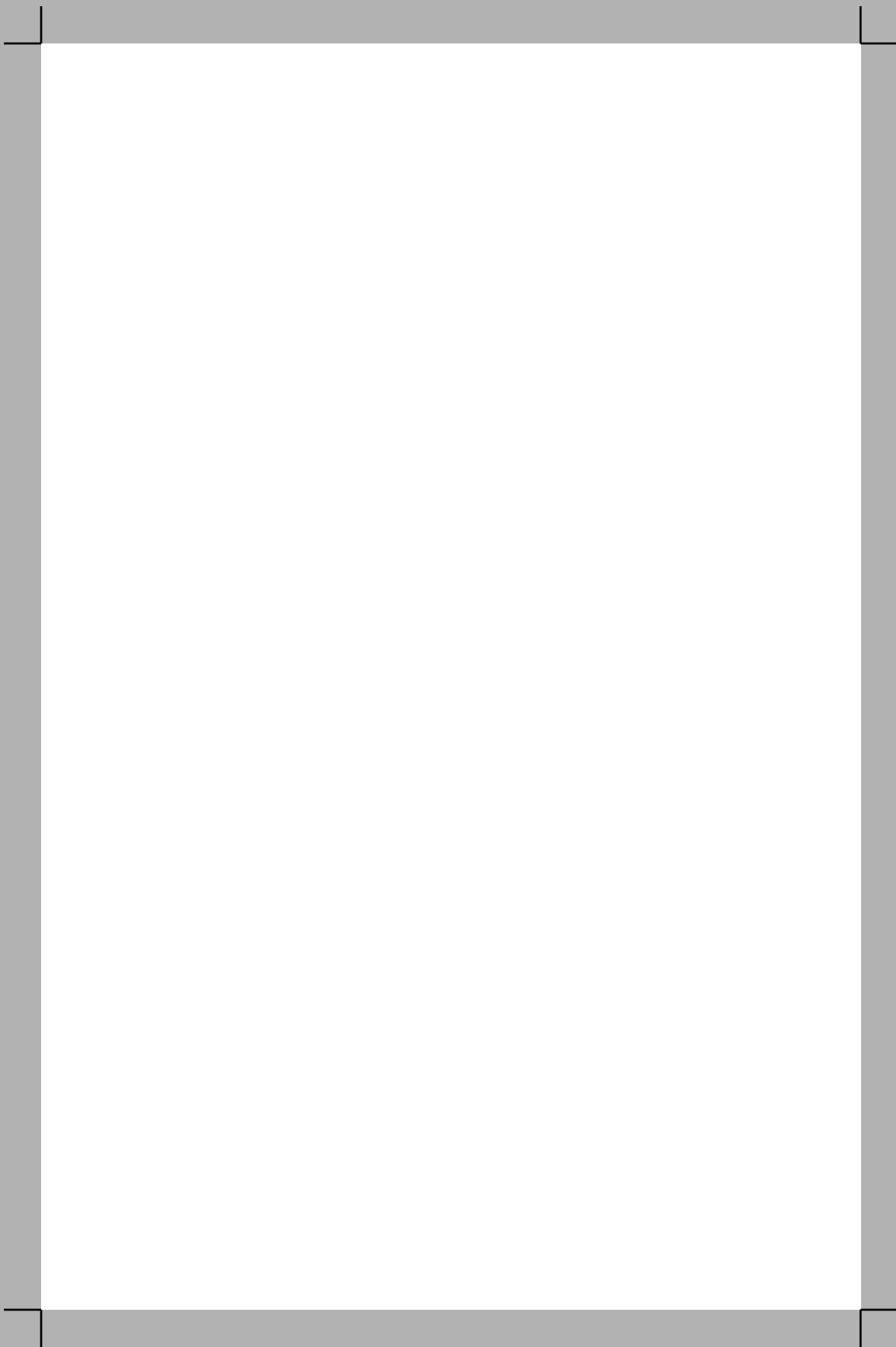
VV Shah is a student of the Long Beach City College creative writing program (when life permits). He currently works as an adjunct Diagnostic Medical Sonography instructor for a school in Anaheim, California.

Colin Wolters is a third-year English major at UCLA, and he'd like to be a professor one day. He is currently developing a senior thesis about the figuration of female bodies in Shakespeare. Colin loves playing video games with his girlfriend, tutoring at Long Beach City College, and learning to be a scholar.

Julia F.Z. Kowey is a student at Long Beach City College, currently involved with the on campus radio network as a host on KLBC. Outside of class she can be found cultivating edible and floral plants, making friends with the neighborhood cats, and keeping up with current events and social-political activism. Although she is not yet settled on one path of study, she hopes to continue writing throughout her life.

Jessica Parker Outhyse was raised in Reno, NV and is a recent transplant to Long Beach, CA. She has only recently found poetry and to writes as frequently as possible. She works in a hospital and finds her best work is inspired by what she sees there.





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