



No. 27: May 2022

2022 NSWA Writing Contest Results!

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NSWA website
for info and updates:
<https://www.nswriters.org/>

Write On!

The Winning Issue

Newsletter of the North Shore Writers' Association
Linking North Shore writers since 1993

A Message from the Contest Committee Coordinator

Barbara Reardon

We are pleased to announce the winners of the 26th annual NSWA Writing Contest!

This year we were delighted to receive more entries than in recent years and hope this trend continues. In total, there were eighty-six entries from sixty-one writers. Entries arrived from writers in the Metro Vancouver area, Barriere, Campbell River, Nanoose Bay, Victoria, as well as farther afield from Barrie, Toronto and London, Ontario.

Several people need to be thanked for their wonderful contributions to the 2022 contest: Mark Turris for artwork and poster designs, Christine Cowan for collating submissions and spread sheets, Kelly Hoskins for website promotion, Janine Cross for online promotion, and Wiley Ho for producing the Winners Edition of this newsletter.

We had fun organizing the awards ceremony to announce the winners in each category.

The Zoom event was recorded in time for the North Shore Writers Festival and can be viewed on YouTube here:

[2022 North Shore Writers' Association: Writing Contest Awards - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7As6nUIPs)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7As6nUIPs>

Our contest is fortunate to be supported by top-notch judges and writers in each contest category: Joyce Goodwin for poetry, kc dryer for fiction, and Samantha Darling for non-fiction. They had the difficult job of selecting winners among strong entries and they provided insightful comments to each winner.

Enjoy the award-winning poems and stories in this edition. They were written by writers like you. Consider entering your own work in next year's NSWA annual writing contest! ■

Congratulations to everyone who submitted and shared their work!



photo: Unsplash



***North Shore Writers' Association
26th Annual Writing Contest Winners***

Fiction

First Place: B.R. Bentley for *The Passenger*
Second Place: Lois Keane for *Camping*
Third Place: Bill Koch for *First Kiss*
Honourable Mention: Rose Dudley for *You'll Never Be A Miss Havisham!*

Non-Fiction

First Place: Lisa Bagshaw for *Confessions of a Covid Addict*
Second Place: Trish Gauntlett for *The Rosewater Sprinkler*
Third Place: Erin Rochfort for *Let This Teach Me*
Honourable Mention: Rod Baker for *The Last Voyage of the Solander*

Poetry

First Place: Trish Gauntlett for *Paintbox*
Second Place: Cathy Sosnowsky for *Autumn Along the Mamquam*
Third Place: Rosemary Gretton for *Covid Conditions*
Honourable Mention: Jannette Edmonds for *Sparks*

Youth

Fiction Winner: Tyler McIntosh for *Touching the Sky*
Poetry Winner: Rose Fitzgerald for *Woodpecker*



Fiction



First Place

The Passenger *B.R. Bentley*

Simon Powell hurried through the business class boarding line as soon as it opened. Fast as he was, there were still two or three people ahead of him. With only a carry-on bag and his briefcase, he was anxious to get everything stored. Neurotic maybe, but certainly effective, and he had work to do. Once general boarding started, the limited storage space would quickly overflow.

As usual, he had booked seat 3C – hopefully the newer pod style seats. In the rush to the airport, he hadn’t checked. Worst case it would be the older style but at least it would be on the aisle. Working might be more difficult, but he could live with that.

The flight attendant smiled, examined his ticket, and pointed down the aisle to a nearby seat. No pods. Damn. At least his fellow passenger was already seated. He looked away then quickly glanced back. The woman in seat 3A was exquisite. Maybe this was one occasion he should break his no speaking rule. *No*, he thought, *better not, she looked exhausted*.

Simon lifted the carry-on and pushed it into the overhead locker before tucking his small, leather briefcase under the seat in front. The woman’s expression didn’t change. Not a single flicker of acknowledgement of his presence. *Looks like an IT executive*, he thought. *Sophisticated, smart, and very distant*. Having satisfactorily categorized his travelling companion, he settled in for the four-hour flight. The meetings had gone well and he was pumped – he could almost feel the energy in his body. Pity his laptop was new. A malfunction would have been a good icebreaker – particularly if his IT guess was accurate.

Simon stared at the error message on the laptop screen in disbelief. Something had “failed to load”. He hated things like this. It had been fine in the airport lounge. He shut it down and tried again. Same result. He looked at the small TV screen on the backrest of the seat ahead. Three hours and twenty-seven minutes to their destination.

“Excuse me, Mr. Powell.” The voice of the flight attendant broke into his thoughts. “Will you be having lunch?”

“Sure. Why not. This bloody thing is playing up anyway, so working’s out.”

The flight attendant looked past Simon at the woman seated alongside.

“And you, Dr. Traynor. Will you be having lunch?”

“No thank you, I’ll just rest and recharge my batteries.”

As the flight attendant left, Simon turned to the woman, “You’re not in IT by any chance?” he asked. He stuck out his hand. “Simon Powell.”

“Hi, Ellen Traynor, and no I’m not. Although I do have some knowledge of electronic fields. I’m in ET.”

“Never heard of that,” Simon replied. “What’s ET?”

Ellen smiled. “How long have you got?”

Simon looked at the screen on the backrest of the seat ahead. “Three hours and twenty-five minutes.”

Thirty-five minutes later, Simon offered a summary of their discussion. “Not to over-simplify things, but essentially you’re saying the whole planet is one big force field and we’re all connected by the same energy.”

“Well almost,” Ellen replied. “It’s actually greater than that. I’m saying the entire universe is one single force field and that everything in it is connected by the same energy. As a result, whatever happens in one place, or to one person, affects everything else in one way or another. It’s a zero-sum event – energy-in must equal energy-out and vice-versa.”

“No disrespect intended, but that sounds pretty far-fetched. Is this a widely held belief?” Simon smiled in an attempt to take some of the sting out of his words.

“Much larger than you imagine, but not widely known. I can give you a practical example if you like.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Could you turn your computer on again?”

Simon moved the remnants of his meal to one side and placed his laptop back on the tray. “It’s the newest version of Wattle,” he said. “It’s not supposed to have glitches. Maybe it won’t do it this time.”

“Oh, it will,” Ellen replied.

Overconfident, Simon thought, but said nothing as his laptop powered-up.

Ellen leaned over to watch the screen, her shoulder resting lightly on his. Simon felt his nerves tingle at her touch.

“Ok,” she said as the error message appeared. “See how the message says ‘one element of Wattle has failed to load’?”

“Yup. Got that.”

“Well, that one failure has affected everything else within your computer system or, to put it differently, its ‘energy field’. If you tried any of your other programs they wouldn’t work, or might work but with changes which you may not be able to recognize.”

“I get that, but how is that the same as what you described earlier?”

“Well in this example you’ve accepted that one change in the ‘energy field’ affects the working of your whole computer. What I’m saying is that this ‘glitch’, as you called it, impacts more than just your computer and actually spreads to the ether beyond.”

“Really?” said Simon. “How?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Ellen asked looking directly at him.

“Yes. I’m intrigued. I can follow you up to a point but then I lose it. If you’re willing to explain further, I’ll try to understand. *Besides*, he thought, *this way I get to keep looking at you.*”

Interrupted by the removal of Simon’s lunch tray, it was a few minutes before the conversation resumed. “Imagine that somewhere in the computer language are the correct settings which you were using before the error. Can you accept that premise?” Ellen asked.

“Sure, but if the settings are corrupt, I’m sunk, unless I get them fresh from somewhere else. Like off the internet.”

“How about if you could go back in time and get them before they were corrupted. Perhaps they’re there and you just don’t know how to find them.”

“I still don’t get your point,” said Simon.

“I’m almost there,” Ellen replied. “Go to your start screen. Search ‘restore’. Then go to ‘create a restore point’.”

Simon did as she instructed.

“Ok, let’s see. When was your computer last working properly?”

“Just before we boarded,”

“So now type in that date and time and press ‘restore’.”

“Are you sure this will work?” Simon asked. “I can’t afford to make it any worse than it is.”

“Trust me,” Ellen replied.

Simon looked directly into her dark eyes and, somewhat shocked, realized that he would probably trust her no matter what she asked. He pressed ‘restore’.

Various messages appeared on the screen as the computer did its job. Finally, a password request appeared. Simon entered his password and Wattle started up. No error message . . . the problem was resolved! “Amazing,” he said. “It’s gone back in time and re-established itself as it was before the problem occurred.”

“Correct,” Ellen said. “Because the program’s ‘language’ or ‘energy field’ remained in its own universe, you merely had to know where and how to access it to correct the problem. It’s the same for the human species operating within their universe.”

“You mean all of us, like you and me,” Simon said.

Ellen smiled. “Not quite. You perhaps, but not me.” Before Simon could ask her what she meant, she spoke again. “By the way, do you have a headache? You’re frowning.”

“I am?”

“Yes. Hold still for a moment.” As Ellen spoke, she turned to face Simon and placed her fingers on his temples. He felt his eyes grow heavy. His head nodded as he fought to stay awake.

Simon’s head jerked up. He felt drained. *Wow*, he thought, *can’t afford to nod off I have to get that report done before we land*. Wattle had taken only moments to start. He was all set. He looked at screen on the backrest of the seat ahead. Three hours and twenty-seven minutes to their destination. He glanced again at his travelling companion in seat 3A. Exquisite was definitely the right description, she positively glowed. Not a flicker of acknowledgement of his presence showed on her face. *Too bad*, he thought. *Oh well, he had work to do anyway. Funny though, something about her was very familiar. Maybe he should say something.*

“Excuse me Mr. Powell.” The voice of the flight attendant broke into Simon’s thoughts. Will you be having lunch?”

“Yes please,” Simon replied.

Looking past Simon, the flight attendant spoke to the woman seated alongside.

“And you, Dr. Traynor. Will you be having lunch?”

“No thank you,” she replied. “I’ve already absorbed as much as I should for today.”



Fiction



Second Place

Camping *Lois Keane*

It was hot in the car. One after another, small farm with abandoned barns, rusty tractors. Now and then a few cows.

Chez Henri, a sign read in the distance. As I got closer and braked, I saw the boarded windows and the bleached-out sign, *Pepsi Biere froide, Patate frite*. A crate stood by the door and in it, remnants of a kitchen – an old-fashioned egg beater, two battered fryers. Off to the side, the remains of chairs.

Perhaps there had been two or three long tables that drew farm people. Laughter, cigarettes, steamed hot dogs, hearty meat stews. I pictured the last customer offering his regret. A neighbor holding the board as the hammer made contact.

My thighs were clinging to the seat. I got out and covered it with a towel. Poured some lemonade from the thermos. Checked my map and thought about being in a cool lake by noon. A car passed with a family on vacation – a canoe on the roof, headed for a cabin and good times.

What I would give to have Teagan back. Almost anything – but not unless she faced up to the shame she'd brought on our family. I'd emptied her room. Hauled her mannish clothes out to the garage. Bought a large aquarium and some rare fish. It would be a nice meditation space for me and Monica.

She'd taken one look. "You have created a graveyard," she said.

I'd heard some of my colleagues talk about the clear cool lakes and the fishing in Gatineau Park. I needed some time on my own. August was a good choice with the black flies and mosquitoes gone.

A cloud of thick dust trailed me as I made the turn-off to the campsite I'd circled on the map. Bulrushes rose out of the ditches on either side. A young deer bounded from between the brown stalks,

crossed the road and disappeared into a grove of sumac. The branches were heavy with pale fingers of fruit. By September they would be like red candelabras against the blue of the sky.

Teagan had made a painting of sumac once, at the cottage. In my purge of her bedroom I came across the painting and was surprised by Monica's fury: *'I won't let you destroy it'* – she faced me, holding it close to her chest.

Several kilometers beyond where I expected to arrive at the campsite, I came to a farm with a wide gateway and a sign – *Belanger*. I pulled over, hoping to get directions. The cattle were the first to greet me, jostling toward the fence. Then a woman wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, a faded, pink, sleeveless dress and stained blue apron came from behind the house, carrying a basket of eggs.

“Bonjour. Perdue?” She switched to English, when she heard me speak. “Looks like you're lost.”

I showed her the map with the campsite marked.

“It closed last year. The owner died suddenly. Good friend of my husband.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You're not the first one to ask. They should put a notice up. Where 're you from?”

“Ottawa.” I was hoping to do some fishing there.”

“Oh, then I know just the place for you. Less than an hour from here. Peaceful and full of trout. But it's a bit tricky to find. Let me draw you a map. Come in. You must be thirsty.” She walked ahead of me, then turned, “I'm Madeline.”

“Very kind of you. I'm Alan.”

I felt instantly at home with this woman and her basket of eggs and found myself stroking a cat rubbing itself against my leg. “This is a grand old place you've got here.” The wide porch, the six Adirondack chairs. Several outer buildings in the distance, all of which had the look of a time gone by.

A small shed from my past began to take shape. The door hanging from a single hinge. My brother, Paul lurking in the dusky light of the shed. Our mother calling us inside for dinner.

'What you going to tell Ma?' I could hear the town boys shouting, punching him after school that day – *Paul the pansy, Funny boy, Paul the faggot, homo Paul.*

'Will tell her I fell off my bike'

'Why can't you grow some backbone and show them you're a man?'

'Just shut it. Better not tell Ma.'

Madeline was saying “My grandfather built this farm – just grew corn back then. My parents added the dairy business and now my husband Guy and I are doing what we can. We have a son Pierre – works for a bank in Quebec City. The young people don’t want to farm anymore. See them two or three times a year.”

“You have grandchildren?”

“Yes. Thank God, Pierre’s wife Marguerite drives the four grand-children here every August. She’s a teacher – stays a couple of days and the kids spend the month. We drive them back just before school starts. Not this year though. They’re with her folks in New Brunswick.”

“Four of them! Any teenagers?”

“No, the oldest boy, Joseph is eleven. They love the farm – can’t wait to jump out of bed in the mornings and help with the milking and the chickens.”

Early mornings. Those were the best times with Teagan. Her, sitting on the counter measuring oats for our porridge. *'Let me Dad'* as we grated nutmeg. Her taking a tray of breakfast in bed for Monica. Later, as she entered her teens, the two of us preparing whole meals together. Recipes she found on-line.

Madeline poured lemonade then reached into an old jam cupboard which had a prominent place in a corner of the open kitchen. “This cupboard is over a hundred years old,” she said proudly. “My grandfather built it.” She pulled out a glass jar of pickled eggs and a larger jar of carrots. On the counter was a freshly baked loaf. “You must be hungry,” she said as she began slicing the bread.

I pictured my mother’s bent back, her worn boots and coarse pants as she removed bread from the wood oven – the stifling walls of our dark kitchen.

“So, what do you do in Ottawa? Married? Kids?”

“Yes, married – one daughter at university.” What would be the point of explaining?

I looked over at the large living room, the two blue couches with colourful quilts and cushions, the framed family pictures decking every wall and table. “I’m a teacher, like your daughter-in-law. High school math. It’s good to be away from the teenagers.”

“You’ll like being at the lake. You’ll run into Mr. Tremblay – nicest old fellow. Lives in an old shack there. Sees himself as a care-taker, sort of. He’ll show you the ropes”

“Sounds just right. And what about you? You always farmed here?”

“Yes, it’s been my life. There’s something about working with your hands”

Her hands lying next to her plate – the clusters of sun spots, the pronounced knuckles. Years of constant work. My mother’s hands.

“It’s the routine I love” she continued. Always knowing the shape of your days. The animals looking for you to tend them. The sowing and the harvests.”

Her voice was as calming as a slow stream, as we lingered over the meal and she talked about when there was just corn – when she got lost in the fields as a small girl. When she went to a dance in the neighbouring village and fell in love with the man who became her husband, Guy.

She got pencil and paper from a drawer. “Not the best map but it will help.”

I left the table and stood in the washroom looking into the mirror above the pine counter. What kind of father did she see – this old woman who greeted each day with such promise? Could she detect the grief in my eyes, behind my smile?

As I returned to the road, I thought I might have stayed longer, if she had asked me – perhaps to feed the chickens or to pick tomatoes for her canning.

The lake was exactly as Madeline described it. *‘You can drink the water – fresh from the mountain.’* I cupped my hands and drank.

There was no one around. No wind to rustle the leaves or ripple the lake’s dark surface. I swam hearing only the sound of my strokes and remembering Teagan’s shouts as she dove ahead of me into the cold of the early mornings at our cottage. We used to swim until our skin crinkled then raced back to the cottage for hot cocoa with Monica.

My solitude didn’t last long. I could hear voices before they came into view among the trees, two men wearing hip waders, each carrying a cluster of small fish.

They said a brief hello, Paul and Jacob. Paul quickly ran to a tent and came out with a first aid kit. Jacob removed his hip wader, sat on a rock and stretched out his bare legs. A large leech had somehow got inside his hip wader and attached itself to his calf. Paul crouched on the grass below him. With his left hand gripping Jacob’s ankle to steady it, he removed the leech by sliding his fingernail under the sucker. He cleaned the wound with alcohol, applied Polysporin and bandaged it. “There.” He smiled up at Jacob with his hand lightly covering the bandage.

Something about the hand on the bandage made me look away.

“When did you get here?” Paul asked me, his hand now on Jacob’s knee. “Not the easiest lake to find, is it?” He laughed. But great fishing. We’re roasting potatoes with eggplant and green peppers to go with the fish. You’re welcome to eat with us.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“You don’t want to eat alone. When you’ve tasted Paul’s cooking you’ll want to eat his trout every day.”

“What I need right now is a nap.”

I thought back to the calm routine of Madeline’s farm.

The farmhouse was deserted when I returned an hour later. I stood in the large living area thinking how good it would feel to remove my shoes and ease my body into the soft folds of the couch. I looked around for the cat then headed to the barn, calling out for Madeline.

“You’re back?” She looked up from the stool where she was shelling peas.

“Yes. Did I leave my hat here?”

“No. You weren’t wearing one. Didn’t you find the lake?”

“No.”

“Oh well, it’s getting late. Why don’t you stay for dinner? Guy will be through milking soon. You could even stay the night if you’re in no hurry to get home.”

“That’s very kind of you.” My eyes moved through the barn – the scrupulously swept floor, the earthy smell of the vegetables and the animals. “I think I should get going. My wife called to say relatives arrived from out-of-town unexpectedly.”

I passed by the coop where the chickens had been gathered for the night. They huddled together, some sitting, some standing with their beaks tucked into their feathers and their eyes shut.

I found a motel and some simple food. The muted voices of the TV and the distant traffic lulled me into an early sleep.

I was startled awake next morning by the brightness of the strong August sun, but more so by the tawdriness of the place where I had spent the night. The broken handles of the chest of drawers, the stains on the bathroom tiles, the lingering smell of air fresheners.

Still wearing the clothes I slept in, I headed straight for the car.

Images tugged at my eyes. Madeline’s kitchen, fresh eggs in a pan...Teagan diving into the early morning lake... Paul’s hand on Jacob’s calf, *‘There.’*



Fiction



Third Place

First Kiss

Bill Koch

When you're a considerable way down the road to the crematorium, like I am now, you think back to those moments that stand out in your memory. Not just the events that you've always ruminated about and wish had turned out differently, "if only ... what if." This mental flagellation goes on forever from kindergarten to the nursing home. Don't tell me that you don't waste time on this merry-go-round of regrets and mental revisions of your own history. We're both old and worldly, not to mention friendly enough to be honest with each other.

But time also brings with it intermittent and illuminating flashbulb memories. These are taken from the smaller supply of powerful, surprising events in your life. The original scene is so impactful that it sits like a scar on your forehead just waiting to flare into neon red, drawing attention to your past joy, misery, or shame. Images, scents, and tastes from these past experiences crop up out of nowhere when you're driving a car, sitting at a bar, or quietly reading at night. But with increasing age, even these memories may change, and their meanings become less obvious. Was a particular life experience a good thing, bad thing, or just a thing? Not an inconsequential question, but not always easy to answer.

For the event in question in the mid-1960's, I was not yet fifteen, a tall, awkward boy with red crew cut, freckles, and thick-lensed glasses. Tall enough to have some use in athletics despite my clumsiness, but possessed of academic interests that set me apart from others and made me, along with all the other stuff above, a social outlier. I was avoiding home and my parents one weeknight for reasons irrelevant to this story. The only place to go on a cold, dark November evening in the remote Rocky Mountain Front was the local soda fountain and convenience store. This little shop, with a *Coca Cola* sign in the window, was situated between the liquor store and post office and across from the Texaco gas station. It was replete with laminate counter and table tops, booths and stools combining chrome and red plastic, a glistening black grill for burgers, and an extensive magazine rack in the back. A jukebox was tucked into the corner, its offerings dominated by the *Beach Boys*, *Beatles*, and *Buck*

Owens and the Buckaroos. I hear you asking “who are BO&B?” Well, you had to be there in cowboy country on the fringe of civilization. Of course, you weren’t there. Most likely, you were sitting comfortably in some middle-class suburb far from country and western music. But don’t worry, the rest of the story might still resonate with you.

When I was years younger, I bought comic books in this little shop, but by age fourteen I leafed through mostly *Sports Illustrated* and auto magazines. The small town had few other places where teenagers could hang out when they weren’t driving endless loops of the six-block main street, or drinking weak beer from a keg in the foothills of the Rockies.

We all discover sex in our own way. Sometimes it’s sweetly intimate and supportive. Sometimes, other emotions come to mind. Our first time often colors later experiences, whether with respect to alcohol – did you get sick, giddy, or morose; or intimacy – was it lustful, loving, or terrifying?

On the night in question, I was one of four people in the shop. Behind the counter, cleaning the grill and stocking bottles of *Coke* and other drinks in the fridge, was a middle-aged woman of stocky build and frizzy gun-metal grey hair. Helen was the cook, waitress, and janitor, all the roles that come with ownership. I was leafing through football news. The Green Bay Packers, a team with whom I had no concrete affiliation but the irrational attraction of a young sports fan, were having a great season and would win the first Super Bowl the following January.

Five stools away, flipping through their own magazines at the counter as they sipped sugary drinks, were Charlene and Maggie, two blondes at loose ends for Thursday night entertainment. They were beautiful in the way that seventeen-year-old girls always are to fourteen-year-old boys. The sultry sprouting of sensuality through swelling breasts, tight jeans, carefully-tended long locks, and pouting lips. Their laughter resembled the sound of church bells calling boys to worship, but with an implied threat underneath. Seductive yet frightening at the same time.

I sat there, re-reading sentences in the magazine as I was distracted by the sound of their laughter and swishing movement of their hair. I repeatedly forced my gaze back to the article about the Packers but my gaze was involuntarily drawn down the counter by some unfamiliar force. Maggie and Charlene blew bubbles through their straws and giggled. My stomach trembled and heart clenched in a manner that was new to me. Over the years, I have become better acquainted with this state of desire swirling in a pool of apprehension. The last time I was adrift in this way was in my middle thirties with the woman who has ever since been my wife. It is a compellingly erotic, yet frightening, state of anticipation.

Somehow, on that night in 1966, the two girls became aware of my presence. I was surprised by their attention. During that period of my life, and episodically since, I have felt invisible to those around me, standing on the periphery of conversations as if I were a peeping tom on a picture frame,

around but not in the action. Using my well-practiced invisibility skills, I retreated into my magazine when the two of them walked down the fifteen feet of counter to sit either side of me with their drinks in hand. “Hi Jeffy, how are you? Watcha reading?” Maggie breathed into my left ear, her breast, in its clinging sweater, rubbing against my arm, while Charlene leaned on the counter with one elbow as her blue eyes searched inside me. Maggie’s soft, cherry-scented breath washed over me.

I held the Sports Illustrated up. “Football,” I choked out as Maggie lightly brushed the back of my hand with her fingernails. Charlene and a cloud of vanilla coated my right side.

“Oh.” Maggie hesitated. “That’s all?” Then she smiled, just a quick flash of perfect teeth as her gaze drifted down to the counter, blonde locks covering her cheek and jaw. “Nothing more interesting than football?” I was hypnotized by her eyelashes.

I struggled to answer. Looking back, I’m not sure my response was audible to them. I panicked and swiveled on my stool before I stepped uncertainly to the back of the store to return the magazine. I placed it on the rack as my insides quivered and legs ached to flee out the door. I turned to leave, but they stepped up to me, all of us hidden from the front by a tall shelf of chips, drinks, and canned goods. Fluorescent light shone down, turning complexions yellow. Their lipstick was red and menacing. Four hands with scarlet fingernails reached for me.

“Jeffy,” Maggie whispered while Charlene turned to check on Helen’s presence, “would you like to kiss me?” She leaned forward; moist lips parted.

I tried to escape but the two of them blocked the only way out. “I don’t think so.” I looked down at the white linoleum floor, warped and discoloured by years of foot traffic. My insides were a confused mess of lust and fear.

“C’mon, Jeffy.” She leaned forward and her lips met mine. I pulled back, but her hand held the back of my neck as her tongue forced its way between my teeth. The sweetness of her cherry chewing gum and saliva-soaked flesh flooded my mouth. I surrendered. My neck muscles relaxed and I leaned forward, caught up in the experience. Suddenly, she jerked back, giggling and wiping her lips with her sleeve. “Charlene, your turn.” I felt myself pulled around and the shorter girl pulled my head down and repeated the same ritual, including the giggle and wiping of her mouth. As she pulled away, there was a taunting look in Charlene’s eyes. “Gee, Jeffy, we got you turned on, didn’t we?” They pivoted back and returned to their *Cokes* on the counter. As I stood by the magazine rack in shock, Maggie turned and smiled at me as she flicked her long locks. “Relax, we won’t tell anybody about this.”

Which, of course, they did the very next day. I was the talk of the school by the afternoon and teased for weeks afterward. For months into the next spring when the snow melted, I avoided them in the hallways, and admittedly distrusted all young women for some time.

A half century later, their scents, saliva, softness of their breasts, and coldness in their eyes still flood my mind without warning. I look back on this tiny sliver of my history and cannot classify it as good or bad. Certainly, their intention was to humiliate, or if I am being charitable, only to embarrass me. If we accept that some women – and men - use sexuality to express power, Maggie and Charlene certainly intimidated me in that brief moment. Was I a victim? That is difficult for me to say. Perhaps at that time, but a half century later, I recall my first kiss with wry amusement.

I contrast this experience with the times since then that I have kissed women with whom I felt no great affection. There have been blessedly few of those saliva-filled superficial moments. And don't tell me that you have only kissed your one true love. We're being honest here, you and I, aren't we? But I've also kissed those for whom I have felt deep, if not always enduring, love.

Despite its brevity, this little moment with Maggie and Charlene was not trivial for me. What was it for them? For how long did it amuse them? Did they ever feel guilty for this minor infraction? I have long since forgiven them and credit both for knowing what they wanted to do with their budding sexuality that cold November night in 1966. After all, certainty and action are their own rewards. Despite these kisses having together been a memorable first for me, I'm sure the event quickly left their thoughts. For many years, any mental traces of this event have likely been swept under the rug of their own life events, successful marriages and friendships, minor disappointments, betrayals, and their own humiliations. Although they probably forgot that brief moment in 1966, I have not forgotten, and continue to be amazed at the little bits of personal history that pursue and perplex me. Tell me now, and be honest, does something similar stick in your memory?



Fiction



Honourable Mention

You'll Never Be A Miss Havisham!

Rose Dudley

It was only late September, but a biting wind was whistling through the awnings, blowing brown, curled leaves across the patio, threatening a storm, so I didn't make my way into the garden where my mind can so easily escape from troubling thoughts.

I turned to a pursuit that always elicits that same calming effect, and I was just removing the last batch of cookies from the oven and breathing in the delicious aroma of chocolate when the phone rang.

Crossing the kitchen, unhurriedly, I picked up the phone with floury hands. "Hi there," I said, expecting it to be a friend who always called at that time of day, but all I heard were the shocking words, "Ben died this morning," before I slammed down the phone in a futile attempt to blot out the awful truth.

My knees buckled and the floor fell away beneath me. "No! no! no! it's not true, he can't be dead, I didn't want him to die, I needed to hear that voice once more; there was so much still to be discussed," I screamed to no one, as my heart was rent in pieces. Tears which normally flowed so readily failed me. My eyes remained as dry as coarse sand.

I had reacted in much the same way with the unexpected news of the cancer diagnosis three

months earlier, so I should have been prepared, but how does anyone adequately ready oneself for the darkness of life's final curtain as the footlights are dimmed?

I was brought back to the moment by my eldest grandson, Marcus, banging on the front door and bursting through it in one clamorous action. "I forgot my boots," he yelled, as I picked them up from the floor in the hall where he had left them the previous night.

"Something smells so good in here, Grandma," he sniffed, as I pressed three carefully wrapped cookies into his hand, having anticipated his arrival and been aware that it would likely be his only breakfast before the soccer practice.

"You don't look so good, Grandma—are you sure you're alright?" he asked with the same concern as his grandfather had always shown.

"I'm fine," I lied. I could not tell him the truth; he would find out soon enough.

"Well, look after yourself; tuck yourself up in bed, and don't forget to drink lots of fluids," he laughed, repeating the advice I had given him so many times.

As he tore off down the path in a bundled-together rather than dressed state, under a mop of unruly, dark curls, I was overcome by love for that boy, as I thought how much he resembled his grandfather in every way. He turned at the end of the path, flashing a smile which reminded me that he was only three years away from the age when his Grandfather and I had met and fallen in love.

The shocking news had reduced everything else in my life to nothingness, so taking my grandson's advice, I unplugged the phone and crept under the covers, trusting that sleep would take away the ache, and that I would awake believing it had all been a horrible dream.

I drifted into sleep, my thoughts lingering back to the time Ben and I had first met— memories set in stone.

That first unforgettable day, I had been fretting over an essay in the college library when I noticed a head of thick, dark, hair above a face hidden in a copy of *The Life of Charles Dickens* on the opposite side of the table. I thought it odd that I had not been conscious of anyone sitting there when I had arrived.

The young man, partially concealed by the book, suddenly became aware that he was being watched, and when he looked up our eyes met, and I felt an immediate connection that left me breathless.

“So, you are a lover of Dickens too,” he whispered, indicating my copy of *Great Expectations* open on the table beside me.

“Oh no!, well no, but, but I mean yes,” I stammered, “but I am struggling with this assignment about Miss Havisham, the character who, anyone familiar with Dickens will know, is out for revenge for having been jilted,” I mumbled incoherently while staring into those smiling, blue eyes that held me so that I couldn’t turn away, our souls seeming to speak to each other.

He got up then, flicking away the heavy wave of hair that fell over his suntanned forehead, and put his books neatly into a smart, leather bag. As he passed, his hand brushed gently against my bare arm, and my heart descended through the floor.

I returned to the same seat in the library for the next three days, praying that the object of my desire would reappear. During that time, in my mind he had taken on the persona of a Greek God, as I recalled every detail of that handsome face, the bare, bronzed arms, the soft, cultured voice and the casual, blue-checked shirt that enhanced his neat appearance.

I had been in such a state of turmoil since that brief encounter—I hadn’t slept, I was unable to eat, and I hadn’t had the will to concentrate on anything. “*If this is what falling in love is about, why should it be so painful?*” I asked myself.

On the fourth day, I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder and that unmistakable voice whispered,

“You’ll never be a Miss Havisham!” My heart missed a beat, as I looked up into those dancing eyes that told me he had guessed exactly what I was feeling.

He sat down across from me, somewhat nervously. There was a long pause before he casually said, “If you are not doing anything on Saturday evening, would you do me the honour of accompanying me to the Law Faculty dance?” My breathing ceased, and my head began to spin. “I’d, I’d love to,” I responded, attempting not to sound too eager.

“Well, that’s settled,” he said with a smile that displayed perfectly even teeth. “Don your finery, and I’ll pick you up at your Hall of Residence at 6 o’clock,” and he was gone, leaving a fragrance that I couldn’t identify lingering in the air.

The next three days were turmoil as I flip-flopped from a state of insecurity to that blissful feeling that I had met the man who I would love for the rest of my life. Time seemed to stand still, and Saturday couldn’t come soon enough, but I was filled with apprehension that I would not live up to his expectations.

At times, I pondered over the anomaly of a law student who actually found the time to read novels along with such demanding courses. It would be well into our relationship before he laughingly told me that he was no fan of Charles Dickens; it had been just his way of drawing me into conversation. I laughed with him but made a mental note.

When the day of the dance finally came, I spent hours fussing over my appearance but felt attractive enough after I had put on the blue, velvet gown that I had worn at my own college ball and for which I had received so many compliments. Nevertheless, I was ready hours too soon and found myself pacing the floor in anxiety.

It turned out to be an evening of which dreams are made. When my new love took me in his arms for that first dance, I felt as if we were one united body. It was 1964, and we moved so comfortably to that romantic song—Non Ho L’eta sung by the 16-year-old Italian girl who had won the Eurovision Song Contest that year. I had no clue what the words meant, but that sentimental melody lodged in my fluttering heart. When he leaned over and softly kissed me for the first time, there was no doubt in my mind that I would love this man forever.

Over the years, throughout my long marriage, I have reminisced about the joy, the pain and the madness of falling in love for the first time. Such thoughts have occasionally hit me like a thunderbolt and at other times drifted in gently, evoked by a beautiful sunset, the sound of waves lapping on the shore or the scent of gardens after rain. Such memories have become more vivid with time.

As the haze of sleep dissipated and I gradually returned to the cold, hard truth, despite the ache that gnawed away at the shards of my broken heart, I knew I had to pull myself together. Tears finally began to well up, and I dragged myself from the rumpled bed, took a long shower in an effort to wash away my grief, and in a robotic state managed to propel myself through the remainder of the day.

As I was setting the table for dinner, I heard the familiar sound of a car in the driveway. “I’m home,” shouted the welcome voice that preceded the tired-looking old man who shuffled into the kitchen and gave me a hug and a warm peck on the cheek. “Anyone call?” he asked as he always did, throwing his jacket carelessly over the back of a chair. “No one of any importance,” I lied, looking away.

“Something smells inviting,” he said, lifting the lid of the pot to examine the dinner that I had made for him without any memory of doing so. “My favourite, Oh! thank you! Do I need that!” he sighed, taking me in his arms and hugging me close. “Well, you can stop worrying about your daughter,” he went on. “I’ve solved all her problems, and I’ll tell you everything so that you will be able to sleep again at night, but first, let’s eat.”

As he held my hand across the table, he noticed the pieces of broken china that had resulted from my nervousness following the fateful call. “How on earth did you manage to break your favourite cup?” he asked, as I fought back tears that had little to do with the question.

“I always knew there was a reason why I wanted to enrol in that Kintsugi course, even though you didn’t exactly encourage me or show any interest yourself in the Japanese art of repairing

porcelain with pure gold to make it stronger at the broken places,” he laughed. “Now I’ll join the class so that I can fix your cup for you, and it will last forever!”

The metaphorical significance of that statement hit me hard, the words echoing through my head, as he looked lovingly into my tear-filled eyes, and we clinked glasses. My wonderful husband, and father of our children, along with the shattered cup, would heal my broken heart with gold, for the second time, following the death, today, of my first love, Ben.

I have not seen Ben for over 60 years, since the day he cruelly abandoned me just like the smooth-talking, upper-class lover, Compeyson, had jilted Miss Havisham, and he will never know that he captured a part of my heart that even in death, he cannot set free.



Non-fiction



First Place

Confessions of a Covid Addict

Lisa Bagshaw

At least I don't need to keep it together any more.

I am without the luxury of the coveted “bubble” of close friends and family designed to tether us to some sort of human connection so we don't fall through the shifting tectonic plates of reality during this pandemic. I have neither of Freud's “cornerstones of humanness,” work, nor love. Instead, the abject lack of human interaction in my physical world has calcified into a shapeless encasement I call home.

The doctor puts me on anti anxiety meds when I tell her on Zoom that I am revving like a Porsche with nowhere to go. They dull the existential panic enough to make me not jump off my 18-story balcony, but not enough to stop tracking the virus 24-7 as it jettisons around the planet and calculating precisely when it will destroy the human race.

From the depths of my innate survival instincts, I have an impulse to control all that I can in my compact, white-walled space. Life beyond the windows and concrete might be fiery-orange with terror, according to CNN, but inside these walls, I decide it is going to be tickety boo. I scrub all those hard-to-reach places that never made the Saturday cleaning routine. I heave out heavy appliances scraping inches of muck, stand on a stepladder to access high cabinets, stretch behind toilets, down on my knees with a toothbrush to the point that my place smells like sterilized hospital. I peel carrots, wash lettuce and chop broccoli for morning smoothies. I sleep from 10pm until 6am. I am doing pushups, sit ups, squats and holding a plank for one minute. I will be strong and healthy. If I don't control my environment, the tsunami of grief will surely over take me.

But as time drones on, the cracks start to form and I feel myself slipping into a cavernous space between two worlds, the outside world of which I am terrified, and my inner world, which I realize I have the ability to construct. After all, I can do what I want, living here by myself.

I am unseen, and unheard, unaccountable and unsupervised. *I'm afraid of falling into nothingness.*

Before long, I take up residence on the couch. I didn't spend a lot of time on the couch, while living my bustling, glamorous previous life of working downtown, workouts at gyms, mid week martinis at swanky bars, but soon realize the benefits: TV, Instagram, emails and Google all at my fingertips; proximity to the bathroom and a well-stocked fridge, not to mention refuge from the treachery "out there." My expensive, seashell colored couch is more than long enough for my weary body to fully collapse into and is adorned with large, plush back and side pillows in which to cocoon. Several purple velvet throw pillows and buttery, taupe blankets fluff the perfect nest. If the world is ending, I am going to be comfy.

I let go of the reigns of discipline and productivity and settle in to my new routines. My couch and I become codependent. It is jealous, demanding and possessive. If I go to the grocery store, it demands I rush home to it. When I am home it lures me to sit on it. And when I sit on it, it insists I stay the night. It begs me to not leave like an insatiable lover. I relent to its demands, grateful to be wanted and ensconced in its arms.

After enough time on my couch, I discover the Matrix.

The Matrix is an elaborate, intertwined, highly addictive system of rabbit holes that emerge when normal housebound habits like Netflix, Google, social media and emails become an insatiable obsession with consumption. It mutates like the virus itself, twisting, expanding and multiplying like the complex underground root system of a forest.

The first crisp sip of Sauvignon Blanc unlocks the gates of the Matrix allowing me to effortlessly slide through the portals meeting enchanting people and visiting mystic places. I dump wrist-slitting CNN and pick a show on Netflix, *Emily in Paris*, a show targeting impressionable 13-year-old girls, not emotionally fragile 57-year-old women. I eat dinner (food that arrives at my door) in front of the TV, enthralled by Emily's life as a young, glamorous marketing executive living in Paris. I vividly imagine we are friends, sharing this charming world.

I finish the *Emily in Paris* season, grab another perfectly chilled bottle of wine from the well-stocked fridge and fill my yearning glass with gloriousness. I fall back into the arms of the couch, snuggling under the nurturing blankets and gleefully cascade down a rabbit hole of cyber-stalking the actress playing Emily for several hours. I discover she is Phil Collins' daughter and with a bit more stalking I find that her new husband is Mary Steenburgen's son. Such a small world. As the rabbit holes mutate, I go to her Instagram account to see more photos from her perfect life. I swipe through her posts in awe. I am desperate to know how she is living her best life while I am toggling between debilitating terror and sadness. Her Instagram account leads me to another rabbit hole, an account that lists the designer names of all the luxury brands on each episode. These Instagram people read my mind! Like an investigative reporter on a deadline, I go through every post from every episode from every season to find out what designer bag, shoes, jacket, skirt and belt the characters are wearing. Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci. Gorgeous!

My sugar cravings kick in and I make a batch of chocolate chip cookies and eat so much dough I feel sick and can't even eat a baked cookie. But then I think what is the perfect thing to go with cookies? Ice cream! I decide to walk across the street from my apartment building to Earnest Ice Cream. I drunkenly stumble into the store in my once oversized, now snug fitting sweat pants and UGGs from 15 years ago and ask for a jar of Cookies and Cream and a jar of Chunky Chocolate. I might be slurring. I am laughing for no reason as I fumble with the tap machine. The young woman who rings up my order, furrows her brows above her mask and looks worried or maybe disgusted. I could be her mother. I should feel ashamed, and maybe I will tomorrow, but right now I need to get home with this ice cream and back to the couch as if my life depended upon it.

I tumble into my apartment, leaving my coat inside-out on the floor and the Uggs askew in the hallway. In a butchered yoga pose, I simultaneously drop one jar into the freezer while grabbing a spoon from an adjacent drawer and land safely back in the nest on the couch. Relief of surviving the mission washes through me as if I've just survived crossing a war zone. I spoon feed myself one glorious jar of cool, comfort which sensuously slides down my throat, and immediately grab the second jar from the freezer. I devour most of it and then put it in the sink and pour water on it so I won't eat the last few spoonfuls.

The matrix is unlocking all its doors and I am swishing down the shopping rabbit hole. I google Nordstrom's, The Bay and Kate Spade to check if they have any good deals. I click on a little black dress, a cross body bag and Dolly Parton red patent knee high boots. I rush to enter my memorized credit card information before someone steals my size. The adrenalin is racing through my body like an elixir.

I feverishly check Instagram one last time before bed. JLo is at a basketball game with Ben. Wait, what bag is that? I zoom in on the picture to clearly see the bag. Coach. I google Coach, and find a similar looking bag. I buy it. It will arrive at my door in a few days. I breathe a sigh of relief. *Okay, okay, it's going to be okay.*

I wake on the couch to a delicious dream that Arod is hitting on me in a café in Paris. I lie there languishing in that long ago feeling of being wanted by a man. The thought of coffee gets me off the couch. In a few steps I press the magic button on the Nespresso machine. Steamy Nirvana pours into a cup. I am squinting to adjust to the light of the screen of the iPhone as I resume scrolling: How is Alec doing after he shot that poor woman and how is Hilaria handling it with all those kids? I resume my position on the couch with my coffee and investigate the story further. Every second post is a fashion advertisement.

I open the weather app because I can't just look out the window. It can't be trusted. Nothing out there can be trusted. No one knows what is real and what isn't. The app is peppered with images of little black dresses, cross body bags and red leather boots just like the ones I bought last night. If I click on them, they will tell me, "People who bought this, also bought this." I feel the pull towards the rabbit hole but decide to clear my head and go for a walk. I plug in my headphones and listen to a podcast, "We Can Do Hard Things" with Glennon Doyle. I don't want to talk to engage with real people. My panic can't handle their panic.

When I get home, I hit the couch and cyber stalk Glennon who was formerly married to a man, and her new wife Abby, a rabbit hole that takes up hours of my empty time.

Later in the day, I Zoom with friends. I don't wear a bra or put on makeup. No one says anything even though I never would have left the house without bold lipstick, face shimmer and lash extensions. We drink copious amounts of alcohol, and swap intel on things that matter: show recommendations, information about characters in shows as if they are our close friends, and gossip about famous people as if they live next door. This is currency in the multiverse. We all love our rabbit holes.

I don't tell them I am slipping through the cracks of reality. Or share about the clothes I'll never wear hanging in my closet with the tags still on them, self help books I'll never read stacked on my bedside table or the luxury bags that will never see a cocktail party that sit demurely in ribbon-adorned boxes in the back of my closet. I don't tell them about the cookies, the ice cream or the bottles of wine. I don't tell them about the Tsunami of Grief, the fear of nothingness and the sheer helplessness of it all. My shame is the cost of my survival.

The Zoom call ends, my friends go back to their "bubbles" with people they may or may not like anymore, and I go back to my house of mirrors in which the reflections are becoming less and less recognizable.

I could go cold turkey on my new life, but then what? A puzzle? No. I prefer to live in a curated Multiverse toggling between reality and fantasy even if the lines get blurrier every day.



Non-fiction



Second Place

The Rosewater Sprinkler *Trish Gauntlett*

*Item: Simple brass rosewater sprinkler from the old souk in Aleppo (now destroyed).
Bids close December 12.*

It wasn't the picture that called to me, the delicate brass bowl topped with a slender column like a minaret, engraved with leaves and lilies; it wasn't the writing spiralling from base to top in Arabic. It was the words. "*From the old souk in Aleppo (now destroyed).*"

I placed my bid.

I thought about it all the time, checking the auction, ready to pay more. A ripple of triumph ran through me when the auction closed and the rosewater sprinkler was mine. Mine was the only bid, as if no-one else could see it or understand that it was priceless. "*The old souk in Aleppo (now destroyed).*"

I searched. The images were from the BBC, before and after. Before - the vast, meandering Souk al-Madina, more than two thousand years old, its stalls and secret corners full of a confusion of bright colours, shining brass, sacks of sweets and spices, pomegranates ranked in rows against the ancient market walls; the metalsmith, his eyes alight with pride, his hands outstretched in welcome and behind him in a tiny stall, bowls and jugs and pans and kettles, lamps and incense burners, copper, brass, tin, braziers stacked like layers of an archaeological dig with not an inch to spare from floor to ceiling, like the ante-chamber of Tutankhamun's tomb. I magnified this image, searching every pan and pixel for my rosewater sprinkler. Perhaps it had come from there, from this man (was he still alive?).

And after – the burned, shattered market with tangles of wire and twisted metal, bricks and rubble blocking the narrow hallways, vaulted ceiling cracked open to the elements and beneath it, in ruins, all that was left of two thousand years of history. Destroyed by fire. Destroyed by war.

When I brought the rosewater sprinkler home I put it in a corner window, against a view of the coastal mountains of British Columbia and the Pacific Ocean. It was dull and empty, out of place, asleep.

It has never settled here. But I love it. I glance at it in the morning and evening light. I polish it with a soft cloth until the leaves and lilies glow like old gold.

I opened it one day. The top released reluctantly from the bowl. It had not been used for many years. Still, I thought there was a hint of roses in the air, a breath of the Rose of Damascus, although I cannot be sure.

We call it the Damask Rose now and it has given us our most beloved perfume, sacred and enduring. It is an old rose with many other names, tracing its ancestry back to wild roses which climbed and clung to the rocks of earth 35 million years ago. Humans would not arrive for another 30 million years. But wild roses survived climate change and cataclysm. Branches of this primeval line now fill the gardens and perfumeries of the world but the first Damask rose grew in Central Asia.

I picture water drawn in a clay pot from a sun-baked well five thousand years ago. Perhaps a woman crushed mint leaves in this water to refresh her house, to cool and soothe her children. Perhaps she sprinkled wild rose petals in the water. They grew in profusion there, roses at the beginnings of written history.

The Damask Rose came as a gift to the Seljuk Emperors, to flourish in the legendary gardens of the Persian Imperial family. Once, a prince had the palace watercourses and fountains filled with rose petals so his princess could smell their perfume as she wandered.

From the heart of Persia came distilled rosewater, capturing of the essence of the Damask Rose. Soon the empires of Egypt and Rome were trading this precious commodity. The Romans used it to scent their wine, their skin, their food. Cleopatra loved it, bathed in it, used it to perfume the air in her chambers. In *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare wrote that when she came aboard her ships they were perfumed so heavily with rosewater that “the very winds were lovesick.” Michelangelo drank a cup of it every morning.

But for all its perfection, the history of this rose is troubled. Some say it was carried away during the Siege of Damascus and brought, captive, to Europe. Others say the Romans took it with them to Britain, an invocation of home in the barbarian wilderness. There is a story that Henry VIII was given it as a gift. He would not have envisioned Persian gardens. He would have seen it as the red rose of Lancaster, drenched in blood and power, conquest, kingship - a heavy burden for such a small flower; more thorns than petals.

Here on the far side of the world my rosewater sprinkler stands quietly against the window. It does not fit in here. It is separate. In an attempt to connect with its past, I research, I learn.

For two thousand years, since the Souk al-Madina in Ḥalab was nothing more than a desert trading post, rosewater bottles have been created from glass, silver, gold and precious gems – for kings and queens, emperors, popes and pharaohs. Mine had more humble beginnings. It was not made for sovereigns or sultans in castles and citadels. It lived in simple houses but its purpose was no less courtly.

I saw a photograph once of a rosewater sprinkler like mine made by a Moroccan metalsmith three hundred years ago. Morocco in those years was not the disparate group of Berbers and Bedouins our imaginations conjure, but a country of culture, art, trade, political influence. I like to think that my rosewater sprinkler was created in the corner of a Marrakesh workshop. This beginning grounds it in deep history, lessening the pain of loss and displacement. I see the craftsman seated on a low stool, hammer in hand, bent over a curve of brass, shaping it with his tools, engraving the leaves and lilies, carving a spell of protection around it, hanging it on a small hook in his open-air stall under the Moroccan sun. Its travels started there, at the crossroads of the great trading routes. It went east, by sailing ship or galley, past the legendary North African coast - Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, coming at last to the place the Phoenicians named 'bīrōt' for its access to precious fresh water wells. Beirut.

When the days are long and grey here in British Columbia and rain falls in great pewter sheets, blocking the peaks and the sight of the sea, I imagine my rosewater sprinkler at the heart of a family.

It is 1763 and Beirut is under Ottoman rule again. In a small house in the old city, guests arrive from Damascus. At the door they are offered a rosewater sprinkler, filled with the perfume of the Damask Rose, to refresh themselves after their long journey. They admire its beautiful engraving of leaves and lilies and remark on its lustre and grace. The host, moved with generosity, gives it to them as a gift as they depart for home. The rosewater sprinkler moves on.

In Damascus the sprinkler is much admired and often used to perfume the house and welcome guests. When the daughter of the family is promised to a young man from Aleppo, her father searches the Al-Buzuriyah Souq for a perfect match for the sprinkler, to make a pair to be given as his gift to the married couple. He finds another sprinkler from Morocco, the perfect shape and size, engraved with roses. At the wedding the rosewater sprinklers are used to bless the bride and groom as they leave for their new home in Aleppo.

For two hundred and fifty years the rosewater sprinklers pass from mother to daughter in Aleppo until the day when conflict and loss overwhelms the family. In the destruction of their home one sprinkler is lost, burned, buried. The other survives. Desperate, displaced, about to flee the city, a father takes it to the old souk and sells it for money to buy food. It hangs, tarnished, above an old wooden table in a stall beneath a vaulted ceiling. A traveller buys it.

During the death struggle for Aleppo, with the city bombed and besieged and the old souk in flames (*now destroyed*), my rosewater sprinkler comes to Canada.

There is grief in knowing that an unbroken story stretching back three hundred years is extinguished now. My rosewater sprinkler will never grace another wedding, never welcome guests to Damascus, never fill the air in Aleppo with perfume. It does not belong here in my window looking out on the Pacific. It belongs in a place that is gone, in a city of mosques, synagogues and churches, castles and citadels, surrounded by olive and pistachio orchards, a city renowned for music, parks and gardens, a city lived in for 8,000 years. A city now destroyed.

But hope is a phoenix.

Mohammad Shawash was the first to come back. In December 2017 he stood in a tangle of concrete and rubble in the ruins of the old souk. For decades he'd sold his wares there from morning until dusk. He'd known everyone around him.

Brick by brick and stone by stone, week after week, Shawash pushed his small wheelbarrow through narrow streets blocked by rocks and debris and rebuilt his simple stall in the place where the old souk had been. He told a reporter from Agence France-Presse that he cried when he first came back. "I found total destruction all around me. The stores were destroyed, the streets covered in rubble and rocks, and the buildings collapsed. So I repaired it myself, to prove to the whole world that Aleppo's Old City still has a soul."

Others followed him. Today, the gates of the old souk in Aleppo are open again. It is restored, rebuilt, reclaimed, rising like a firebird out of the ashes, slowly, cautiously, painfully, with hope.

My rosewater sprinkler belongs there, at the beating heart of ancient stories.

Perhaps I will take it back.

Until then it stands on my windowsill in the shadow of foreign mountains, a world away from its beginnings. It is sleeping. Dreaming. Remembering the scent of roses.



Non-fiction



Third Place

Let This Teach Me *Erin Rochfort*

Principal Pritchard’s face oozed confidence. I pushed myself back into the chair quickly analyzing if I could trust him, his words, his confidence. My mind swirled with questions: how do I teach Grade One materials to Grade Two students? What happened to their previous teacher? Mr. Pritchard kept talking in metaphors and platitudes. Ms. Washington broke his monologue with a suggestion.

“Why don’t I give you a tour of the school, Ms. Rochfort. You can pick up some materials you might need for next week? We decided to keep the substitute in the room for the remainder of this week. You can use these few days to plan.”

Gratitude swept my face as I nodded in agreement with Ms. Washington. She stood motioning me to follow her into the dim hallway brightened only by bubble gum painted walls, the bright colour feeling more ominous than cheery. As we walked down the hallway every few steps a wooden door appeared with a glass window netted in wire. I think I heard Ms. Washington mention a few teachers’ names as we passed each door, but I didn’t retain much of what she said. Her words flew around in a muted buzz. It was all I could do not to bat them away.

Looking at the doors, I was reminded of a story my roommate had told me recently of a fight between two girls in her science lab. During their brawl, one girl got her hand stuck in the glass and wire netting of their classroom door. The very same ones in this hallway. A painful consequence of a mislaid punch. The incident made worse the next day, when the mother of one of the girls showed up to grease her daughter’s face before the start of class.

“Why would she do that?” I asked.

“To make the punches slide,” Toni answered.

The science of retaliation.

My mind returned to the hallway when I realized Ms. Washington was speaking to me.

“Ms. Rochfort, you are being presented with an opportunity here. One that will have its challenges but offer you many chances to learn and grow. You needn’t be afraid of that.” I managed a feeble smile in response. The butterflies inside me preventing much more.

We made our way down the stairs to the basement storage area. Ms. Washington gestured for me to enter one of the rooms. I walked aimlessly for a moment or two finally selecting a couple of markers and a pad of chart paper. I couldn’t think of what else I might need – just grabbing mindlessly. My uneasiness about this new position was growing exponentially inside me like my body was trying to let me in on a secret.

I clumsily gripped the paper and markers as I made my way back up the stairs following Ms. Washington’s sturdy stride. Together we arrived back at the main office where my day had begun but instead of re-entering, Ms. Washington opened a door across the hall and again, with nothing more than a gesture and a smile, invited me in.

I braced for impact knowing now I was crossing the threshold of my new classroom. Prior to my interview other teachers had relegated story after story of the horrors of this room and these children. I expected bedlam. Hovering at the door clutching my paper I scanned the room for evidence of the chaos and violence I’d been warned about.

It was the sheer lack of students I noticed first. The students present were sitting at desks, quietly working, very few even looked up to acknowledge either Ms. Washington or myself. I ventured in further, feeling a bit like a timid deer, heart racing and ears piqued for danger. The room remained quiet, docile even.

There were clues however, that disorder existed in the room. Most of the desks were covered in a pale green paint grown crusty and picked at. The same celery green paint splattered across one wall arching out into a cruel haphazard rainbow. I looked for an uncluttered surface to put my paper down, it kept slipping in my hands. Inching further into the room I kicked something, drawing my eyes down - broken pencils, bits of food, ripped paper scattered the floor. Little land mines everywhere. I turned my eyes towards the back corner of the classroom where there was a sink filled with brown, dank water and above it: pages stuck to the wall, barely coloured from some dated Disney colouring book. The sheets swayed limply, half fallen, resembling tattered flags of surrender.

Fear tightened inside me like a vice. I placed the paper on a table trying to orient myself in the space. Ms. Washington remained at the door exuding calm. She nodded slightly indicating it was time to go. I managed to make my way to the door hopeful no student would notice my increasing panic.

But one student did notice me. It was inevitable, really. A tall boy wearing an ill-buttoned dress shirt untucked over grey dress pants belted with some sort of rope or chord stood as I reached the door. “Ms. Washington, is this white lady going to be our new teacher?”

His eagerness softened my fear, if only briefly. I turned to look first noticing how his eyes twinkled inside their almond shaped lids. It seemed impossible he was in Grade Two, he towered over the other children. But his smile exuded warmth and excitement. I found myself captivated.

“You’ll have to wait and see Sheppard. Just wait and see.” Ms. Washington responded as she ushered me out the door. I wanted to turn back and smile at the boy, but I was too afraid I might notice something else inside that fearsome room.

Ms. Washington walked me outside and held the door for me as I exited the building. She announced cheerfully, “we’ll see you Monday,” then abruptly turned letting the door shut with a firm click.

Pulling my coat closed I started walking. The winter air bit at my face as if to wake me from a bad dream. I found my hat in my pocket and shoved it on my head. It took me hours to walk home. I don’t remember any of my thoughts. I just remember the fear.

The following Monday I arrived at P.S. 59 bleary eyed under the still blackened sky of early morning. I trudged toward the entrance grappling with several bags and a bucket. The school loomed larger than I remembered, glowering at me as I approached. I walked to my classroom while silence permeated my every step. The smell of an old tin can hit my face as soon as I opened the door. I dropped my bags (mostly cleaning products – cleaning the only goal for the day) and searched for something I could use for my ‘teacher desk’. I rehabilitated a square table shoved into a corner as my own and noticed a carpet adorned with brightly coloured fish and numbers to ten placed on the floor near the windows. I hadn’t noticed it on my earlier visit. The carpet’s bright colours instantly grounded me, an essential piece to any primary classroom. I quickly noticed the sink had also been drained since my previous visit but remained coated in a thick brown sludge. I moved one large chair under my new ‘desk’ and found a folded lawn chair in the closet and put that on the carpet, for now, I told myself. There were a few picture books dotted along the otherwise sparse bookshelf. I added the few I’d brought with me, spreading them out like I’d seen in libraries.

As the hours ticked closer to 9:00 morning light pushed shadows back into their corners and the school started to come alive with teacher greetings, doors opening and closing. A Monday morning hum taking over the school. I sat at my desk fearing I'd made very poor use of my early arrival. After some early rearranging, I'd spent the remainder of my time staring at the grassy paint on the desks and wall wondering what ghastly event had resulted in such destruction. What could have gone so terribly wrong?

In the time I'd spend away from the room I'd determined my only goal was removing the paint. If I could accomplish this, I would declare day one victorious. A small step towards the larger battles I anticipated. In the final minutes remaining before the bell, I busied myself with mindless tasks; organizing and reorganizing spelling sheets, math review pages, reading over and over the class list ensuring I knew everyone's name, placing the book I wanted to read on the chair, then on the floor beside the chair, then back again on the chair. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Ms. Washington opened the door softly. "I thought I'd come with you to the gym to pick up your class." I nodded and walked towards the door. As we walked, I copied her confident pace. She moved like a finely tuned machine, all cogs working in unemotional effortless rhythm.

The bell rang out as we entered the gym. Most groups were already lined up awaiting their teacher. A few boys were still playing basketball and several girls giggled while clumped in a corner. Ms. Washington cleared her throat with a firm invitation drawing these few stragglers to their lines. She escorted me to my line. It was a tiny group of only fourteen varied sizes and shapes but all wearing maturity misplaced on seven- and eight-year-olds. I made eye contact with each one feeling a smile form on my face despite my nervousness. Their eyes showed keen interest, I prayed mine hid my fear. At the end of my interview, Mr. Pritchard revealed their previous teacher had been a high school teacher who wore dreads and high tops. I wore a boxy, button-down shirt, wedges and reeked of naivete. I glanced at Ms. Washington. She smiled broadly and motioned for the door.

It was time.



Non-fiction



Honourable Mention

The Last Voyage of the Solander

Rod Baker

I stand on my bunk and struggle to undo the lugs of the escape hatch in the foredeck. They're corroded and tough to turn. The tugboat has run aground and I'm scrambling to get out before the giant steel barge we are towing crushes us. Throwing the hatch open, I see the skipper and mate in the wheelhouse and yell, "Get out! Get out! The barge is going to run over us."

Staring at their bemused faces, I realise I've made a fool of myself. We haven't run aground. Since starting work on the tugboats six months ago, I've often awoken in a blind panic believing the tug I am working is about to be crushed by one of the huge barges we tow.

Closing the hatch, I make myself a coffee, and reflect how I came to be on this old wooden vessel, each day chugging further away from my new wife: I'd met Louise on a blind date in Horseshoe Bay when I was a deckhand working on British freighters. After a year of writing to one another, I'd moved to Vancouver, and married her. Unable to find work ashore, I'd taken this job as a tugboat deckhand.

Three weeks earlier, our fifty-foot wooden tugboat, *Solander*, left Vancouver towing a barge full of goods bound for remote communities and logging camps tucked into the folds of British Columbia's giant coastal rainforest.

The other crew members are Dennis, mid-20s, short in stature with a cocky attitude. Jim, the mate, is a tall, easy-going guy of about 35, who has worked on the tugs since he was 17. The skipper, Bill, is 50 with thinning red hair — a fish-boat skipper. This is his first trip working on tugboats. As the youngest at 21, and a tugboat novice, my status aboard is barely above the waterline.

We've left Prince Rupert and are crossing the turbulent Hecate Strait toward the Haida Gwaii. Each time our tug surfs down giant waves, the towline attached to the barge jerks us back. I slept little during the violent pitching, but now the waves are flattening out as we reach the inlet leading to Masset, our northernmost port of call.

The steel barge we are towing weighs 500 tons, is thirty feet wide and a hundred feet long. Its cargo tanks contain 18,000 gallons of gasoline. Lashed on deck are two bulldozers, a backhoe, and a small crane for delivery to Masset.

“Hey, Ray, it’s midnight. You and Bill are up now,” yells Jim. “She’s blowing a blizzard out there.” The skipper and I crawl out of our bunks and up through the hatch for our watch in the wheelhouse. Bill takes the wheel and I take Dennis’ position by the radar as the other two head down to sleep.

We peer through the windows into the double darkness of a midnight blizzard. The engine roars like an angry lion as the ancient wooden craft ploughs up the inlet, straining to haul its heavy load against the outgoing tide. The draughty wheelhouse is cold and the high winds blow in whiffs of acrid diesel smoke.

“Keep us a quarter mile offshore,” says Bill. I study the radar image and give him steering directions. The radar is fuzzy from the heavy snow as it reflects the outline of the surrounding channel. As visibility is down to 40 feet, I worry that we might miss Masset in the blizzard and pass right by. “Should we get Jim back up? He’s been here a few times.”

“No, any fool can follow the radar up the inlet to Masset.” Bill barks back.

My eyes strain from staring at the glowing radar screen, flicking up to the windshield, and back to the radar. The slow scrape of the wipers can barely clear away the heavy gobs of snow blanketing the windshield. A tiny yellow blip appears on the radar. I wait for a couple of sweeps to make sure it doesn’t disappear.

“There’s a blip on the radar dead ahead.”

“What kind of blip?”

“A small blip.”

“How far away.”

“A quarter mile. Why don’t we get Jim up?”

Bill remains silent. As we close on the blip, I flip on the searchlight. We’re blinded by stark white light reflecting back from the blizzard. As our eyes adjust, we make out a wooden piling thirty feet off the port bow.

“I guess that’s the blip,” says Bill. “Stupid place to put a piling in the middle of the goddamned channel.” We ease past it, just ten feet off our port bow.

“The barge is going to run over it.”

“Can’t do much about that now,” replies Bill. “That old chunk of wood won’t damage the barge any.”

A tremendous crunch rocks the tug and its bow bucks upwards as though punched by a giant fist. I'm thrown forward and my chest hits the radar screen. Smashing and splintering sounds echo from the bowels of the tug as rocks tear into the hull planks. The tug shudders to a halt with the bow tilted upward. The engine coughs and dies. I taste blood on my lip. Silence.

The hatch in the wheelhouse floor springs open as Dennis and Jim pop up like Jack-in-the-boxes.

“What the fuck's going on?” yells Jim. No one answers.

Seawater swamps the batteries and plunges us into darkness. The tug has run aground, but the barge we were towing will continue surging through the water until it smashes into us. My stomach turns into a cold, heavy stone. My worst nightmare is coming true. I find a life jacket and slip it on. It may keep my head above water if I'm knocked unconscious. My breath comes in short sharp bursts, like bellows as I feel my way out of the wheelhouse. Tripping on the coaming of the side door, I stumble outside into a world of chill darkness and grab the guard rail to stop myself falling overboard. *Must get to the bow — as far as possible from the impending impact.* I edge forward gripping the side rail for guidance. Big snowflakes make cold, wet dabs on my face.

As the massive steel barge loaded with gasoline and heavy equipment storms ever closer, I reach the bow and cling onto the rail with both hands. If the barge is punctured and the gas explodes, I'll be blown into the water. If there's no explosion, I'll jump into the water just before it crushes us.

The barge is so close I hear it hissing through the water and pull on my hood so my hair won't get burned off if there's an explosion. *Will I be able to swim if I get blown into the water?* I start to shake: *I'm too young to die. I've just emigrated, got married. My life's just beginning!*

A gigantic impact rocks the tug as the barge smashes into our stern. I yell in pain as the rail smacks into my thighs and am almost tossed into the water. Horrendous splintering and crunching sounds penetrate the night as the barge flattens the tug's towing winch, crushes the rear cabin and mounts the back of the wheelhouse. A massive dark presence looms up behind me. I flex my legs and take a deep breath, ready to launch myself into the dark depths below. The barge grinds to a halt overhanging the wheelhouse. Erie stillness. Gigantic screeching and squealing noises pierce the night as the barge slides slowly back over the broken tug into the water.

A faint odour of crushed mussels scraped off its bottom lingers in the air. Soft wet snow continues to fall on my face as though nothing happened. I breathe warm air into my icy hands and run them over my tingling scalp. Alive, not burned, blown up or swimming for my life in freezing water, I'm safe, out of danger.

Maybe not! When the current catches the barge, and it reaches the end of the towline, it could have enough momentum to jerk the tug back off the rocks. With our smashed hull, we'd sink in a minute. I walk back, holding the rail, and feel for the small dinghy on top of the wheelhouse, hoping it's undamaged. Hearing footsteps clumping on the deck is reassuring. I worried the other guys had been crushed.

“Everyone okay?” says Jim. “Sing out your names.”

“Dennis here.”

“Ray here.”

“Bill here. Oh my God, what a mess we’re in,” he says in a shaky voice. We bump against each other in the coal-black night.

A few minutes before, we were safe and warm in our living quarters with heat and light. Now we’re survivors aboard a crushed, cold wreck that may soon sink beneath the frigid waters of Masset Inlet.

“Jesus Christ, I thought we were a goner,” says Jim, his voice breaking. “Let’s get the dingy ready in case we need it.” We manhandle the small boat onto the foredeck. Dennis passes smokes around. We light up, glad of a little comfort. The flickering flame reveals the gaunt faces of four shaken guys with fresh snow on their hair and jackets.

“We’re stuck on this reef pretty good,” says Jim, guessing what’s on our minds. “We should be okay.” He flicks his butt up into the air. It arcs through the night like a firefly.

“Hey, there’s car headlights lining up on the shore,” yells Bill.”

Barely visible through the blizzard, four sets of headlights let us know we’ve been spotted. Encouraged, we stamp our feet and rub our hands together to keep warm as the wet snow soaks us and the temperature drops. After the second cigarette, we hear the clatter of a diesel engine approaching. Through the big white flakes, we spot the welcome sight a fishing vessel beaming its searchlight towards us. It draws parallel about fifty feet off the starboard side.

“You guys need help?” A voice yells.

“Damn right we do,” shouts Jim.

“Paddle over. We’ll pick you up.”

We drop the dinghy into the water. With four of us, it’s overloaded. Water slops over the gunnel as the wind pushes against us. I bail and Jim paddles. Two Haida fishermen reach down and help us clamber aboard. We turn and stare at the remains of the *Solander* — a forlorn, crushed wreck in the swirling snow caught in the fish-boat’s yellow searchlight. There’s something dismal about a shipwreck — like a fresh corpse. Bill starts to sob.

“Don’t worry — they build one every day,” says the Haida skipper in a soft voice, laying a hand on Bill’s shoulder. I’m guessing Bill’s upset for the loss of the tug *and* his job.

“There should be a warning marker for that goddamned reef we hit,” says Bill.

“It was that wooden piling you knocked down,” replies the fish-boat skipper.

By the time we reach the dock at Masset, it’s two in the morning. The younger fisherman offers to help find us accommodation, and we pile into his station wagon. After trying two local bunkhouses, no one responded to his knocks. He’s run out of options and brings us to the police station. A Mountie answers the door in his underpants. He wears a sour expression at being woken so early, but agrees to let us sleep in the cells.

As I lie down on the bunk and pull the blankets over myself, the Mounity locks my door. I remember panicky thoughts before the barge hit and allow myself a wry smile. I’ve survived, and locked behind bars — couldn’t be safer!

The next morning, the four of us fly out on a float-plane to Skidegate, where we board a jet to Vancouver. Staring down at the snowy mountains of Vancouver Island, from my comfortable seat on the plane, I feel a flood of elation to be alive and going home — to spend my first Christmas with my wife.

I vowed the last voyage of the *Solander* would also be my *own* last voyage.



Poetry



First Place

Paintbox

Trish Gauntlett

I gave her a paintbox filled with all the colours of her life,
the greens and blues of summer on the islands,
the golds and scarlets of the leaves in fall,
white like the fog and ice that captures us in winter
and best of all, the soft new violets and buttercups of spring.
I hoped she would lift the brush and paint away her sadness.
At least some of it.
Some small part of it.
I hoped she would paint a sanctuary and take refuge there,
painting herself in with cool, smooth stones to keep the world away.
I hoped she would paint a perfect curve of wings and fly unseen into the rain.
And she began.
She tried.
But tears fell on her canvas
and the colours, so safely separated,
ran together, merged, transformed until there was no sanctuary, no retreat and no escape,
until the image she had framed, so sweet and full of hope
blurred into something old and dark
and could not hold,
could not hold back the night.



Poetry



Second Place

Autumn along the Mamquam *Cathy Sosnowsky*

Under trees turning yellow,
their dropped dry leaves
crunching underfoot,
we walk the path
between river and channel
hearing new sounds,
not just the usual gurgle
of water over rocks
but sounds of slapping,
sounds of splashing.

At the trail's bend
we see them:
male humpback salmon
vying for positions
eager to spray their milt
over fresh-buried eggs
their battles stirring the water
into a roil.

The female salmon
make softer waves
as they flounder upstream,
exhausted from their journey
their noses bruised
from digging nests
in the river's gravel.

Along the banks,
some lie dead already
their silver flesh
an autumn offering
to waiting eagles.



Poetry



Third Place

Covid Conditions

Rosemary Gretton

Social distancing masking unprecedented isolation
Coronavirus curve flattening
Shops closing
Streets emptying

New normal, not normal
Home working
Quarantine quarantinis quarantunes
Prime ministerial pronouncements on the CBC

Puzzling pandemic
Patients, patience
Disease, death
Vaccine vacuum

Unprecedented uncertain outcome
Insta addiction, Facebook fatigue
Zooming and messaging
Percussing pots for frontline workers

Strolling six feet apart
Sweet magnolias signalling spring
Surveying the horizon
Spectacular sunsets inducing short-lived serenity

Constantly craving connection
Acclimating incrementally to existence as a
Hermit, hermetically sealed eight floors up
Missing faraway family and friends

Reading but not writing because too I'm too damned restless
Reminiscing photographing procrastinating editing my life
Sleep disturbed and oddly dreaming
Wondering if I'll accomplish anything consequential ever again.



Poetry



Honourable Mention

Sparks

Jannette Edmonds

Sparks, flying across the cracks.
Your universe, my universe,
The intensity always threatening
To burst into flames
And destroy everything.

Do we narrow the crack?
Caulk it up with civility
And things crucial to survival?
Or do we just kill the sparks,
That energy reminding us we're opposites?

You like to lob the ball
Of controversy back and forth,
Inflame the situation, wreak havoc,
And I, in my universe, scurry forth
Putting out flames, smoothing things over.

We are both mesmerized
By the riveting rightness of our beliefs,
Hypnotized by the hypothesis of hope
We cling to like a lifeboat, at the ready,
Lest we fall into the abyss.

And the sparks flare bright blue, illuminating the cracks
In the story of who we are, and who we are to become.



Youth Winners



Poetry

Woodpecker *Rose Fitzgerald*

A woodpecker is like a hollow-sounding, quiet, beautiful hammer.
A burst of flame out of the corner of your eye.
Sudden bunny hops down a favourite tree.
Spirits lift when you hear the woodpecker.
Insides open in time to the beat.
They bring to focus what the woodpecker is saying,
As if calling for spring.
Flowers rise in agreement, coming alive at the woodpecker's taps,
As if the sound was a signal.
Woodpeckers silence the forest.
Only their soothing sound breaking the quiet.
Tapping out their morse-code alphabet.

Touching the Sky

Tyler McIntosh

The acorn lay wistfully on the forest floor imagining all the possibilities, if only they were brave enough to grow. They look up at all the trees counting each intricate branch and leaf. The acorn was severely lonely, they wished they still had a family or at least some close friends that they could look up to.

One evening, a chilling gust of wind blew by the acorn, causing them to dramatically tumble down the hill away from the forest and into a busy street in the city. All the trees there were contaminated and sick. They did not seem like they would make a loving family, let alone friends. The acorn lay on the street bawling their eyes out. They were scared and just wanted to go back to their safe bed of moss in the forest. Drowning in the sorrow of their tears, they drifted off to sleep.

When the acorn woke up, they were traveling in the coat pocket of a boy. The pocket was dirty and there were all sorts of wrappers, rocks, dirt, and hundreds of other things the acorn had never seen before. The acorn felt like they were trapped and being controlled, and they could not do anything about it. The boy then threw his coat on the ground, leaving the acorn to tragically roll on to the street. Cars whooshed past the acorn. Loud sounds were piercing their ears, and the acorn was rolling side to side dodging every deadly vehicle. They were distressed, tired, and longed for the safety of home.

By the end of the day, the acorn gave up and lay there staring at the stars. Out of the corner of their eye, they saw something shooting across the night sky. “Could it be?!”, the acorn thought to themselves. They closed their eyes and made a wish. They wished they were back in the forest, that they had a family, and that they had the guts to grow. They wished they would turn into the tallest, and most beautiful, and perfect tree in the entire forest.

Suddenly, they heard a voice, but they could not find out where it was coming from. “Listen to me and I will help you get through the dark and frightening times in life. You won't get everything or maybe even anything you asked for, but life always turns out.”, the voice advised. The acorn didn't know how to respond, “Who are you?”, they asked. The voice replied, “It doesn't matter who I am; it matters that I am.” Then the voice disappeared. The acorn found themselves strangely connected to the voice. They felt as if they had known it for a long time. They felt as if it was an old friend.

Another long day passed, but this time, it was different. This time, the acorn had hope that the voice would soon come back, and they would have the wonderful, connected feeling once again. That night, just as the acorn expected, the voice came back. However, when the voice was speaking it

sounded extremely distressed. “You’re in great danger my young acorn,” pleaded the voice. “What do you mean?” cried the acorn. “It's hard to say this, but if you do not choose to grow soon, I'm afraid you won't ever be able to touch the sky,” sighed the voice. It then disappeared.

The next day, the voice’s warning was trapped inside the acorn’s mind. At the end of the day, the voice returned. The acorn bawled, “I want to grow, I really do. But I'm too scared to show my inner self to the world. All my life I've been living in this safe little shell with the dream that someday I will grow into a big and perfect tree. But I put too much pressure on myself. I don’t want to be seen. I want to stay small!” The voice had a very different response than the acorn expected, “Focus on the step in front of you, not the whole staircase.” The acorn then cried themselves to sleep. Even if they did decide to grow, they were still in the middle of the road with no soil to nourish their roots.

When they woke up in the morning, they were alarmed to find that they had been moved to the side of the road onto a patch of dirt. It wasn’t necessarily the freshest dirt in the world, but it made the acorn feel most at home, and that was a feeling anyone would kill for. Anything or anyone could have kindly moved them, but they had a feeling deep down that the voice had done it. Knowing this, the acorn could not find words to express their gratitude.

The acorn had come so far since their time in the forest. Now it was time for the biggest decision any acorn could make. They had no choice but to grow. Like the voice had said, “Life always turns out.” The voice then popped up and whispered, “We can't direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.” With that, the acorn began to grow.

A hundred and one years later, the acorn was finally touching the sky. Although they weren't big or beautiful, or as perfect as they wanted to be, they had plenty of resources, more friends than ever, and had inspired countless acorns to grow. From time to time, the voice returns, and they share each other's journeys. “May you be proud of the work you do, the person you are, and the difference you make.”

Upcoming Events

Events Calendar

May 14	NSWA Saturday Write-in @ 10am Join at this Zoom link: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87105551221?pwd=WjM2UVA3V0ZFZlRNNnovbXFVK01Sdz09 Passcode: NSWA
May 16	NSWA In-person Meeting @6:30pm with guest speaker Frances Peck West Vancouver Memorial Library
June 11	NSWA Saturday Write-in @10am Join at this Zoom link: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87105551221?pwd=WjM2UVA3V0ZFZlRNNnovbXFVK01Sdz09 Passcode: NSWA
June 20	Year-End Wrap Up Party, in person at The Silk Purse, West Vancouver
July – August	Summer break
September 19	AGM and Election for 2022 – 2023 Executive

Call for Newsletter Submissions Deadline: September 6

Submissions are open for our Fall Newsletter. Please send:

- Your recent publications or writing news (e.g., upcoming book launches, writing awards)
- Your poetry or prose up to 600 words (fiction or non-fiction, can be excerpts from larger works)
- 100-word challenge on the theme: *contents under pressure* (inclusion of theme words optional, prose or poetry)
- Art work or photography that might fit a fall theme (JPG files 2MB+)
- Writing workshops or resources to share with fellow members

Submission Guidelines

1. Submissions from NSWA members only.
2. Share your latest writing news (e.g., recent publications, book launches, author readings).
3. Poetry, short fiction or nonfiction up to 600 words. No op/ed articles.
4. Email your submission to editor@nswriters.org (preferred method), or mail to NSWA, PO Box 37549 Lonsdale East, North Vancouver, BC V7M 3L3.
5. Contributors are responsible for the accuracy, originality, and reliability of their content. Please check spelling, grammar and punctuation prior to submission. Word attachments preferred over email text. Accompanying photos belonging to the writer or open-source welcome.
6. Writing that appears in the NSWA newsletter is eligible for submission to the NSWA writing contest.
7. Publication in the *WRITE ON!* newsletter is at the discretion of the Editor, in consultation with the Board of Directors.